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Building on the Gains

Results from the 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign*

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Washington Student Achievement Council

October 2026

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And lastly, we express our sincere gratitude to everyone within WSAC and across Washington who maintained a tireless commitment to financial aid outreach during the 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign. The progress that we highlight in this report would not be possible without you. We hope this year's report provides a roadmap for further increasing financial aid access among Washington's high school seniors.

Preface

In fall 2025, Governor Bob Ferguson signed Executive Order 25-08, which established the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign and created an advisory board to "provide recommendations regarding all *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign activities, including local and statewide events, training, and marketing, and to monitor statewide progress toward the annual goal." Alongside expectations outlined in the Governor's Executive Order, the Advisory Board must submit a report on annual progress and planned action for the coming year.

This report satisfies the outlined reporting requirement, providing an overview of this year's campaign strategies, tracking progress against this year's goals, and sharing data on statewide completion trends.

Unless otherwise stated, all data is from WSAC and all analysis was completed by WSAC staff. On-time completion is treated as any aid application completed as of the last weekly reporting date in June, in keeping with the definition used by the National College Attainment Network (NCAN). For the Class of 2026, this date was June 29, 2026. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, this date was October 5, 2026.

Advisory Board Letter of Transmittal

October 30, 2026
Honorable Bob Ferguson
Governor of Washington
Legislative Building
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Governor Ferguson,

On behalf of the Washington Student Achievement Council and the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Advisory Board, we are pleased to submit *Building on the Gains: Results from the 2025–26* Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign as part of the Board's work to support the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign.

Established through Executive Order 25-08, the Advisory Board was tasked with providing recommendations to inform statewide FAFSA completion efforts. Over the past year, the Advisory Board met regularly to review completion trends, identify barriers faced by students and families, and consider strategies to target school- and community-level improvements in financial aid completion.

This report summarizes the Advisory Board's activities over the past year, presents WSAC's analysis of the 2025–26 campaign, and shares WSAC's plan for implementing the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign during the 2026–27 academic year. Additionally, the report includes the Advisory Board's recommendations for the steps that can be taken to improve access to financial aid and postsecondary opportunity for Washington's high school graduates.

These recommendations reflect the Advisory Board's shared commitment to improving financial aid completion, expanding access to financial aid, and supporting Washington students as they plan for postsecondary education after high school.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important statewide effort and look forward to continuing this support throughout next year's campaign.

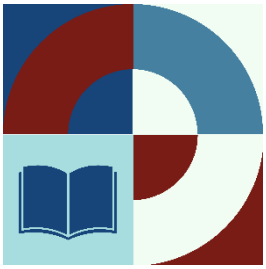
Respectfully,

Washington Student Achievement Council
On behalf of the Advisory Board

Advisory Board Members

Collin Bannister
Geraldine Donovan
Sarah Everitt
Carol Garza
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Sienna Jarrard
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Executive Summary



More Washington high school seniors completed a financial aid application in 2025–26 than ever before. Statewide gains outpaced national growth, with particularly strong progress at schools and in communities receiving targeted support. The *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign, led by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), helped drive this progress through coordinated statewide outreach, locally tailored strategies, and partnerships.

The campaign addressed a longstanding challenge. Although Washington offers generous financial aid for college and career training, its FAFSA completion rate has historically been among the lowest in the nation. Students and their families must complete the FAFSA or WASFA to access available aid, and despite recent simplification efforts to reduce administrative barriers, obstacles remain. During the 2025–26 academic year, WSAC focused on overcoming these barriers through an intensive, data-driven, regionally focused, and equity-centered outreach campaign.

Results and Impact

The *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign helped drive statewide gains in financial aid completion that outpaced national growth (over 10 percent in Washington versus 7.5 percent nationwide), while also improving completion equity in communities receiving targeted support from WSAC and its partners. WSAC measured the campaign's progress against four statewide goals. Two were met, while results from partnership schools and communities demonstrated promising progress toward the remaining two.

- **Goal 1: Increase overall financial aid completion. Met.** A record 48,177 high school seniors completed a FAFSA or WASFA, surpassing the campaign's goal of 46,000. Washington achieved record completion both by overall count and as a percentage of the senior class.
- **Goal 2: Increase FAFSA completion among FRPL-eligible students. Met.** FAFSA completions among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) increased by 6 percent or more at 298 schools, nearly doubling the goal of 150 schools.
- **Goal 3: Close the completion gap between FRPL-eligible and non-FRPL-eligible students. Not yet met statewide.** Although completion increased among both groups, the statewide gap remained at five percentage points. However, at schools served by Washington State's GEAR UP program, FRPL-eligible students completed

the FAFSA at higher rates than non-FRPL-eligible students (67 percent versus 63 percent), demonstrating that longstanding completion disparities are not inevitable.

- **Goal 4: Reduce disparities in completion by race/ethnicity and special education status. Not yet met statewide.** Schools served by WSAC's Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) program showed more equitable completion rates by race/ethnicity than observed statewide. Across RCG schools, the completion rate for the racial/ethnic group with the highest rate was 1.46 times that of the group with the lowest rate, compared with 1.78 times statewide. A score of 1 represents perfect equity.

  Priority schools showed more equitable completion rates by special education status than observed statewide. Across these schools, the completion rate for the group with the highest rate was 1.86 times that of the group with the lowest rate, compared with 1.90 times statewide.

Campaign Strategies

To advance these goals, WSAC used data to identify gaps, target outreach, and continuously refine its efforts. The campaign focused on three key strategy areas:

- **Strengthen system-wide alignment:** WSAC strengthened statewide financial aid completion efforts by further investing in new and existing partnerships with schools and communities. WSAC also established the College & Career Culture Recognition Program to publicly recognize schools demonstrating effective college- and career-going practices.

- **Target regional supports:** WSAC expanded the priority school pilot first employed last spring and offered more regional financial aid trainings. WSAC also piloted an innovative regionalized version of OtterBot, working with partners in five regions to craft customized text messages on college and financial aid.

