

2018-19

# FAFSA COMPLETION CHALLENGE

## Case Studies

**ASA Research visited five sites to learn more in-depth about NCAN FAFSA Completion Challenge practices, challenges, and outcomes.**

ASA utilized a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to select the case study sites, including preliminary FAFSA completion rates, level of engagement, and evidence of innovative practices based on prior focus groups, interviews, and survey findings. In addition, ASA ensured a diverse cross-section of sites by lead organization type, district size, student and local population characteristics, location and locale, and strategies offered. A team of two researchers conducted focus groups and small group interviews with site staff, partners, and students.

Each profile below outlines the sites' promising practices and next steps planned, followed by collective challenges and lessons learned.



**Please see the [full report](#) for complete information about the NCAN FAFSA Completion Challenge background, results, and findings.**

# DENTON, TX

## Lead organization:

Denton Independent School District (ISD)

## 2017-18 to 2018-19 change in FAFSA completion rate:

8.9 percentage points

## # high schools:

4

## 2018-19 # seniors:

1,944

## Low-income (FARMS)<sup>1</sup>:

35%

## Grant partners:

- Local postsecondary institutions/college access programs
- Communities in Schools
- United Way
- Community businesses/non-profits

<sup>1</sup> Sites reported the percentage of students receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMS) at each school as a proxy for low-income student status.

## SUMMARY

**DENTON INCREASED FAFSA COMPLETION** through a concerted effort in the school district to train and energize counseling staff and teachers. Each school received a sub-grant to use at its discretion for student incentives and prizes for FAFSA completion. The high schools rely on partnerships with local colleges and universities to provide FAFSA assistance, through programs with college student mentors and professionals who have experience working with FAFSA in a variety of situations. Students told us they found it helpful to see numbers such as Pell Grant amounts in the messaging. They were motivated by prizes and found that school efforts made the FAFSA “less intimidating.” Many teachers became involved in and excited about FAFSA efforts; this grant helped them “build relationships with students in ways [they] hadn’t before.”

## PROMISING PRACTICES

- **On-site FAFSA advisor:** Denton used grant funds to place an Upward Bound counselor with extensive FAFSA assistance experience in the high schools each week. This advisor wrote passes to have students meet with her individually during class time. She kept a list of each student’s progress and asked students for printed FAFSA confirmations to ensure their completion.
- **College partnerships:** The following partnerships existed prior to the grant, but over the past year became more strategically focused on FAFSA completion.
  - **University of North Texas G-Force mentors:** This state-funded program sends teams of college mentors, half of whom are bilingual, into the high schools three days per week to provide one-on-one FAFSA assistance. This past year, mentors also attended FAFSA nights and community events. Mentors try to help ease counselor workloads and make students feel comfortable by providing help from someone close to their age. If students did not have all of the required parent information during FAFSA completion sessions, counselors sent a “call back” to students listing the information they needed to bring with them the following week.
  - **The North Central Texas College Elite team** consists of five first generation and bilingual work-study students. They are trained in FAFSA completion by the financial aid office and connect with students and parents at events and classroom presentations.
- **Data use:** School staff found that having access to FAFSA completion data is “motivating” and creates friendly competition between schools among staff and principals. Counselors created weekly customized reports using state data, including a FAFSA completion flag, to identify students who needed fol-

low-up. The district began tracking college readiness and FAFSA completion metrics this past year, which placed additional emphasis on this indicator.

One parent found a library event to be particularly successful because it was “relaxed” and she found “friendly faces” available to sit down and help her and her son. It was a “positive, fun, hands-on” event; “not a scary thing...not a chore or overwhelming.” She also found there were sufficient staff available that she “didn’t need to wait in line.”

