



## The Education Trust–West

# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on California's Financial Aid Application Completion Requirement For Local Education Agencies

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### Q: What is California's financial aid application completion requirement for local education agencies (LEAs)?

A: California's 2021-2022 Budget and AB 469 passed a financial aid application completion requirement for local educational agencies (high schools, school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools) to ensure that their seniors are completing and submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) beginning in the 2022-23 academic year, or opt-out of doing so.

### Q: Why is this needed?

A: California educates approximately [1 out of every 10 K-12 students in the nation](#). Alarming, thousands of aid-eligible students from lower-income communities and students of color attend high schools with some of the [lowest financial aid application rates in the state](#). [Only 50%](#) of California's senior class of 2021 completed the FAFSA or CADAA. Students who would benefit the most from financial aid are [least likely to apply](#). We want to ensure all students explore and understand the resources available to them to attend college.

### Q: Are there any California LEAs currently ensuring their seniors complete and submit the FAFSA or CADAA?

A: Yes, two school districts in California, Val Verde Unified School District and Perris-Union High School District have enacted a FAFSA/CADAA completion policy change and have seen significant positive results. Val Verde Unified School District has increased FAFSA/CADAA completion by 14 percentage points, from 69 to 83 percent in the first year alone, with no negative impact on high school graduation rates. A school in the district, Rancho Verde High School, had one of the highest FAFSA/CADAA completion percentages in California at [96 percent](#). Aside from these two districts, we know some schools and districts have not passed a specific policy but are achieving high completion rates through their methods. These schools include winners of the [Race to Submit Leaderboard](#).

### Q: Who will ensure LEAs receive support to confirm that their seniors are completing and submitting the FAFSA or CADAA?

A: The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) leads a handful of activities and programs to support financial aid application completion throughout the state (i.e., [Cash for College workshops](#), the [California Student Opportunity and Access Program \(Cal-SOAP\)](#), and maintaining the [Race to Submit dashboard](#)). They also provide professional development training (live and recorded) for counselors and administrators. These trainings walk attendees through the [WebGrants system](#), a data system used to track students' completion rates and identify non-completers. Additionally, community-based

organizations, college-readiness programs, and local community colleges in various regions team up with LEAs and CSAC to lead this work (through Cal-SOAP or independently). CSAC is one piece of the puzzle – it will take the whole education community to ensure students can afford a college education. It takes all of us to go all in for financial aid.

### Q: What funding is available to help LEAs?

A: LEAs can leverage existing funds to implement California’s financial aid application completion requirement. For example, [Val Verde Unified School District](#), [Perris-Union High School District](#), and [Riverside County Office of Education](#) have been ensuring FAFSA/CADAA completion without any new funding from the state.

First, financial aid application completion expenses are acceptable and valid use of Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) supplemental and concentration funding because it helps low-income students.

For example, Jurupa Unified School District is an LEA leveraging LCAP funding to support the completion of financial aid applications ([Jurupa Unified School District LCFF](#)). Their LCAP includes the goal: “All students will be college and career ready.” To reach this goal, their career center staff and California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI) Leadership team prepare for a College and Career Kick-Off Day, FAFSA workshops, parent workshops, and college decision day events. These efforts include parent and student-oriented topics (e.g., Career Day and training on college systems, FAFSA completion, and college application process). They allocate LCFF funding for these activities: \$812,500 for support and resources for career center staff for high schools and \$157,000 for district and site-based parent training on student opportunities ([Jurupa Unified School District LCFF](#)).

Second, according to the statutory provisions, LEAs will be reimbursed by the state for financial aid application completion expenses. LEAs must submit a “Test Claim” to begin the reimbursement process; learn more here: [brochure.pdf \(ca.gov\)](#).

### Q: What does the policy say about students who do not want to fill out a financial aid application?

A: There are two opt-out options for parents and LEAs: (1) A parent, legal guardian, legally emancipated student, or student who is 18 years old or older may opt-out through a written request to their LEA. (2) An LEA can flag an “extenuating circumstance” for a student who cannot complete this requirement and thus opt them out. Extenuating circumstances may include military plans, religious reasons, and entering the workforce. Most significantly, opt-out options should be the last resort after all reasonable efforts to complete student financial aid applications have been exhausted. LEAs should provide information to students and parents about:

- California’s financial aid applications,
- the financial aid opportunities available when students apply,
- details about the financial information required by the application, and
- the process of completing the application.

### Q: How are undocumented students’ privacy concerns being addressed?

A: First, the proposal outlines that all information shared by parents, legal guardians, and students for this purpose shall be handled according to applicable state and federal privacy laws and regulations.

Second, schools are a trusted community space where parents and students can be assured that their personal information is safe - this has been reinforced by state laws such as [SB 54 \(DeLeon, 2017\)](#) and [AB 699 \(O'Donnell, 2017\)](#). Lastly, AB 540 and the California Dream Act also include [privacy protections](#) from keeping immigration status and other sensitive information from the federal government.

**Q: What best practices should LEAs adopt to reach 100% FAFSA or CADAA completion?**

A: The Education Trust–West’s research brief, [Hidden Figures: A Framework to Increase Access to Financial Aid](#), offers strategies that district and school leaders can employ to increase financial aid application completion rates. The report identifies five “components of success” – promising practices from diverse, cutting-edge districts and schools – that are helping to close equity gaps and improve financial aid awareness and application completion.

**Q: Have any other states done this?**

A: Yes. Across the nation, Louisiana, Texas, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, and Washington D.C. have done this or something similar. [Louisiana](#) established its FAFSA completion policy in 2017-18. In the first year of implementation, FAFSA completion rates increased by [26 percentage points](#) to an overall completion rate of over [77 percent](#). They quickly became the state with the highest FAFSA completion rates in the nation. It was the most significant year-over-year percentage change in FAFSA completion of any state.