

Strategy Spotlight

FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT

How can parents be leveraged as partners in driving FAFSA completion? How can communications and outreach efforts be tailored to reach families?

SPOTLIGHT DISTRICT



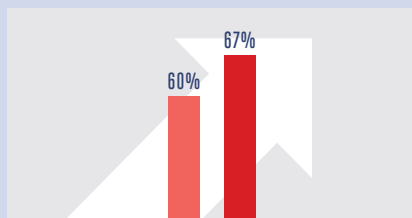
Grand Prairie Independent Schools
Grand Prairie, Texas

COUNSELOR ACCESS

50

AVERAGE COLLEGE
COUNSELOR ADVISING
SESSIONS PER WEEK

DISTRICT RESULTS



From 2017-2018 to 2018-2019,
GPISD INCREASED FAFSA COMPLETION
BY 7 PERCENTAGE POINTS

WHY THIS MATTERS

Because parents need to provide financial information and sign the form, engaging families around the importance of completing the FAFSA is essential. Yet, parents are one of the most frequent barriers cited by schools and districts in their efforts to increase FAFSA completion rates. Much of this challenge stems from a lack of awareness about the importance of the FAFSA, as well as misconceptions among parents about how the form will be used. According to a recent survey, 23 percent of FAFSA non-completers stated they did not have enough information to complete the form, and 32 percent assumed their family would not qualify for financial aid. Families may also be distrustful about sharing information with the federal government; this issue is particularly salient for undocumented families. It is up to schools and districts to address these misconceptions, build awareness, and provide direct support to families in completing the FAFSA.

ACTION STEPS

Partnering with families is integral to driving FAFSA completion rates. Taking the lessons learned from school districts across the country, the following strategies can be used to build family engagement around the FAFSA:

- ✓ Leverage parents who have already completed the FAFSA to serve as a resource for other families
- ✓ Provide in-person support to families in completing the form by hosting FAFSA nights and offering advising sessions with a college counselor
- ✓ Develop marketing campaigns to build awareness of the FAFSA among families
- ✓ Utilize community resources, such as libraries, housing agencies, and local television and radio stations, to expand reach

STRATEGIES

Below, we have highlighted how Grand Prairie Independent School District and other districts across the country leaned on close-knit community to build awareness and support for families in completing the FAFSA.

Appointing Parent Ambassadors

Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD), located outside of Dallas, is a community where “everyone knows each other,” according to GPISD’s Executive Director of College Readiness Cornelia McCowan. “Parents know each other, and their children all attend the local

community schools.” To build upon this strong sense of community among families, GPISD created a parent ambassador program where parents of students who have already completed the FAFSA share their experiences and support other families in completing the form. GPISD provided training and other resources to prepare ambassadors to take on this role and encouraged them to reach out proactively to the families they knew to provide support. This strategy has the potential to be particularly useful in building trust and connecting families who speak another language or who include individuals who are undocumented. Schools should be intentional about recruiting parent ambassadors from diverse racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and should ensure that all training is culturally responsive.

Providing Direct Support to Families

There are few replacements for targeted, in-person support to students and families for increasing FAFSA completion rates. In addition to providing access to individual advising sessions with college advisors, GPISD also holds multiple FAFSA nights at each of its three high schools over the course of the school year. These events provide an opportunity for families to learn about the FAFSA and why it matters, complete the form with the support of GPISD staff or volunteers from their partner organizations, and even hear from local higher education institutions about their offerings. To ensure that all families are being served by these opportunities, schools should track who is attending and be proactive about reaching out to families who may be unaware or hesitant to take part, particularly for parents of first-generation students and undocumented families.

Developing Marketing Campaigns

GPISD used the slogan “But First FAFSA” to brand their FAFSA campaign. In addition to crafting their own emails and social media posts, they engaged their parent ambassadors to create videos encouraging other parents to complete the FAFSA. Other sites, such as Truckee Meadows Community College in Nevada and Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas, have found success with geofencing—purchasing advertising targeted to specific locations and demographics—and launching texting campaigns to reach parents directly. To reach all families, schools and districts should develop these communications in multiple languages.

Leveraging Community Resources

To meet parents where they are, many schools and districts partner with local organizations to publicize and provide support around the FAFSA. For example, Puget Sound College & Career Network in Washington partnered with the King County Housing Authority to mail postcards advertising upcoming FAFSA nights to all families in public housing. They were also regular guests on the local Spanish radio station to raise awareness of the FAFSA to Spanish-speaking families. Denton Independent School District, located in Texas, promoted the FAFSA at high school football games, advertising FAFSA nights on the jumbotron and handing out FAFSA foam fingers to fans. In Wyoming, Laramie County Community College coordinated with the county library to publicize and hold FAFSA events.

HOW STATES CAN SUPPORT

States can support schools and districts by developing toolkits for engaging families on FAFSA completion. These toolkits might include sample emails, social media templates, checklists for planning and hosting FAFSA events, and resources on the importance of the FAFSA. The state should post all relevant resources on its agency website. States can also promote awareness of the FAFSA by running their own marketing campaigns. Additionally, states can partner with organizations that lend on-the-ground capacity to advise families on completing the FAFSA.