- **School events:** Schools were provided with “mini-grants” to hold events and reward FAFSA completers with prizes. One parent found a library event to be particularly successful because it was “relaxed” and she found “friendly faces” available to sit down and help her and her son. It was a “positive, fun, hands-on” event; “not a scary thing...not a chore or overwhelming.” She also found there were sufficient staff available that she “didn’t need to wait in line.” Schools continued to offer events and assistance throughout the summer, to help students after graduation.
- The grant year included an increased focus on **educating the community** about the importance of college and the role of the FAFSA in the college application process. Denton staff clarified misconceptions about financial aid among families, many of whom had not previously heard of the Pell Grant and did not understand the nuances of various types of aid.
- The Denton lead formed a district-level **core committee** which kicked off the initiative with a day-long planning meeting. Members brainstormed ideas, formed a work plan, and continued to meet monthly in the fall and twice per semester in the spring to monitor progress.
- **Training:** All school staff interacting with seniors were trained on the basics of the FAFSA by postsecondary partners; although not all staff need to be experts, they were informed enough to respond to the first line of questions and refer students to counselors.
- **Messaging:** When the schools publicized the \$6,095 maximum Pell amount, a “light bulb went off” for students, that “wow, college is a possibility for me!” Staff also found that using actual dollar amounts and wording such as “free money” is effective. Students remarked that in addition to dollar amounts, real-life student scenarios would also be effective messaging. Prior to receiving information about FAFSA, many students assumed they would need to take a year off after high school to work and save enough money for college.
- Several **informal, organic strategies** were effective, for example connecting students with financial aid officers from community colleges, and counselors regularly stopping students in the hallway to ask if they completed the FAFSA. School leadership and culture also play a role; a counselor noted that teachers are willing to let students meet with FAFSA advisors during class time because students are “our kids...we are a team.” School staff wear FAFSA **t-shirts** and post **pictures** of FAFSA completers on **bulletin boards** for all to see.

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## SAMPLE SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

One of Denton's high schools with a particularly energized counseling lead and team provided a sampling of events held throughout the year. The staff at this school are appreciative of the school leaders who let them take ownership of FAFSA events through the mini-grant.

**SEPTEMBER:** At senior events such as "Scholarships and how to pay for college," students created FSA IDs and counselors created lists of items students need from home to complete the FAFSA.

**NOVEMBER:** College and Career Week provided FAFSA information for seniors, including a "Show me the money" FAFSA bingo game.

**MARCH:** Staff held a drawing at the class photo for large prizes (e.g., mini fridge for dorm rooms) for FAFSA completers.

**OCTOBER:** Staff distributed information at football games (as well as FAFSA foam fingers, fans, and a jumbotron PSA), senior presentations, ESL college and career expo night, and "FAFSA Fright Night" ("Let's make filling out FAFSA a little less scary!"). Some presentations were delivered in Spanish (rather than translated) which made this population less intimidated and more comfortable. An Upward Bound counselor worked with small groups (5-6 students) at events and held one-on-one appointments the next day for those who started but did not complete the FAFSA at the event. A senior survey asked who would like one-on-one help completing the FAFSA (which the school used for individual targeting).

**FEBRUARY:** Teachers presented information about FAFSA in Government and Economics classes and counselors pulled students from class to follow up with them individually. FAFSA completers were rewarded with an off-campus lunch.

## NEXT STEPS

- The superintendent values and plans to continue this work. He believes the community is beginning to understand the benefits of FAFSA completion.
- Denton plans to engage ESL teachers earlier on this year. These teachers have relationships with parents who are otherwise hard to reach.

# ROCHESTER, NY

## Lead organization:

Rochester Education Foundation (REF)

## 2017-18 to 2018-19 change in FAFSA completion rate:

4.5 percentage points

## # high schools:

14

## 2018-19 # seniors:

1,679

## % low-income (FARMS):

N/A

## Grant Partners:

- Rochester City School District
- Individual/charter school
- Local postsecondary institutions
- Roc the Future/Strive network
- Rochester College Access Network
- Local media

## SUMMARY

**REF PROVIDES RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT THE SUCCESS OF INNER-CITY STUDENTS**, including a FAFSA Fest event, which REF has held for the past five years. REF also leads the Rochester College Access Network (RCAN) and leveraged its RCAN partnerships to support the efforts of this grant. REF was able to increase the number of FAFSA completions over the grant year through a concerted effort among its network of partners and volunteers, and through the addition of dedicated FAFSA staff, to provide opportunities for intentional one-on-one assistance and build awareness around the importance of FAFSA completion. REF achieved this increase despite turnover in district leadership and one partner's staff, which caused a shift in strategies. In addition, REF strengthened its relationship with Monroe Community College, which provided staff for FAFSA events. REF has also built relationships with district staff, who believe REF has proven to be a reliable resource for teachers and counselors who need the additional support. REF staff are surprised at how much progress they have made and are "excited to get so much engagement."