- **Strengthen trusted messenger data use and communications:** WSAC expanded FAFSA Portal outreach and training, refined its delivery of the annual Governor's letter to high school seniors, and overhauled trusted messenger communications to align with a consistent annual campaign calendar.

Lessons Learned and the Advisory Board's Recommendations

The results of this year's campaign underscore the importance of combining statewide momentum with local improvement. Although statewide efforts can build awareness and encourage FAFSA completion, sustained and equitable progress depends on locally

tailored strategies and partnerships. Trusted messengers—including educators, counselors, and community organizations—are especially well positioned to help students recognize the value of postsecondary education and navigate the financial aid process.

Building on these lessons, the Advisory Board articulated a vision in which every student, regardless of where they attend high school, receives clear and consistent financial aid messaging; has at least one individual conversation connecting financial aid to their plans after high school; and has dedicated opportunities during the school day to complete the FAFSA or WASFA. Students and families facing greater barriers should receive additional support tailored to their needs.

To realize this vision, the Board recommends shared responsibility across schools, community partners, higher education, and the state, along with longer-term capacity building in advising, trusted community supports, and data systems. Together, these efforts would help create a more coordinated and sustainable financial aid support system across Washington.

Next Steps: 2026–27

Next year's campaign is designed to maintain momentum that was built during 2025–26 while putting the Advisory Board's recommendations into practice. WSAC will organize distinct moments for statewide action throughout the academic year, giving schools, partners, and trusted messengers shared goals and opportunities to mobilize.

The campaign will also deepen partnerships, strengthen coordination, and use data to direct additional support to schools and communities where it's needed most. Outreach and messaging will continue to connect FAFSA or WASFA completion to each graduate's future after high school.

Building on the gains of 2025–26 and strengthening the partnerships that helped make them possible will allow Washington to continue expanding access to financial aid and to the opportunities that financial aid makes possible.

Introduction



Washington is one of the most generous states when it comes to providing financial aid for college and career training, but generosity only matters if the path to that aid actually works. Right now, students and their guardians must complete the FAFSA or WASFA to formally claim the aid they're eligible to receive.

On paper, these financial aid forms look simple: a few questions, a handful of documents, a bit of time. But filing for financial aid is a social process, not a mechanical one. Whether a student files depends on individual preference; available resources and support; and the culture of their school, community, and family. Sometimes it depends on trust in government itself. For those who do submit a financial aid application, completing the form can surface unexpected reflections about economic class, family structure, or immigration status. And, although FAFSA simplification and state aid policies have removed many administrative burdens, the process can still be complicated for students whose family circumstances don't match the assumptions on which the forms were built.

It's against this backdrop that WSAC led the 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign, aimed at driving sustainable and equitable increases in financial aid completion. With the generous aid available and recent policy changes in place, Washington has an opportunity to close the remaining gap between eligible students and the aid they're owed.

The campaign, which officially launched in September 2025, when Governor Ferguson signed Executive Order 25-08, paired clear goals with targeted outreach that galvanizes trusted messengers and community partners to directly support students and their families. Overall completion increases, as well as the remarkable growth of FRPL-eligible student completion rates at many schools across the state, showcase what can happen as a result of coordinated, community-led efforts. At the same time, the unmet goals demonstrate what must change with next year's campaign if financial aid application rates are to continue increasing for all Washington's public high school students.

This report documents Washington's progress toward increasing FAFSA completion rates, highlighting remarkable improvements on the national stage and statewide. Key lessons learned from the campaign provide context that informs both goals for the 2026–27 campaign and the strategies identified to achieve these goals.

What We Did: The 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign*

Washington launched the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign on the heels of a concerted outreach campaign in Spring 2025. This early campaign offered insights into strategies that could scale, and those that required continued refinement.[1] When Governor Ferguson signed Executive Order 25-08 in September 2025, WSAC was well-positioned to launch its next year-long campaign.

That campaign was guided by a simple framework designed to focus attention on activities and outreach that yield equitable increases in financial aid completion statewide: Define clear, measurable goals and determine the impact of efforts toward those goals. Data gathered then becomes information that informs key decisions, helps monitor progress, and shows what works.

With this framework, three strategy areas emerged (see Appendices A, B, and C):

- Strengthen system-wide alignment.
- Target regional supports.
- Strengthen trusted messenger data use and communications.

Family Perspective

The perception that the FAFSA is long and tedious can still deter students and families from completing it early. But recent changes have made the process easier and faster. For example, the FAFSA now provides near-automated feedback on the application, which means that students can see when their application has an error and make corrections accordingly. Applications are processed in as little as 5 seconds, and 69 percent of initially rejected applications are corrected on the spot.[2]

WSAC staff have seen the impacts of these changes on students and families. At one event, a student and her guardian submitted the form, found an error, corrected it, and received confirmation that the form was submitted. There was no waiting and there were no calls to helplines. Another guardian shared that, after waiting months to complete her section, it took her very little time to do so. She said she wished she had not waited, underscoring the need for early outreach and accessible family support.

The 2025–26 campaign took place under two kinds of pressure: tighter budgets for schools, districts, and community-based organizations; and weaker trust in government among some families.

Districts across the state faced financial constraints that limited their ability to expand, improve, and target financial aid support. Eight districts were formally under binding conditions with OSPI during the 2025–26 school year, working to return to financial stability. The community-based organizations (CBOs) that often fill gaps in school services are also losing funding. In addition to helping students in their local communities, many of these CBOs are also leading voices in the state's FAFSA outreach.

Conversations with students, families, trusted messengers, and outreach organizations across the state made clear that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) actions in local communities and the national rhetoric surrounding immigration affected families throughout the school year. Students from mixed immigration-status families, or who are themselves undocumented, hesitated before attending financial aid-related events in public places or sharing their information through financial aid and college applications.

