Connecticut FAFSA Challenge 2023-2024 Overview Document and School Application

Information Webinar: September 13, 2023 Application Due: September 29, 2023







Governor Ned Lamont

&

Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker

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FAFSA Challenge 2023-2024 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 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. And, in the 2022-2023 FAFSA Challenge, 57 schools increased their FAFSA completion rate by 6.9 percentage points and contributed to the state rate of 61.8 percent, the highest in recent record. 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 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 fourth FAFSA Challenge this September. Similar to previous years, the FAFSA Challenge will provide microgrants, trainings, professional development, and other resources to 109 eligible high schools serving high-needs students as a means of helping high school 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 2023.

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 In June 2023, 61.8 percent of Connecticut's Class of 2023 completed the FAFSA.

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

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

³<u>National FAFSA Completion Rates for High School Seniors and Graduates</u>, National College Attainment Network.

B. FAFSA Completion Measurement

Each school's 2023-24 FAFSA completion rate will be measured as follows:

Total FAFSAs completed by high school seniors (including early graduates) by August 2024 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 |
|--|---|
| 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. | Tier 2 provides similar resources for schools who wish to commit more time to improving FAFSA completion, invest in their own professional development, and learn from other schools. |
| In Tier 1, schools can apply to receive: | In Tier 2, schools can apply to receive: |
| A microgrant, scaled to senior class size Participation in the FAFSA Challenge Community of Practice (attendance optional*), where the Connecticut RISE Network⁴ will hold monthly gatherings for 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. | A microgrant, scaled to senior class size Participation in the FAFSA Challenge Community of Practice (attendance required*), where the RISE Network will hold monthly gatherings for staff to collaborate and share successes, challenges, and promising practices Training, in-person coaching***, and professional development opportunities for school staff on FAFSA completion. See more on coaching below. Access to aggregate and student-level data about FAFSA completion (EdSight, Online Portal), empowering educators with information to then target student support. |
| 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. | Schools that apply for Tier 2 will be expected to attend monthly Community of Practice meetings with their school peers. |

***Schools that have participated in Tier II coaching have consistently rated it as one of the most valuable components of the FAFSA Challenge. Supported by a member of the Connecticut RISE Network, schools that opt for coaching via Tier II will receive the following:

- Monthly coaching (November-May) to review FAFSA data
- Data and strategy goal support personalized to your school needs and demographic
- Budget planning and quarterly review
- Provide support to school teams in identifying best practices for FAFSA completion
- Additional coaching priorities include marketing, FAFSA Task Force, Community Outreach, and more.

⁴ The Connecticut RISE Network is a community of educators working together to help CT students achieve success in and beyond high school.

D. Eligibility Determination

The CSDE determined the list of 109 eligible high schools, potential "Challenge Schools," using 2022-23 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:

- FAFSA completion rate for all students is below 70 percent for the 2022-23 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 2022-23; or
- FAFSA completion rate for students eligible for free- or reduced-price meals was below 70 percent during the 2022-23 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.

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 <u>CSDE website</u> and on page 14 of this document. Applications must be submitted by the school. For districts that have multiple eligible high schools, each should submit its own application.

F. Application Timeline and Submission Requirements

| Activity: | Date: |
|---|-------|
| Call for 2023-24 applications September 6, 2023 | |
| Prospective applicant webinar – register <u>here</u> September 13, 2023 | |
| Application deadline September 29, 2023 | |
| Award notification October 6, 2023 | |
| Kickoff event (all Challenge participants invited)October 18, 2023 | |
| Implementation period October 2023-August 20 | |

Applications should be completed <u>online</u>. For questions, contact John Scianimanico, Director of Special Projects, at <u>john.scianimanico@ct.gov</u>.

G. Recognition

In September 2024, the CSDE will publicly recognize schools for their growth and overall achievement in boosting FAFSA completion rates for the Class of 2024, compared to the Class of 2023. The CSDE will also recognize a FAFSA Challenge school each month for their month-to-month growth in FAFSA completion.