## PROMISING PRACTICES

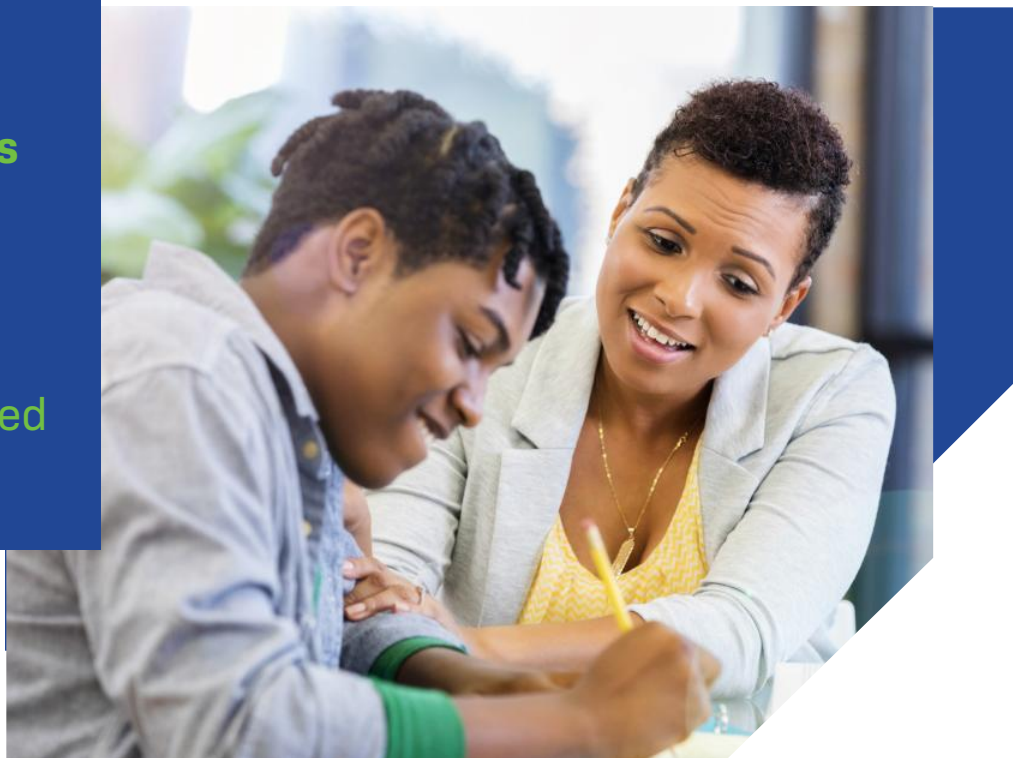
- **One-on-one assistance through school events:** This strategy is new to REF and perhaps the most effective. As part of its Spring FAFSA Fest, REF and partner college staff provided on-site FAFSA completion assistance at schools and at Monroe Community College (MCC). The personal connection with students, the "humanity aspect," is key. Students reported being highly satisfied with these events, because they were able to get assistance right away and complete the FAFSA on the spot.
  - **Classroom assistance:** REF presented in 12th grade economic classes for the first time this year, where staff helped students get FSA IDs and promoted FAFSA events.
  - **Parent nights:** Members of RCAN presented at parent nights at schools. Events were better advertised and attended than in the past.
- **Counselor incentives:** REF believes that gift cards were a motivating factor to get counselors more engaged. However, engaged counselors may only represent a minority of the schools in the district (see Challenges – Partner engagement, p. 14).

- **Volunteers:** REF trained 75 volunteers from the community; most were repeats and highly engaged in this work.
- **Data:** Although REF is still working on obtaining correct student-level FAFSA completion data (see Challenges, p. 13), counselors at individual schools that were able to report completion data to the principal found it helpful to be able to show improvement.

## NEXT STEPS

- REF plans to continue FAFSA activities (by demonstrating their success to local foundations, REF was able to secure additional funding for the current school year) and will provide more targeted events based on lessons learned. REF thinks the conversation has changed among high school staff who are beginning to talk about success beyond high school graduation.
- While Rochester has made strides, it can realize further improvement through more targeted follow-through by counselors and partners to ensure that students complete the FAFSA in its entirety, including verification and any additional information needed by colleges.