When resources are tight and trust is fragile, no single sector can carry the message of financial aid outreach. WSAC therefore partnered with other state agencies to amplify the campaign's message:

- The Commission on Hispanic Affairs co-hosted completion and community events with local partners. This approach empowered local communities while drawing on state technical expertise on financial aid.
- Washington's Lottery augmented statewide Washington College Grant (WA Grant) marketing efforts and sponsored ads promoting FAFSA or WASFA completion.
- The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) hosted joint webinars and shared relevant resources with trusted messengers.
- The Health Care Authority included WA Grant messaging on its hold line, reaching families outside school and community event settings.

By working across agencies, the campaign reached families in more places than WSAC could on its own.

Table 1. 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign By the Numbers

14 Advisory Board members attended eight meetings	**75+** schools signed up for the College & Career Culture Recognition program	**32** FAFSA/financial aid trainings hosted by WSAC across the state
577,000+ OtterBot messages sent to HS seniors & guardians about financial aid	**2,000+** students completed the FAFSA within 2 weeks of receiving a postcard from the Governor	**1,400+** trusted messengers attended financial aid trainings
95% of public HS seniors attend a school with at least one active FAFSA portal user	**1,100+** Active users in the FAFSA portal	**31,000+** visits to the FAFSA Completion for Expected High School Seniors Dashboard
44 high schools were supported by a Regional Challenge Grant partnership	**28** priority schools received individualized coaching and support from WSAC staff	**13** high schools provided financial aid advising as part of Washington State GEAR UP

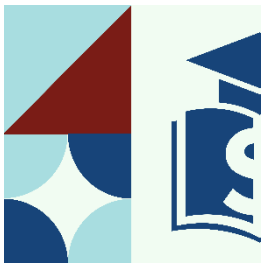
Futures NW

FuturesNW, which operates in Skagit and Whatcom Counties, bridges educational opportunity gaps for local students by providing hands-on mentorship, college preparation tips, and career exploration services.

Recently, FuturesNW lost a significant portion of its funding, forcing the organization to scale down and directly impacting its Financial Aid Completion Support and QuickStart to College programs. This year, the organization partnered with WSAC in its OtterBot regionalization pilot,[3] affording an opportunity to provide targeted technical assistance to students and capacity support to organizational staff. The on-time FAFSA completion rates among students in the FuturesNW service region rose from 30 percent for the Class of 2025 to 39 percent for the Class of 2026.

FuturesNW is also a leading voice in financial aid outreach statewide. The organization co-hosted a statewide financial aid summit with WSAC, bringing together people, organizations, and systems to share regional learnings, identify barriers students and families face, spotlight effective strategies, and strengthen statewide collaboration.

What We Achieved: Measuring Progress on the 2025–26 Statewide Goals



The statewide goals were intentionally ambitious, designed to draw attention to both a statewide need and local population- and community-specific disparities. Of the four goals, two were met: More than 46,000 students filed a FAFSA or WASFA, and more than 150 schools increased completion among FRPL-eligible students. Moreover, the number of high school seniors completing a financial aid application this year hit a new record (Figure 1), and Washington ended five positions higher in the national rankings than for the Class of 2025 (42nd versus 47th).[4]

Maintaining statewide momentum throughout next year's campaign is necessary if Washington is to continue increasing its overall financial aid completion rate. The pronounced progress in partnership regions over the past year demonstrates that statewide momentum relies on local change. Trusted messengers are in the best position to shift the perceived value-add of a postsecondary credential and, in so doing, motivate FAFSA completion in their communities. In other words, the path to sustained improvements in financial aid completion is through strategic state-local partnerships.

This section chronicles progress on the campaign's four goals, highlighting instances in which partnership regions in particular improved markedly during 2025–26.

2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign Goals

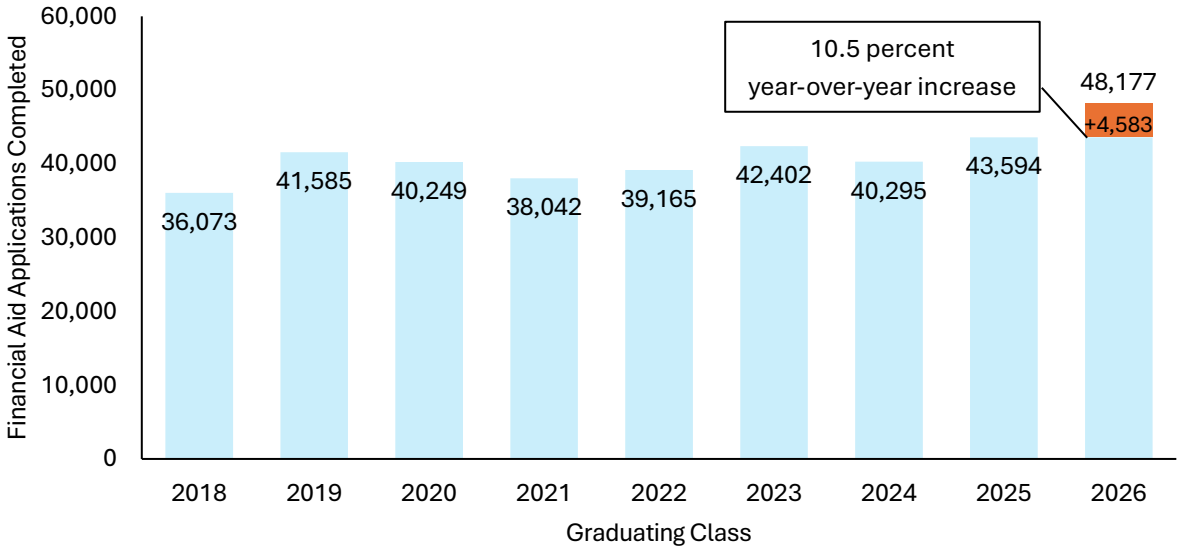
By October 5, 2026, the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign aimed to:

- Ensure 46,000 seniors completed the FAFSA or WASFA.
- Raise FRPL-eligible student completions by 6 percent or more in at least 150 high schools.
- Close the gap in FAFSA completion between FRPL- and non-FRPL-eligible students.
- Reduce disparities in FAFSA completion rates, especially among students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

Goal 1: Reach 46,000 FAFSA/WASFA Completions

Washington met Goal #1 on July 21, 2026. By the end of the campaign, 48,177 high school seniors—55 percent of all expected graduates—had filed a FAFSA or WASFA. Filing slowed in the spring, as it does every year, but the campaign still finished well above the previous year's final count. The total number of applications completed by high school seniors at the end of the 2025–26 campaign exceeded the previous record by more than 4,500 completions (Figure 1), a 10.5 percent year-over-year increase.[5] The pattern suggests that the coordinated outreach and continuous momentum created by the campaign contributed to statewide momentum.

