CROSS-SECTOR
COLLABORATION

ESG | Education Strategy Group | LEVEL UP

What structures, routines, and policies can support shared ownership between the K–12 and higher education sectors in supporting FAFSA completion?

SPOTLIGHT DISTRICT
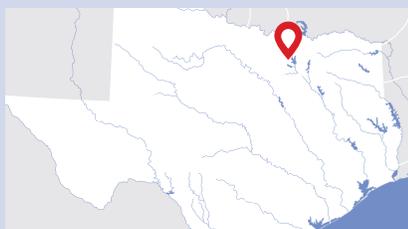
Denton Independent Schools
Denton, Texas

PARTNERSHIPS

3 | University of North Texas
Texas Woman's College
North Central Texas College

DISTRICT RESULTS

From 2017–2018 to 2018–2019,
DISD INCREASED FAFSA COMPLETION
BY 8 PERCENTAGE POINTS

WHY THIS MATTERS

Because it opens doors to federal—and increasingly, state and institutional—financial aid, completing the FAFSA is an essential step for students preparing to transition from high school to college. While much of the responsibility for high school students completing the FAFSA has fallen on the K–12 sector, the higher education sector also is invested in supporting FAFSA completion to promote enrollment and attainment. In fact, some postsecondary institutions have started to require the FAFSA to access both need-based and merit-based aid, and many others have offered staff to advise high school students on the financial aid process. To truly move the needle, the K–12 and higher education sectors need to come together to align their work to support students and families with completing the FAFSA.

ACTION STEPS

Both the K–12 and higher education sectors stand to gain from increasing FAFSA completion. As such, it is incumbent on both sectors to develop a strategy for providing support to students and families. Taking lessons learned from school districts across the country, the following strategies support cross-sector collaboration:

- ✓ Convene stakeholders from both K–12 and higher education to develop a joint strategy for increasing FAFSA completion
- ✓ Partner with local higher education institutions to provide on-the-ground support to students and families
- ✓ Leverage philanthropic and nonprofit partners to support sustainability and scale

STRATEGIES

Below, we have highlighted how Denton Independent School District and other districts across the country have successfully established a cross-sector network to develop and implement a FAFSA completion strategy.

Convening Across Sectors

Denton Independent School District (DISD), located outside of Dallas, Texas, launched its FAFSA completion initiative by pulling together a committee of practitioners from across the K–12 and higher education sectors. In addition to recruiting the district's own principals and high school counselors, the committee also included members from three local higher education institutions: the University of North Texas, Texas Woman's College, and North Central Texas College. The committee met regularly to develop and refine a strategic plan for increasing FAFSA completion in their region. Their coordinated effort resulted in an eight percentage point increase in the district's FAFSA completion rate.

Partnering with Local Postsecondary Institutions

In addition to involving postsecondary representatives on their committee, DISD took advantage of their partnerships with local colleges to provide students with access to near-peer mentors. An initiative led by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Go Centers are college and career information centers staffed by current college students that operate to help high school students navigate the transition to college. They are housed in colleges across the state and add capacity to local high schools by offering individual advising sessions and staffing FAFSA nights.

In Mississippi, Get2College (G2C) involved postsecondary partners by piloting an initiative for college financial aid administrators to adopt a local high school. A total of 26 financial aid advisors worked with 10 schools with historically low FAFSA completion rates to provide one-on-one advising to students and families. Vancouver Public Schools (VPS), located in Washington, followed a similar approach to G2C, working with financial aid offices at partner colleges to provide training to local high school staff.

Bringing in Philanthropic and Non-Profit Organizations

To broaden their network, many schools and districts look to philanthropic and non-profit partnerships. As these organizations are often well-connected to a network of other organizations and institutions—either locally, regionally, or nationally—they can provide direct support for building relationships across sectors. For example, Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD), also located outside of Dallas, has a partnership with Dallas Promise. In addition to providing direct support, Dallas Promise fostered a connection between GPISD and Dallas County Community College, which provides volunteers to staff local FAFSA events. Both Puget Sound College & Career Network (PSCCN) in Washington and the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority (UHEAA) partner with the United Way, which has helped them build awareness within their communities and connect with other local resources to support students and families.

Similarly, many districts turn to support from local college access networks, which collaborate closely with both secondary and postsecondary partners. In addition to training high school counselors, advising students and families, tracking data, and hosting FAFSA events, local college access networks can help scale FAFSA initiatives by expanding successful models across the state. GPISD partners with Advise Texas, UHEAA partners with the Utah College Advising Corps, and VPS partners with the Washington College Access Network.

HOW STATES CAN SUPPORT

States should model cross-sector alignment at the local level by fostering collaboration across K-12 and higher education state agencies. They should tap leaders from both sectors to build shared ownership for increasing FAFSA completion and create intentional opportunities for them to set targets and develop strategies to drive completion. Leveraging their role as connectors across districts, agencies, and organizations, states should also support structures to codify and share high-impact strategies from both sectors across the state.