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# CORPUS CHRISTI, TX

## Lead organization:

Corpus Christi Citizens for Educational Excellence (CEE)

## 2017-18 to 2018-19 change in FAFSA completion rate:

6.0 percentage points

## # high schools: 9 2018-19 # seniors:

2,570

## % low-income (FARMS):

63%

## Grant Partners:

- Corpus Christi Independent School District
- Local postsecondary institutions/mentors
- Local media
- United Way
- Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend

## SUMMARY

**CEE HOUSES EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT PARTNERS (E2E) AND COASTAL COMPASS EDUCATION & CAREER RESOURCE CENTER, WHICH PROVIDES FREE AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION AND CAREER RESOURCES** in a shopping mall. Coastal Compass has hosted “FAFSA Frenzy” Saturdays and a FAFSA completion Mobile Center at football games for the past few years. CEE increased FAFSA completion through community events and innovative student incentives such as graduation cords. The site adjusted proposed strategies such as competitions and peer mentoring, originally planned to take place at the individual level, to the school/group-level, due to initial counselor pushback. By the end of the grant, the counselors seemed to understand that CEE is there to support them, not to create extra work. Site team members stated that as a result of this work, FAFSA will receive more emphasis from schools and as it becomes embedded in the culture.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

- **Mentors:** Del Mar College (DMC) and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) provide trained college mentors in the high schools to assist seniors with FAFSA completion and college access. Mentors act “as support to counselors to get [students] through the college enrollment process,” and for the grant, served as “champions for FAFSA.” Students feel comfortable opening up to mentors who are close in age; mentors “can speak to rather than speak at high school students” and “feel more like a friend.” The DMC mentors visited required English classes and provided assistance at evening and weekend events.
- **Graduation Cords:** CEE generated excitement around FAFSA completion by providing special graduation cords for FAFSA completers. This visual marker of accomplishment served as an incentive for students and families to complete the FAFSA.
- **FAFSA completion events:** CEE held events in the community on evenings and weekends, where trained staff and mentors sat down with students and parents to help them complete the FAFSA.

## NEXT STEPS

- Kickoff meetings with all staff supporting the work will be beneficial in the future.
- CEE expects schools and counselors to reach out for assistance in helping all seniors to complete the FAFSA in response to the new state graduation requirement, and will use the lessons learned from the FAFSA Challenge.
- While it seemed a good idea to provide FAFSA completion services at tax assistance events targeting low-income populations, this event had low demand, and CEE does not plan to continue this strategy in the future.

# WEST VALLEY CITY, UT

## Lead organization:

West Valley City: Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority (UHEAA)

## 2017-18 to 2018-19 change in FAFSA completion rate:

2.6 percentage points

## # high schools:

8

## 2018-19 # seniors:

4,290

## % low-income (FARMS):

41%

## Grant Partners:

- Postsecondary institutions
- Granite School District
- Salt Lake County Library system
- United Way

## SUMMARY

### UHEAA IS A STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCY WITH A FOCUS ON FINANCIAL AID OUT-REACH AND FAFSA COMPLETION.

Past/ongoing efforts include 97 FAFSA events in 2017-2018 and FAFSA “boot camp” trainings. UHEAA awarded microgrants to four schools and hired two part-time community outreach assistants, assigned to one school each. UHEAA saw progress but “not as much as [they] hoped.” They do feel they “have changed the conversation and more folks are engaged.” The College Advising Corps advisors located in the schools, while not hired for this grant, seem to be highly effective based on feedback from students and staff. A group of students conveyed that before the year of the grant, they did not know that college was a real possibility. One student shared that college is an aspiration for both her and her mom: “this is our dream.” When she received the financial aid award letter notifying her that she was eligible for the maximum Pell Grant, she said “well then, look who’s going to college!”

West Valley City faced unique challenges specific to its local population. Located in Salt Lake County where over half the population (51%) is Mormon, high school graduates often serve two-year missions through the Mormon church; they are not yet thinking about college senior year. Counselors try to change that mindset and encourage students to apply now and defer enrollment. In addition, several interviewees shared that Utah has a Western “self-reliant culture.” People “don’t want hand-outs...not part of [our] identity.” They “want to work for/earn what they get.”

## PROMISING PRACTICES

*The following strategies were implemented for the grant/using grant funding:*

- **Community Outreach Assistant (COA):** The part-time COA hired for the grant was based in one of the schools and worked with students one-on-one or in small groups (a second COA was hired initially, but did not work out). He planned FAFSA completion events and outreach with teachers and counselors. He pulled students out of class, however he received “backlash” from some teachers who did not want time taken away from their classes, and offered after school help for those students instead. The COA prepared a matrix of colleges in the state to show students tuition and financial aid amounts for various scenarios. Students found it helpful to receive assistance from a relatable, recent first-generation college graduate.
- **Microgrants:** Microgrants enabled schools to expand on existing incentives for FAFSA completion. The site lead provided schools with a report of best practices, from which they chose to implement. Some provided raffle prizes such as Chromebooks or gift cards for students who completed the FAFSA.