Figure 1. Total Number of Financial Aid Applications Completed, by Graduating Class



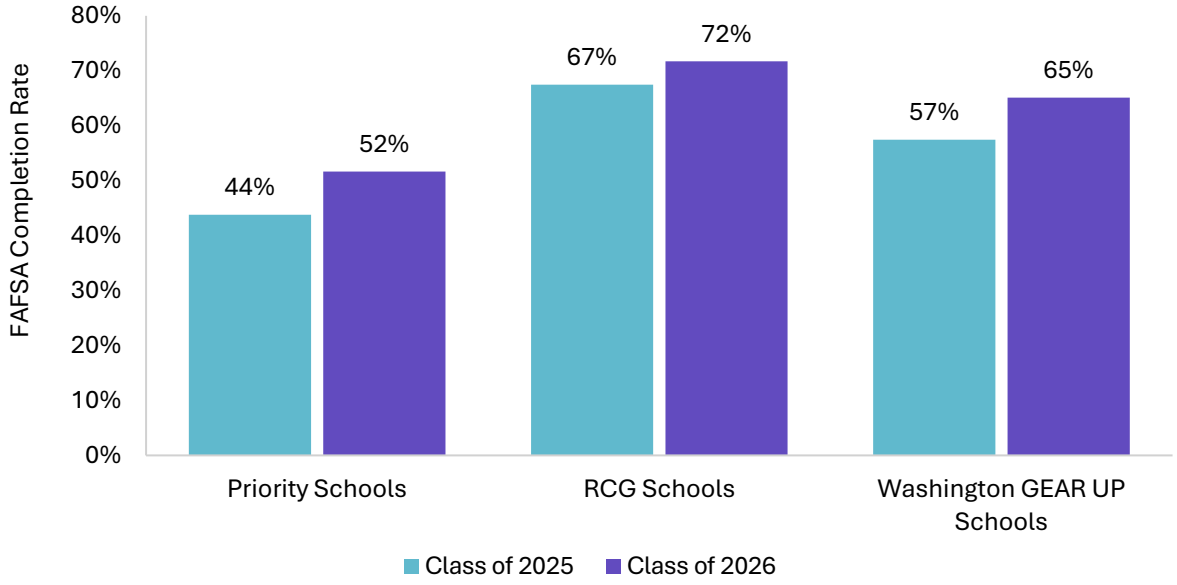
Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion counts for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Exploratory analyses suggest that WSAC's intentional partnership approach helped drive some of the biggest gains in FAFSA completion rates. That approach included initiatives like Washington State's GEAR UP grant, the FAFSA campaign priority school model, and targeted support through RCG investments. (For more on the priority school strategy, see Appendix B. For more on GEAR UP and the RCG program, see Appendix A.)

Students at schools served by each of these partnership models experienced improvements in FAFSA completion between 2024–25 and 2025–26 (see Figure 2):

- The final completion rate among students at priority schools was 8 percentage points higher for the Class of 2026 than it was for the Class of 2025 (52 percent vs. 44 percent).
- The completion rate at RCG partnership schools improved by 5 percentage points, from 67 percent to 72 percent.
- At GEAR UP schools, completion rates rose from 57 percent for the Class of 2025 to 65 percent for the Class of 2026.

Figure 2. Final FAFSA Completion Rates at Partnership Schools, by Graduating Class and Partnership Type



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final FAFSA completion rates across all students served by WSAC partnerships. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Quincy High School

Quincy High School is a public high school in a rural, agriculture-based region in central Washington. The school offers career-connected programs, dual credit options, and healthcare and data center certification programs that align with local industry needs. Quincy was a priority school in Spring 2025 and, for the 2025–26 year, it worked closely with WSAC as part of the OtterBot regionalization pilot.

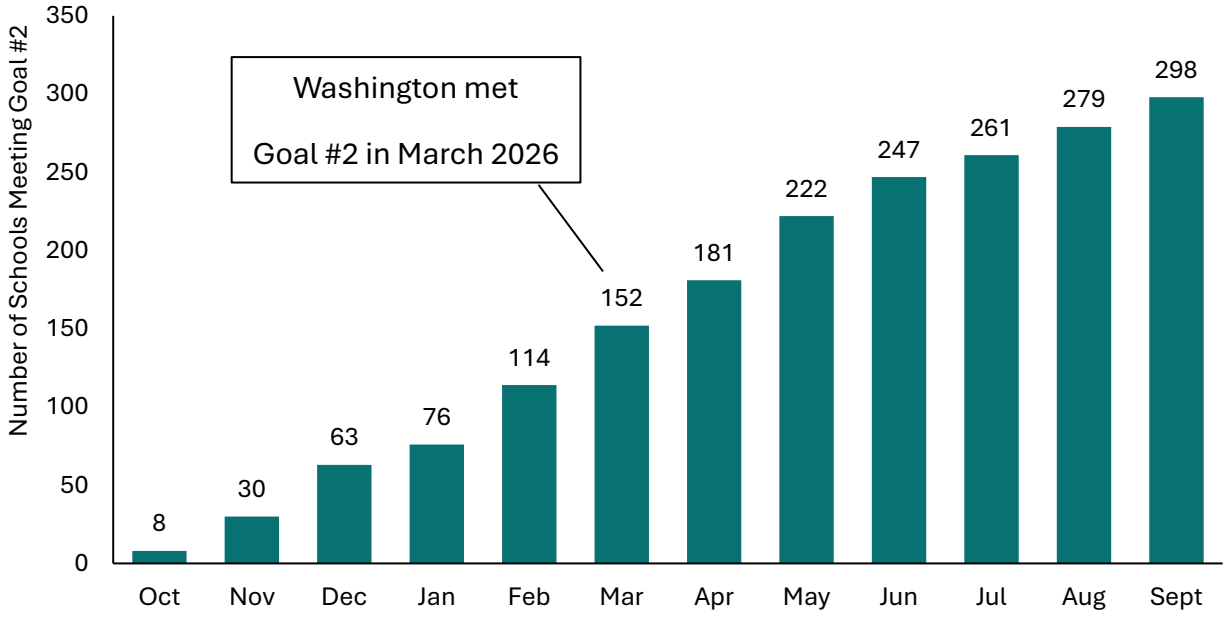
The school has experienced significant growth in FAFSA completion rates over the past three years and had a remarkable 71 percent on-time completion rate for the Class of 2026. Assistant Principal Susan Rose, who serves on the Advisory Board, credits improvement to:

- Statewide and grant partnerships, including with WSAC and the Gates Limitless Grant.
- Direct one-on-one advising through a partnership with Big Bend Community College and the NCW Tech Alliance.
- Targeted leadership focus, with the administration integrating FAFSA completion as a core accountability metric.
- Student-centered data, with staff routinely acting on three years of student feedback to improve postsecondary preparation systems.
- Student recognition and incentives, featuring school-wide celebrations and tangible rewards.

Goal 2: Increase FAFSA completion among FRPL-eligible students by at least 6 percent at 150 schools

By the end of March, the campaign met Goal 2: increase FAFSA completions among FRPL-eligible students by at least 6 percent at 150 schools. Just under 300 schools achieved this milestone by the end of September 2026 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Schools Meeting 6 percent Increase in FAFSA Completion Rates for Class of 2026, By Month



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: This chart captures the number of public high schools that met or exceeded a 6 percent year-over-year growth in the number of FRPL-eligible students completing a FAFSA application as of the final weekly report in each month.

Two factors in particular contributed to progress on Goal 2: individualized support in tight-knit communities and strategic partnerships between WSAC staff and trusted messengers.

Of the 298 schools that increased FAFSA completion among FRPL-eligible students, 94 enroll fewer than 20 FRPL-eligible students. Across these schools, more than 240 additional students completed the FAFSA compared with the previous year. The final FAFSA completion rate across the schools rose from 35 percent for the Class of 2025 to 51 percent for the Class of 2026—a more than 15-percentage-point increase. These results show how gains at individual schools, even those serving relatively few students, can contribute to statewide progress.

Moreover, schools participating in WSAC partnership programs were more likely to meet Goal 2. Less than half of schools statewide increased FAFSA completion among FRPL-

eligible students by at least 6 percent, compared with nearly 60 percent of schools supported through WSAC partnerships.

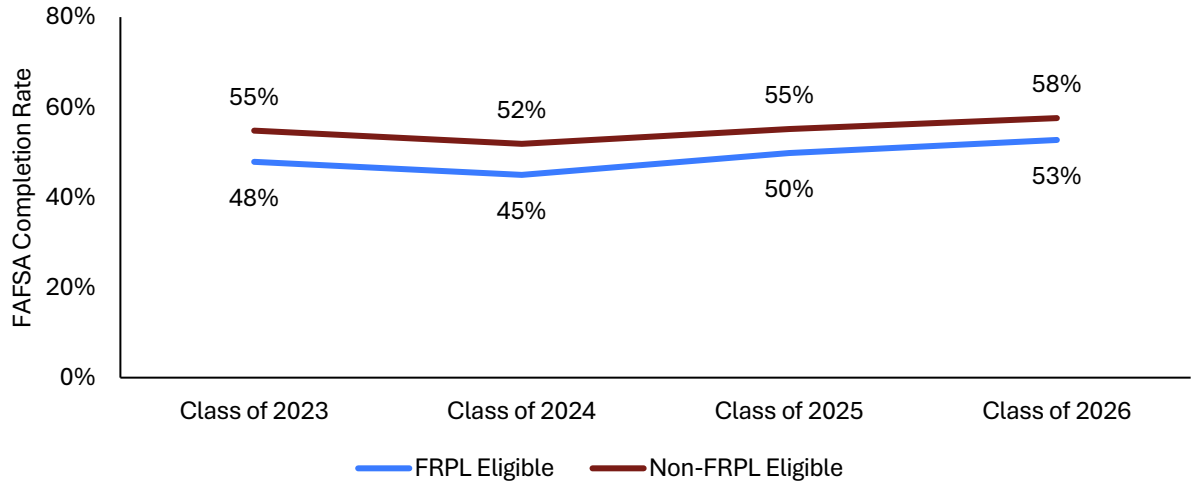
- 18 of the 28 priority schools met the goal
- 23 of the 44 schools supported by RCG partnerships met the goal
- 8 of the 13 schools served by Washington GEAR UP met the goal

Goal 3: Achieve parity in FAFSA completion between FRPL- and non-FRPL-eligible students

WSAC set a goal last year to achieve parity in the completion rate between FRPL-eligible and non-FRPL-eligible students. Achieving this goal would require closing a 5-percentage-point gap, as observed at the end of the previous year's FAFSA cycle.