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. 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 | 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. FAFSA breakfast Refer a friend Monthly raffles Food Truck Celebration Classroom Competitions | 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. Saturday family FAFSA workshops Evening events Communication to parents (letters from coaches, email blasts for events, postcards) | Flyers/marketing Guest Speakers on Financial Aid/FAFSA Refreshments Incentives/Raffles |
| Culture- Building Activities | Consistent opportunities to establish FAFSA culture among school communities. Posters with financial aid vocabulary Photos displayed when applications completed Classroom competitions (FSA ID, Applications completed) Weekly announcements Staff Awareness Classroom Activities (Financial Aid Bingo w/prizes) | Posters for hallways (multiple languages) T-shirts for completed applications Checklists for teacher classrooms |
| Marketing & Promotion | Intentional spaces in school buildings to promote and highlight FAFSA completion and FAFSA Campaign initiatives. • 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 | Poster/postcard printing Mailing expenses T-shirts to promote completion Flyers for parents/students at sporting events |

| | Announcements/tables at sporting events | |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Community Partnerships | Collaboration with community based organizations including community colleges to increase FAFSA completion and support team goals. In-kind gifts from local businesses FAFSA Fridays partnering with local community college CAPFAA partnership | Staff stipends/hourly rates for community outreach Postcard/poster printing for collaboration events |

FAFSA Challenge Application Narrative

Directions: All eligible schools wishing to <u>apply</u> for resources through the FAFSA Challenge must complete Questions 1-4 in the 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 other 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: District Budget Officer/Fiscal Officer Point of Contact Name: District Budget Officer/Fiscal Officer Point of Contact Email:

- Use of Data: What was your school's FAFSA completion rate in 2022-23 (you can use the <u>EdSight tool</u> for school FAFSA completion rates)? How will your district use real-time <u>data</u> <u>posted on EdSight</u> to achieve a 5 percentage point increase during the 2023-24 school year?
- 2. Strategy and Commitment to Equity: Describe how your school intends to use its microgrant in order to raise FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors by at least 5 percentage points during the 2023-24 school year, compared to the Class of 2023. 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 discuss at least two best practices 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 <u>strongly encouraged</u> 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 | Moderate | Strong |
|--|----------|---------------|----------|
| | Evidence | Evidence | 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 pc | bints |

ASSURANCES AND COMPLIANCE

- Failure to comply with all Assurances and Certifications in this application, all relevant provisions and requirements of the ARP Act of 2021, Public Law 117-2, enacted on March 11, 2021, or any other applicable law or regulation may result in liability under the False Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3729, et seq.; Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Guidelines to Agencies on Governmentwide Debarment and Suspension (Nonprocurement) in 2 CFR part 180, as adopted and amended as regulations of the Office in 2 CFR part 3485; and 18 USC § 1001, as appropriate;
- The sub-grantee, contractor, subcontractor, successor, transferee, and assignee shall comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits recipients of federal financial assistance from excluding from a program or activity, denying benefits of, or otherwise discriminating against a person on the basis of race, color, or national origin (42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq.), as implemented by the Department of the Treasury's Title VI regulations, 31 CFR Part 22, which are herein incorporated by reference and made a part of this contract (or agreement). Title VI also includes protection to persons with "Limited English Proficiency" in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq., as implemented by the Department of the Treasury's Title VI regulations, 31 CFR Part 22, and herein incorporated by reference and made a part of this contract of the Department of the Treasury's Title VI regulations, 31 CFR Part 22, and herein incorporated by reference and made a part of this contract of the Department of the Treasury's Title VI regulations, 31 CFR Part 22, and herein incorporated by reference and made a part of this contract or agreement;
- Utilize funds only for activities allowable under section 2001 of the ARP Act of 2021. No funds shall be used to subsidize or offset executive salaries or benefits of individuals who are not employees of the applicant or engaged partners or for expenditures related to state or local teacher or faculty unions or associations;
- Provide reports as may be required by the CSDE which could include but are not limited to: the methodology used to provide services or assistance to students and staff; the uses of funds (by the applicant organization 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;
- Cooperate with any examination of records with respect to such ARPA 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;
- 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 funds must be used for purposes that are reasonable, necessary, and allocable under the ARP Act;
- 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;

- 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 organization;
- Fiscal control and fund accounting procedures will be used to ensure proper disbursement of, and accounting for, federal funds;
- The organization 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 organization 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 organization 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 organization 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;
- 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;
- Our organization has discussed this grant application with other stakeholders in our community including the school district to ensure we are enhancing and not duplicating services.

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, Connecticut General Statutes Sections 1-200 et seq (the FOIA). 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.