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**“this is our dream.”**

When she received the financial aid award letter notifying her that she was eligible for the maximum Pell Grant, she said “well then, **look who’s going to college!**”



- **Email “nudging”/data use:** The site lead sent weekly email updates to counselors, which they appreciated and found motivating. The updates included data, deadlines, and best practices. Schools “love to see where they are at an aggregate level” and the progress they made. Neighboring districts would like to receive these as well.

*In addition to the practices described above, UHEAA continued existing strategies, described below.*

- **The professional development** offered by UHEAA is quite extensive and well-received, consisting of both in-person and online trainings for counselors and educators, including a four-hour “FAFSA boot camp” and a YouTube step-by-step FAFSA “walkthrough.”
- **College Advising Corps (CAC) advisors:** These first-generation near peers provide one-on-one FAFSA completion assistance in the schools. They demonstrate the importance of FAFSA completion and college-going and send emails to students with options of times to come in either with or without their parents. They call students out of class, find them at lunch, or meet after school, “nagging them to complete.” They also follow-up with students who attend financial aid nights but are missing a signature or other FAFSA component. Advisors make in-class presentations to senior English classes before the statewide college application week, and throughout the year to AVID and Latinos in Action. The site lead is their “emergency hotline.” They have all taken his FAFSA bootcamp training.
- **School FAFSA nights:** Roughly one-third of seniors attended these events. College partners, high school counselors, and College Access advisors (some Spanish speaking) provided on-site, one-on-one assistance. At some schools, students earned points for the citizenship component of their graduation requirements by completing the FAFSA at an event with their parents in attendance. At one school, students who completed the FAFSA and a survey received a meal ticket for a food truck outside. Information about FAFSA nights was circulated through school websites, posters, postcards, emails, and phone messages. Reactions to the FAFSA nights included the following:
  - One student mentioned finding these events helpful to attend with his parents, who had previously thought FAFSA was only for loans. A counselor explained to parents the grants and other types of aid available through FAFSA.
  - One counselor noted she can see the “jump in data” when they hold a FAFSA night. The first one of the year is well attended, however it “tapers off after that.”
- **Materials:** Students and parents find FAFSA materials developed by UHEAA to be helpful, including a pull-out page with FAFSA login and scholarship information.

## NEXT STEPS



- Counselors are interested in obtaining grant funding to implement promising practices from other Challenge sites, such as FAFSA Fiestas and fans for football games. Other strategies UHEAA was unable to implement but would like to explore for the future include a celebrity radio spot and halftime advertising at high school football games.
- UHEAA would like to expand the email reminders statewide (perhaps not weekly, but monthly). They would like to overhaul the existing system to automate these emails.
- UHEAA would like a CAC advisor in every high school. The CAC advisors are continually refining their services and making themselves available at convenient times for the school. One was looking into presenting at an elective class in the school she serves.

## Students and staff spoke highly of the CAC advisors in the schools and shared the following ways they are effective:

- They are persistent, intentional in their follow-up with students, and rigorously track data around meetings.
- They are able to empathize and students feel comfortable sharing, given their similar backgrounds.
- One student shared that her advisor “allowed me to gain confidence in myself.” She said, “Here is my pathway and here’s what I need to do to follow it.”
- The advisor “makes everything about you and wants you to succeed.”
- Another student added that she and her parents did not know how to complete the FAFSA, and “going to him helped me figure it out.”
- Another added, “having someone pushing you was very helpful.”

**“...[MY ADVISOR]  
ALLOWED ME TO  
GAIN CONFIDENCE  
IN MYSELF.”**

# VANCOUVER, WA

**Lead organization:**

Vancouver Public Schools (VPS)

**2017-18 to 2018-19 change in FAFSA completion rate:**

2.6 percentage points

**# high schools:**

7

**2018-19 # seniors:**

1,522

**% low-income (FARMS):**

35%

**Grant Partners:**

- Washington (WA) College Access Network
- Evergreen School District
- Postsecondary institutions
- Leadership Clark County
- VPS Foundation

