DATA

How can systems for data collection and reporting be developed? How can practitioners track and use data to prioritize support for students and families?

SPOTLIGHT DISTRICT

Vancouver Public Schools
Vancouver, Washington

TARGET SCHOOLS

11 Percentage point increase in three high-need "target" schools

DISTRICT RESULTS

From 2017–2018 to 2018–2019, VPS INCREASED DISTRICT-WIDE FAFSA COMPLETION BY 5 PERCENTAGE POINTS

WHY THIS MATTERS

One of the highest impact strategies for increasing FAFSA completion is providing access to student-level data for high school counselors and administrators. This enables schools to target outreach and support to the students and families who need it most. However, data is also one of the most frequently cited challenge areas for schools and districts. Merging data from multiple sources may result in inaccuracies or inconsistencies. In other cases, the data may come too late—or not at all—to be useful in informing possible interventions. Even Louisiana, which has led the nation in FAFSA completion for the past several years, was unable to access student-level data until after high school graduation due to the state's strict student privacy regulations. Without consistent access to data, many high school counselors have resorted to devising their own methods, such as individually tracking down each student to show a confirmation of their submission. These methods are neither practical nor efficient, taking valuable time from high school counselors who are often already stretched thin. Whether led by a state, district, or partner organization, developing a system for tracking and reporting data should be at the center of any FAFSA completion strategy.

ACTION STEPS

Harnessing data to target supports for students and families is a cornerstone of any school or district's FAFSA completion strategy. Taking the lessons learned from school districts across the country, the following strategies can be used to bolster data capacity:

- Develop an online portal for schools and districts to access student-level FAFSA completion data
- Regularly report on data to track progress at the school, district, and state level
- Provide training to school counselors, principals, and district administrators on how to leverage data to prioritize outreach and support to students and families

STRATEGIES

Below, we have highlighted how Vancouver Public Schools and other districts across the country have leveraged a partner organization to develop a system for sharing FAFSA completion data with high school counselors and administrators.

Providing Access to Student-Level Data

Vancouver Public Schools (VPS), located just north of the border between Washington and Oregon, has seen significant momentum around FAFSA completion in the past six years. A core element of their strategy is sharing robust student-level data with schools through an online portal. Managed by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), the state's higher education coordinating board, which has a signed data agreement with VPS, the portal allows all high school counselors and administrators to have real-time data on students who have completed the FAFSA, have missing information or errors on their application, and who have started, but not finished the form. VPS has also created a customized report in their student information system that pulls disparate data from Federal Student Aid, state scholarship programs, and state financial aid into a single system. According to Nina Stemm, the GEAR Up Coordinator at VPS who has spearheaded the district's FAFSA efforts, VPS is now focusing their attention on conducting trainings on the data, with the goal of "building the capacity and knowledge of all staff to increase [their] ability to support students and families."

Reporting on Progress

The Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) manages a statewide FAFSA tracker. The tracker, which is publicly accessible, enables individuals to view data by school, enrollment, region, and county and benchmarks current completion rates to the previous year. To spur competition among schools, the tracker also features a leaderboard of the top schools in the state by both overall completion rate and growth from the previous year. This competition is further supported by the College Cash Campaign, championed by Governor Whitmer, which provides incentives to schools for meeting certain benchmarks. For example, the top three schools will have Governor Whitmer speak at their graduation ceremony, while all schools meeting the statewide goal of 75 percent of students completing the FAFSA will receive an award and social media recognition by MCAN and the Executive Office of the Governor.

Training Counselors and Principals

In Texas, Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD) holds monthly meetings with college advisors to discuss their progress toward meeting the district's FAFSA completion goals. At each meeting, district staff reviews disaggregated data to determine whether specific groups of students would benefit from targeted outreach or support, and then collaborates with the college advisors to develop a plan to do so. In Tennessee, all high schools partnering with GEAR UP, a federally funded college access grant program, receive ongoing training from regional coordinators on how to analyze their data, identify root causes for low completion rates, and set goals for improvement. They then work closely with high school counselors and administrators to develop a work plan to meet those goals.

HOW STATES CAN SUPPORT

To enable schools to better support students and families in completing the FAFSA, states should provide access to timely, accurate, student-level data through the development and maintenance of an online portal. They should work with districts and relevant partner organizations to establish necessary data sharing agreements to ensure that all necessary staff have access to the data. This should be coupled with professional development for high school counselors and administrators, both on how to access and use the online portal and on how to use the data to inform the supports provided to students and families. States should also use aggregate data at the school or district level to target their own supports, as well as to transparently report on progress to the public. To further drive the use of data, states should set a statewide FAFSA completion goal and support districts or regions with setting their own targets.