2023-24 FAFSA Challenge Eligible High Schools

| District Name | School Name | District Name | School Name |
|--|---|--|--|
| Ansonia School District | Ansonia High School | CTECS | Emmett O'Brien Technical High School |
| Area Cooperative Educational Services | CREATE at Whitney Academy | CTECS | H. C. Wilcox Technical High School |
| Berlin School District | Berlin High School | CTECS | H. H. Ellis Technical High School |
| Bethel School District | Bethel High School | CTECS | Henry Abbott Technical High School |
| Branford School District | Branford High School | CTECS | Howell Cheney Technical High School |
| Bridgeport School District | Bassick High School | CTECS | J. M. Wright Technical High School |
| Bridgeport School District | Bridgeport Military Academy | CTECS | Norwich Technical High School |
| Bridgeport School District | Central High School | CTECS | Oliver Wolcott Technical High School |
| Bridgeport School District | Warren Harding High School | CTECS | Platt Technical High School |
| Bristol School District | Bristol Central High School | CTECS | Vinal Technical High School |
| Bristol School District | Bristol Eastern High School | CTECS | W. F. Kaynor Technical High School |
| Capitol Region Education Council | Academy of Science and Innovation | CTECS | Windham Technical High School |
| Capitol Region Education Council | Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts High School - Full Day | Danbury School District | Danbury High School |
| Clinton School District | The Morgan School | East Hartford School District | East Hartford High School |
| CTECS | A. I. Prince Technical High School | East Haven School District | East Haven High School |
| CTECS | Bullard-Havens Technical High School | East Windsor School District | East Windsor High School |
| CTECS | E. C. Goodwin Technical High School | Enfield School District | Enfield High School |
| CTECS | Eli Whitney Technical High School | Glastonbury School District | Glastonbury High School |
| CTECS | Ella T. Grasso Technical High School | Goodwin University Educational Services (GUES) | Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin University |

| District Name | School Name | District Name | School Name |
|------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|
| Great Oaks Charter School District | Great Oaks Charter School | New Britain School District | New Britain High School Satellite Careers Academy |
| Griswold School District | Griswold High School | New Canaan School District | New Canaan High School |
| Groton School District | Robert E. Fitch High School | New Haven School District | Cooperative High School - Inter-District Magnet |
| Hamden School District | Hamden High School | New Haven School District | Hill Regional Career High School |
| Hartford School District | Bulkeley High School | New Haven School District | James Hillhouse High School |
| Hartford School District | Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy | New Haven School District | Metropolitan Business Academy |
| Hartford School District | Hartford Public High School | New Haven School District | Wilbur Cross High School |
| Hartford School District | Pathways Academy of Technology and Design | New London School District | New London High School |
| Hartford School District | Sport and Medical Sciences Academy | New London School District | Science and Technology Magnet Pathway for High School Grades |
| Hartford School District | University High School of Science and Engineering | New Milford School District | New Milford High School |
| Hartford School District | Weaver High School | Newington School District | Newington High School |
| Killingly School District | Killingly High School | Newtown School District | Newtown High School |
| Ledyard School District | Ledyard High School | North Haven School District | North Haven High School |
| Manchester School District | Manchester High School | Norwalk School District | Brien McMahon High School |
| Meriden School District | Success Academy | Norwalk School District | Norwalk High School |
| Middletown School District | Middletown High School | Norwich Free Academy District | Norwich Free Academy |
| Milford School District | Jonathan Law High School | Old Saybrook School District | Old Saybrook Senior High School |
| Montville School District | Montville High School | Plainfield School District | Plainfield High School |
| Naugatuck School District | Naugatuck High School | Plainville School District | Plainville High School |
| New Britain School District | New Britain High School | Plymouth School District | Terryville High School |

| District Name | School Name | District Name | School Name |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Putnam School District | Putnam High School | Torrington School District | Torrington High School |
| Regional School District 01 | Housatonic Valley Regional High School | Vernon School District | Rockville High School |
| Regional School District 05 | Amity Regional High School | Wallingford School District | Lyman Hall High School |
| Regional School District 07 | Northwestern Regional High School | Wallingford School District | Mark T. Sheehan High School |
| Regional School District 15 | Pomperaug Regional High School | Waterbury School District | Crosby High School |
| Regional School District 19 | E. O. Smith High School | Waterbury School District | John F. Kennedy High School |
| Seymour School District | Seymour High School | Waterbury School District | Wilby High School |
| Shelton School District | Shelton High School | Waterford School District | Waterford High School |
| Southington School District | Southington High School | Watertown School District | Watertown High School |
| Stamford School District | Stamford High School | West Hartford School District | Hall High School |
| Stamford School District | The Academy of Information, Technology & Engineering | West Haven School District | West Haven High School |
| Stamford School District | Westhill High School | Wethersfield School District | Wethersfield High School |
| Stratford School District | Bunnell High School | Windham School District | Windham High School |
| Stratford School District | Stratford High School | Windsor School District | Windsor High School |
| The Gilbert School District | The Gilbert School | Wolcott School District | Wolcott High School |
| Thompson School District | Tourtellotte Memorial High School | | |