## SUMMARY

**THE VPS COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ASSESSMENT COORDINATOR AND DISTRICT COORDINATOR FOR GEAR UP MANAGED THE FAFSA CHALLENGE WORK.**

They had the full support of district and building leadership and were able to provide FAFSA assistance both in class and by pulling students from class to meet with counselors one-on-one. Some new strategies, such as a FAFSA family breakfast event and student ambassadors, were slow to pick up steam, but the site leads are currently planning for how to improve on this in the future. The site leads are not satisfied with the progress they made so far and are interested in identifying funds to hire an additional staff member to help them manage FAFSA activities. Some staff reported a (slow) shift in the mindset of students and staff to seeing FAFSA as required for all students: “Previously, people thought you need to fill out FAFSA if you don’t have enough money and I can tell this is changing now and everybody starts to understand the importance of it.”

## PROMISING PRACTICES

- **One-on-one assistance:** Interviewees agree the most effective strategy was talking to students personally. Counselors identify non-completers using weekly data updates (see “Data use” on the next page) and contact them for this assistance.
- **In-class assistance:** Students in one of the alternative high schools in the district completed the FAFSA in their English class. In another school, two Current World Problems (CWP) teachers were trained to provide FAFSA assistance in their classes. Teachers collaborated with the site leads to allow their students to be pulled from class for assistance. Existing relationships with teachers were key for allowing this use of valuable class time.
- **FAFSA trainings:** In September, the site leads and postsecondary partners provided a three-hour in-person training on FAFSA for teachers, counselors, and other staff who interact with seniors (previously, training was only available online). The training had a good turnout; 40 staff were trained and received continuing education credits. A training in February, specifically addressing the unique challenges of undocumented students, had a turnout of over 60 staff.
- **Language resources:** VPS provided Spanish interpreters and materials translated into both Spanish and Russian to help reach these significant populations.



## SCHOOL EVENTS

## EARLIER IN THE

## YEAR HAD BETTER

## TURNOUTS THAN

## LATER ON.

- **Regular communications:** The site leads sent weekly data updates to schools, and schools shared ideas for events. For example, two rival schools had a friendly competition between their career specialists, which they found to be motivating, and shared as a sample practice for other schools to follow.
- **Data use:** Counselors used a college readiness spreadsheet to track down students who did not complete the FAFSA. VPS created the spreadsheet, which includes students' college bound and FAFSA completion status, drawing on data from state FAFSA and scholarship portals, a district student information system, and a career exploration platform. The site leads sent a FAFSA status update to schools weekly.
- **School events:** The schools had several FAFSA events in the fall, some tacked onto larger college events. Local colleges held FAFSA completion workshops in computer labs with one-on-one assistance. The school events earlier in the year had better turnouts than those later on.
- **FAFSA campaign:** VPS used the "First you hafta-FAFSA" logo (from the first Challenge) on the district website, banners, and documents. The school websites, computers at the Career Center, and seniors' iPads had direct links to FAFSA information, and each school's webpage had a thermometer to show where they were in the FAFSA completion process, to spur competition. In October, VPS placed calls and emails to students' homes and posted information about events on the district social media pages.
- **Incentives:** VPS offered schools other incentives such as printed t-shirts, water bottles, posters, and banners. Staff wore FAFSA t-shirts they received through trainings.

## NEXT STEPS

- VPS would like to explore ways to better engage parents. A morning event had a lower turnout than expected, and one interviewee recommended holding an event with food and babysitting to attract more families. The site leads would also like to see more events available for immigrant families in their languages. Creating trust with families begins early on, before high school, and FAFSA outreach begins with explaining the basics about paying for college before asking families to complete a form.
- VPS developed guidelines and planned activities to expand and further structure a student ambassador strategy. Only two students attended the ambassador trainings, however the site leads believe students have great ideas and the ability to connect with those who share similar backgrounds. They hope to attract more participants with the expanded strategy this year.

- While district leadership has been supportive, the leads would like to see this work become more systematized by including FAFSA completion in district-wide key performance indicators (KPIs), and by making activities a planned part of the curriculum. They are in communication with school district leadership to start conversations about FAFSA beginning in 9th grade (currently, FAFSA/college planning only happens early on for students in GEAR UP or AVID, but many other students need this education).
- It may be difficult to find funding to sustain the incentives, but VPS has enough staff trained to sustain the communications and data strategies. VPS would like to train more staff in the future, both administrators and teachers – any staff who interact with students, so they can better answer FAFSA-related questions.

