

ADVANCING FINANCIAL AID ACCESSIBILITY:

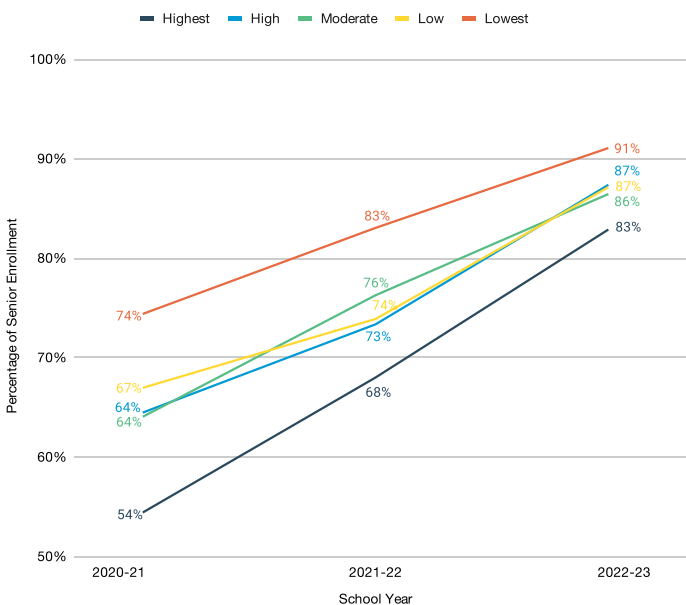
LEARNING FROM SUCCESS IN LA UNIFIED



INTRODUCTION

The process of applying to college is daunting, with too many pieces left for students and families to manage on their own. It is even harder for the many students of color in Los Angeles who face economic insecurity, language barriers, and the challenges of being a first-generation college applicant. Fortunately, as of the 2022-23 school year, all high school seniors in California are now required to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA), thanks to AB 469 (2021).¹ This requirement will make college access more equitable for underrepresented students by strengthening the college-going culture in high schools and ensuring that the approximately \$550 million in financial aid historically left on the table by students² can support their college access and success.

Figure 1. 2021-2023 Multi-Year FAFSA/CADAA Completion Rate by SENI Quintile



Though the Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified, or District) was already ahead of the state in financial aid completion, with 64% of seniors completing applications in 2020-21 compared to 50% statewide,³ the District took action to prepare to meet the state mandate. In fall 2021, the *Got a Plan for That? Removing Barriers to College and Career Success*⁴ resolution was passed, directing District leadership to develop a plan to help students complete the appropriate financial aid application in addition to meeting other postsecondary preparation goals.

District-level policy and school-level implementation efforts have paid off, with the FAFSA/CADAA completion rate in LA Unified increasing 16 percentage points since the legislation was passed (from 64% in 2020-21 to 80% in 2022-23).⁵ Even more exciting, the highest-need schools – according to the Student Equity Needs Index (SENI)⁶ – have achieved the greatest growth (a 28 percentage point increase from 2020-21 to 2022-23), with almost 1,700 more students in these schools alone completing applications (See figure 1).⁷

A closer look at the data reveals that a number of schools demonstrated impressive increases of 30 to 51 percentage points in their financial aid application completion rates during this time period.

Figure 2. Top 15 SENI High- and Highest-Need Schools with High Growth*

Rank	High School	Percentage Point Growth* (2020-21 — 2022-23)
1	University Pathways Public Service Academy	51%
2	Los Angeles Senior High**	49%
3	Augustus F. Hawkins High Critical Design and Gaming STEM Magnet	48%
4	Robert Fulton College Preparatory**	47%
5	Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy	42%
6	Jordan High	39%
7	Crenshaw High School Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Medicine Magnet	36%
7	Diego Rivera Learning Complex Green Design STEAM Academy	36%
9	Mervyn M. Dymally High	35%
10	Cesar E. Chavez Learning Academies Technology Preparatory Academy	32%
11	John C. Fremont Senior High	31%
11	Santee Education Complex	31%
11	Helen Bernstein High	31%
14	Susan Miller Dorsey Senior High	30%
14	Manual Arts Senior High	30%
14	Diego Rivera Learning Complex Public Service Community School	30%

*As measured in cumulative percentage point growth from school years 2020-21 to 2022-23.

**Our growth calculation assumes schools cannot exceed 100% completion. In cases where CSAC data reflects more than 100% completion, we adjusted the rate to 100% for our calculation.



FINDINGS

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools set out to learn from high-need LA Unified schools that demonstrated significant growth in FAFSA/CADAA completion, with the goal of sharing successful practices that other schools and districts can implement.⁸ Through surveys, focus groups, and interviews, we engaged with these “bright spot” schools and uncovered five key practices.



Practice #1: School counselors are aligned around the importance of FAFSA/CADAA completion.

Most staff agree that college affordability has been a barrier to college completion and see the mandate as a necessary step to ensuring student access to college funds. This alignment has developed a collective sense of increased urgency in LA Unified schools, with an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to increasing the number of students completing the FAFSA/CADAA – even before the mandate went fully into effect.



Practice #2: The state mandate, as well as LA Unified’s resolution, have created a level of accountability around increasing FAFSA/CADAA completion.

Beyond shared values, District prioritization of the mandate has prompted the establishment of routines and structures to ensure student FAFSA/CADAA completion. This need has been particularly evident through data tracking and capacity-building initiatives now in place.