Overall completion among FRPL-eligible students increased to 53 percent for the Class of 2026, as compared to 50 percent for the Class of 2025. This increase represents an additional 1,370 FRPL-eligible students completing the FAFSA during the 2025–26 academic year. Completion rates among non-FRPL-eligible students increased by a similar amount, resulting in a steady gap in FRPL-eligible versus non-FRPL-eligible completion rates over the past two years (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Progress toward Parity in FAFSA Completion, by Graduating Class and FRPL Status

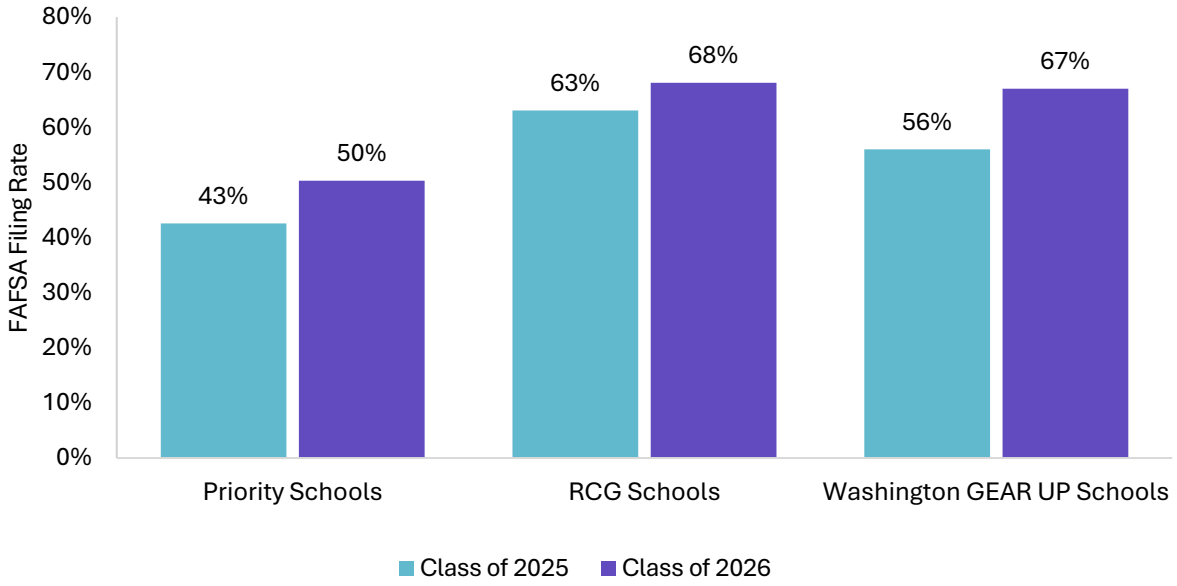


Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Although the statewide gap remains, FAFSA completion rates among FRPL-eligible students increased more markedly at schools served by WSAC's partnerships (Figure 5).

In RCG-supported schools, final completion rates for FRPL-eligible students rose from 63 percent for the Class of 2025 to 68 percent for the Class of 2026 (Figure 5), exceeding the statewide average for FRPL-eligible students by 15 percentage points. Across schools served by the Washington State GEAR UP grant, which WSAC leads, completion rates among FRPL-eligible students rose by more than 10 percentage points between the Class of 2025 and the Class of 2026.

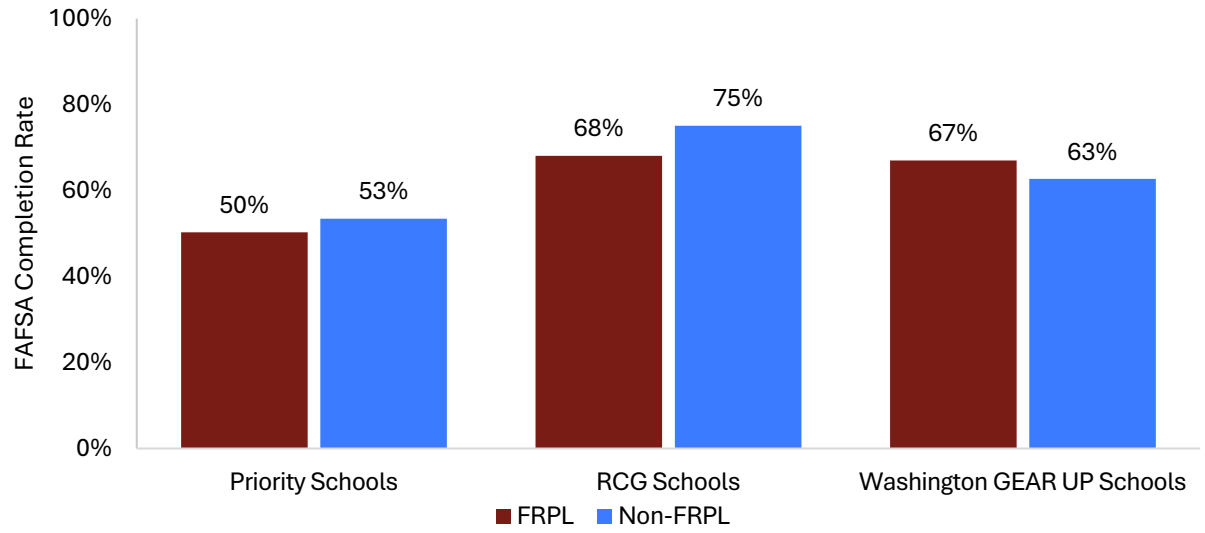
Figure 5. Final FRPL Student FAFSA Completion Rates at Partnership Schools, Class of 2025 vs. Class of 2026



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

To the question of whether parity in completion rates is possible, progress at Washington's GEAR UP schools demonstrate that it is. Across these schools, FRPL-eligible students' completion rate exceeded the completion rate for non-FRPL-eligible students at these same schools (67 percent vs. 63 percent, respectively, Figure 6). FRPL-eligible and non-FRPL-eligible completion rates approached but did not quite achieve parity across priority schools (50 percent vs. 53 percent).

Figure 6. FRPL-Eligible vs. Non-FRPL-Eligible Student Final FAFSA Completion Rates in Partnership Regions, Class of 2026



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

In short, although broad outreach efforts can help more students complete the FAFSA, achieving parity in FAFSA completion among low-income and non-low-income students requires targeted support designed with low-income students' needs in mind. Building on this evidence, next year's campaign will expand partnership coordination efforts to ensure that trusted messengers have the supports they need to build a culture of college-going within their schools and communities.

Riverside School District

Riverside School District in Spokane County has experienced a substantial increase in FAFSA completion over the past two years, coinciding with support from the Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) and LaunchNW's investment through the MPower program. In 2025, 62 percent of Riverside seniors completed a FAFSA (a 23 percentage point jump from 2023). This year, by the end of June, on-time completion for Riverside FRPL-eligible students was 91 percent (compared to 57 percent for the Class of 2025).