## COMMON CHALLENGES

REPORTED BY THE FIVE SITES ARE SUMMARIZED BELOW.

### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

Note, these challenges were common throughout the 25 sites participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge, and are also detailed in the full report.

- **Distrust:** Some families are fearful of providing information to the federal government, may not file taxes correctly, or do not want their kids to know how much money they earn.
- **Misconceptions:** Others think they earn too much to qualify for aid or assume they will have to pay back any money received through the federal government. Debt is on the minds of many families. Some students who are not citizens believe they can only obtain a minimum wage job after high school, even if they are doing well in school.
- **Inaccessibility:** Some parents are working two jobs and cannot commit to a meeting at school; others live too far to be engaged. Parents may not have cars to travel to FAFSA events. Others do not have Internet access. Some families face difficult situations such as homelessness and incarceration.
- **Language barrier:** Some sites offered Spanish translations, but have many other non-English speaking populations.



### DATA:

- **Inaccuracies:** The district FAFSA data provided to a CBO were inaccurate, and counselors were not able to identify and follow-up with non-completers. Due to turnover at the district, this CBO was unable to obtain corrected data.
- **Matching:** Several districts faced challenges matching state and federal level datasets due to slightly different spellings or abbreviations of school names and were required to manually match student information.





## PARTNER ENGAGEMENT:

- **Counselor Engagement:** When a CBO is the site lead (as opposed to a school district), it can be difficult to gain the buy-in and engagement of school counselors, who may resist taking on FAFSA completion as yet another job responsibility. It is important to involve all stakeholders, including counselors, beginning with the planning stage. One counselor shared that incentives would help motivate them to work evening events.
- **Community Engagement:** Sites would like to expand community partnerships, but recognize that these relationships take time to develop.

## VERIFICATION

- **Lack of clarity:**
  - Students and parents often do not take – or understand – the final steps needed for successful completion. Students reported completing the FAFSA at events, but not receiving financial aid offers from institutions, and having to contact institutions to find out that additional documentation was needed for verification.
  - Students and parents are often confused by the FSA data, which reports students' applications as "processed" or "successfully submitted." Parents do not know which status means completed and often call the schools for clarification.



# LESSONS LEARNED

REPORTED BY THE FIVE SITES ARE SUMMARIZED BELOW.

- **Change takes time.** Sites expressed that while they made progress, they expected even larger increases. For Denton, this initiative was “the first real intentional focus” on FAFSA completion and it will take longer than one year to fully integrate FAFSA with the local culture (at the time of the grant, FAFSA was not yet mandated as a high school graduation requirement as the state later announced in July, 2019).
- **Begin early.** Sites emphasized starting conversations with students and families about going to and paying for college early on, before high school, to build trust and educate the community.
- **One-on-one is best.** Sites repeatedly cited one-on-one assistance as the most effective strategy. Students often do not speak up as much in groups and may be afraid to ask personal questions in front of their peers. They will likely receive information more tailored to their situations in individualized settings.
- **Leverage existing assistance.** Tools such as Naviance can free up time for counselors to meet with students and families who are not as engaged in the college/ financial aid process.
- **Offer one-stop shopping.** At FAFSA nights, students can also complete college applications. Students “leave these events feeling like college is actually a possibility...[college] becomes real for them...they feel accomplished.”
- **Prepare students before events** with a list of items they will need to bring.
- **Relationships matter.** In addition to partner relationships, student relationships are important. Counselors who have built relationships with students are able to push them to complete the FAFSA.
- **Leadership buy-in makes a difference.** Schools that were most involved in the FAFSA Completion Challenge had support from principals who encourage their staff to be engaged.
- **Include all stakeholders** in the planning, and throughout the initiative, to gain and maintain their buy-in and engagement.
- **Be flexible.** Offer assistance or “chat times” in the mornings, evenings and on weekends. Provide multiple opportunities in various locations for students to receive assistance.
- **Be committed and persistent.** One site lead stated that “it takes a dedicated person to lead this work.” The person leading this work must set aside time and be prepared to adapt strategies when faced with setbacks.
- **Messaging matters.** Students and staff emphasized the importance of messaging:
  - Stories are powerful. One advisor suggested publicizing stories about students and the amount of aid they received and how it helped them.
  - The word “FAFSA” can be intimidating to students. But once they actually complete it, many find it “isn’t that bad.”
  - Advisors learned the “free money” message is helpful at getting students’ attention.