- **Data tracking:** Schools have had to establish data systems to track completion and report the data to the District’s regional offices. Student-level data tracking at school sites has also helped counselors provide targeted supports based on real-time data.
- **Capacity building:** Where there was an identified need and resources were available, some schools have hired a college counselor in addition to existing academic counselors to help with this effort. Existing counselors have set aside more time in their schedules to support FAFSA/CADAA completion. Some schools have created task forces to implement this effort and outline school-level goals and strategies around completion.



Practice #3: School staff have created more opportunities for students to complete the FAFSA/CADAA application.

For example, many counselors help students start their financial aid applications earlier in the school year, starting in the fall semester. Many schools have also created dedicated spaces for students and families to complete the application through Saturday workshops, before school, during school, and after school.



Practice #4: School staff engage families as critical partners in FAFSA/CADAA completion.

Counselors, teachers, and administrators create multiple, one-on-one opportunities to meet with students and families to help them understand the FAFSA/CADAA requirements and provide them with support to complete their applications. School staff emphasize the need to develop trust with families, especially when addressing data privacy concerns for immigrant families. Staff also provide targeted outreach to students and families who need support in moving their applications from initially “submitted” to “completed.”



Practice #5: Some LA Unified regions have partnered with local community colleges, government entities, and community-based organizations to support FAFSA/CADAA completion.

These partners provide case management and direct support to students to help them complete their application. Some school teams provide training for community partners to ensure the support is effective and aligned with school goals around FAFSA/CADAA completion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to implementing the five practices in this brief, we recommend school and District leaders take up the following recommendations to strengthen implementation of the FAFSA/CADAA mandate:

1. **Identify further opportunities to streamline this effort with other college readiness and preparation efforts**, given that FAFSA/CADAA completion is one of many postsecondary priorities. Streamlining is especially important when considering the competing time challenges of academic/college counselors and other staff. For example, support students in developing postsecondary plans that articulate the steps they need to take to reach their goals, and embed a plan for FAFSA/CADAA completion within it.
2. **Continue to improve data tracking systems** to create more streamlined, timely, and clear ways to access updated information about submission and completion, with the goal of providing more targeted student supports. This recommendation applies across school sites, the District, and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC)'s Race to Submit website, with support to streamline data tracking available from organizations like the [California College Guidance Initiative \(CCGI\)](#). Additionally, school sites and the District should develop a standardized approach to collecting completion data at specific intervals to make the process more efficient.
3. **Continue to close gaps between application submission and completion** by engaging with students and families who have not fully completed their application to ensure missing pieces, such as parent signatures, are completed.
4. **Share out sample implementation resources** (trackers, workshop materials, etc.) at the District regional and school levels so that school leaders and staff do not have to spend limited time creating their own resources. Promote and support capacity building around existing resources like LA Unified's [Financial Aid Success Toolkit](#).
5. **Anticipate ways to make up for lost time** and ensure students and families are ready to jump in as soon as the application window opens, given the federal delay that moves the start of the next application cycle from October to December.⁹

ENDNOTES

- 1 California Education Code Section 51225.7
- 2 Wu, T, "Hidden Figures: A Framework to Increase Access to Financial Aid," The Education Trust—West, 2019. <https://west.edtrust.org/resource/hidden-figures-a-framework-to-increase-access-to-financial-aid/>
- 3 Replogle, J, "How Will Los Angeles Unified Get Seniors to Apply for Financial Aid?" LAist, October 27, 2021. <https://laist.com/news/education/high-school-senior-financial-aid-california-law>
- 4 LA Unified, "L.A. Unified Board of Education Unanimously Approves Resolution to Increase Post-Secondary Planning and Access to Financial Aid," October 26, 2021. <https://achieve.lausd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&ModuleInstanceID=4466&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=112840&PageID=1>. This resolution was sponsored by Board Member Melvojn.
- 5 This figure is based on California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) Race to Submit dashboard reporting, which includes all schools (traditional, options/continuation, affiliated charters, and independent charters).
- 6 Our analysis includes all LA Unified schools under the Student Equity Needs Index (SENI), therefore including opportunity/continuation and independent charter schools. SENI is an equity-based student need index adopted by LA Unified in 2018 to inform the allocation of resources by ranking schools according to their level of need. The index leverages multiple variables (including student, school-based and community indicators) to divide schools into even quintiles of highest, high, moderate, low, and lowest-need schools.
- 7 Data were downloaded from the CSAC Race to Submit website as of 5/1/23 date. CSAC data were last updated on 4/16/23.
- 8 We sent out a survey to 41 moderate, high, and highest-need schools (based on SENI classification) that saw the most significant growth and/or sustained high completion rates from 2020-21 to 2022-23, based on Race to Submit data as of March 16, 2023. We then held two focus groups and interviews with a subset of respondents, primarily college counselors, to learn about the practices contributing to their success.
- 9 Smith, A, "California Sees Boost in Student Applications for College Financial Aid," EdSource, March 27, 2023. <https://edsource.org/2023/california-sees-boost-in-student-applications-for-college-financial-aid/687027>



This brief is brought to you by The Len Hill Civil Rights Project at the Partnership for LA Schools — working to advance policy to ensure that all students access their civil right to a high-quality education.

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1055 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1850 | Los Angeles, CA 90017 | (213) 201-2000