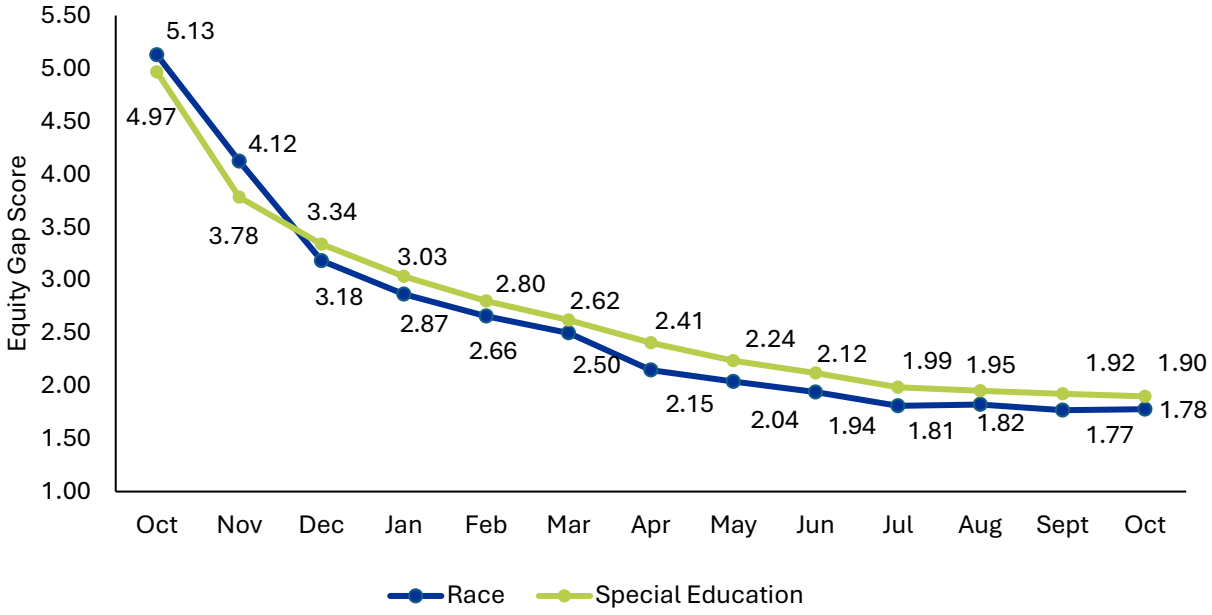
Goal 4: Reduce disparities in FAFSA completion by race/ethnicity and special education status

In October 2025, when the 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign began, early information on FAFSA completions pointed to severe inequities in which students were most likely to complete the FAFSA. At that time, when examined by race/ethnicity or by special education status, the group with the highest completion rate was filing at

approximately five times the rate of those with the lowest completion rate. As the campaign progressed, the size of the gap shrunk for both groups.

By the end of the 2025–26 campaign, the equity gap score, which is calculated by dividing the completion rate of the group with the highest rate by the completion rate of the group with the lowest rate, had fallen to below 2.0 for both race/ethnicity and special education status (Figure 7).

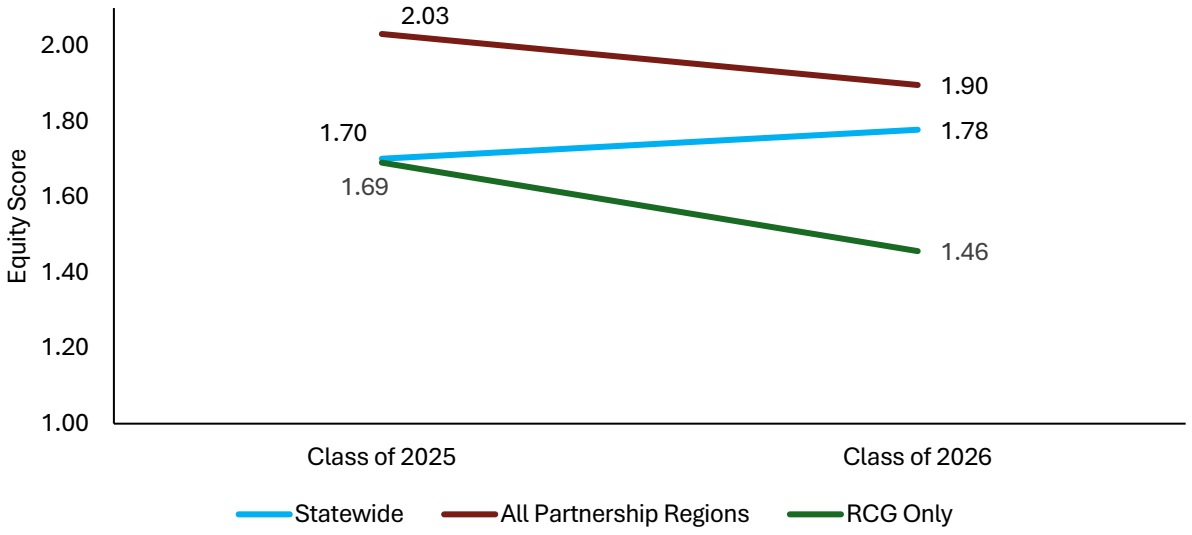
Figure 7. Change in FAFSA Completion Equity Gap Scores for Race/Ethnicity and Special Education Status During the 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign*



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: This chart captures the equity gap score at the beginning of each month of the 2025–26 academic year. The equity gap score is calculated by dividing the completion rate of group with highest rate by the completion rate of group with the lowest completion rate.

When examined year-over-year, the story is more complex: Statewide completion rates by race/ethnicity were *slightly less* equitable for the Class of 2026 than for the Class of 2025 (1.78 versus 1.70, Figure 8). However, across schools served by WSAC partnerships, completion rates by race/ethnicity had become *slightly more* equitable for the Class of 2026 than for the Class of 2025 (Figure 8). Across regions supported by RCG, the equity gap score by race/ethnicity improved from 1.69 to 1.46—closer to equitable filing than the state overall or across all WSAC partnership schools (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Final FAFSA Completion Race/Ethnicity Equity Gap Scores for the Class of 2025 vs. Class of 2026 at Partnerships and Statewide

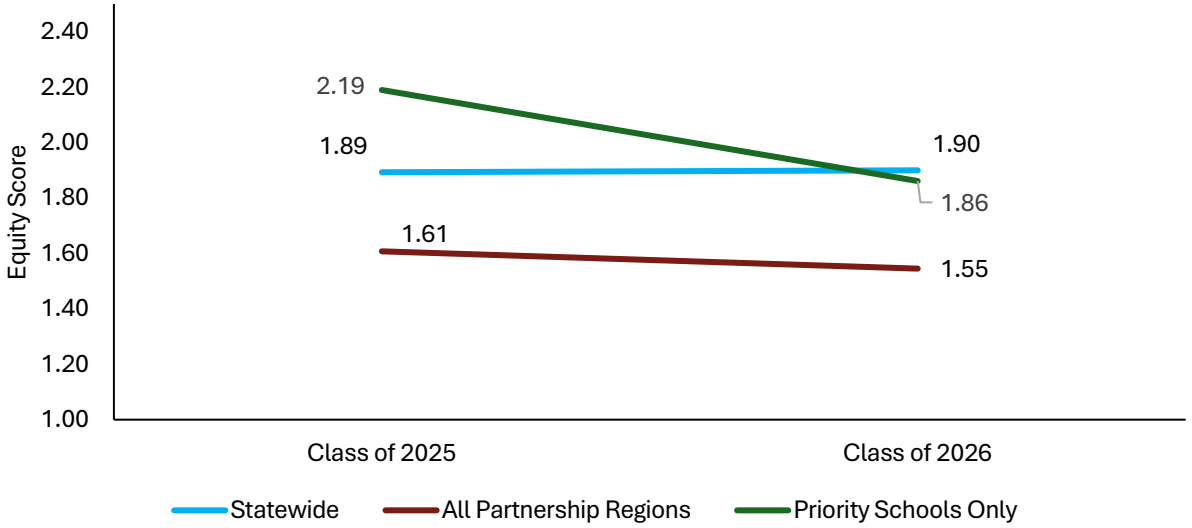


Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: This chart captures the final equity gap score for the Class of 2025 and Class of 2026. The equity gap score is calculated by dividing the completion rate of group with highest rate by the completion rate of group with the lowest completion rate.

This improvement is not accidental: RCG's grounding hypothesis is that those closest to and most impacted by inequitable systems are best positioned to identify and operationalize the solutions that will prove effective in their communities. Many RCG partnerships were in their third year of close collaboration with WSAC staff, and these results make clear that a systems-change approach to educational improvement works.

A similar pattern emerges when examined by special education status: The statewide equity gap score by special education status was essentially flat between the Class of 2025 and the Class of 2026 (1.89 versus 1.90, Figure 9). However, across schools served by WSAC partnerships, the equity gap score improved, from 1.61 for the Class of 2025 to 1.55 for the Class of 2026 (Figure 9). Across all priority schools, the equity gap score improved from 2.19 to 1.86—the largest improvement in equity gap scores included here (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Final FAFSA Completion Equity Gap Scores by Special Education Status for the Class of 2025 vs. Class of 2026 at Partnerships and Statewide



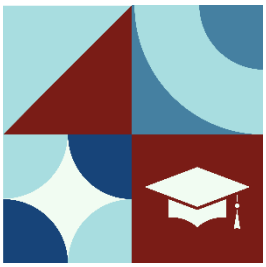
Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: This chart captures the final equity gap score for the Class of 2025 and Class of 2026. The equity gap score is calculated by dividing the completion rate of group with highest rate by the completion rate of group with the lowest completion rate.

Washington's Progress in the National Rankings

Washington has consistently ranked near the bottom of NCAN's national rankings for FAFSA completion among high school seniors. This ranking is imperfect: It relies on imprecise class size estimates, leading to a ranking that doesn't square with the higher completion rates that practitioners in Washington observe in their schools. This diverging narrative pushed WSAC to create a FAFSA completion dashboard that offers one of the most granular snapshots of FAFSA completion progress over time, by demographic subgroup and across regions.

More recently, adjustments to the class size used on NCAN rankings allow for a national story that better aligns with the real-time data available from WSAC: Over half of Washington high school seniors complete the FAFSA, and the rate is on the rise. FAFSA applications in the state also outpaced national growth (over 10 percent versus 7.5 percent, respectively).

What We Recommend: The Advisory Board's Vision for a Stronger Financial Aid Support System



During the 2025–26 academic year, the Advisory Board identified what students and families need to successfully complete financial aid applications and how schools, communities, higher education, and the state can better support students and families. Working together, the Board articulated a shared vision, guiding principles, and recommendations for strengthening financial aid support across Washington. (For more detail on themes that surfaced across the Advisory Board meetings, see Appendix D.)

A Shared Vision for Students and Families

The Advisory Board wants all students to see financial aid as relevant to their future, have multiple opportunities to complete the FAFSA or WASFA, and have access to support when they need it. Regardless of where they attend high school, all students should have a consistent baseline level of FAFSA awareness and support access.

In practice, this vision means that every student:

- Receives clear, consistent financial aid messages that are targeted to themselves *and* to their families.
- Has at least one individual conversation that connects applying for financial aid to their post-high school plans.
- is given dedicated time integrated into the school day to file for financial aid with support from their counselors or other trusted messengers.
- Can access additional support when needed, either for themselves or for their families.

This is a future vision that does not yet exist in all communities. Aligning around this vision can help everyone involved in financial aid outreach identify challenges and gaps, prioritize resources and support, and guide continued development of solutions.

Guiding Principles for Student- and Family-Centered Support

Throughout their discussions, the Advisory Board identified five guiding principles that center students and families and contribute to achieving this vision.

- Make filing for financial aid relevant so that students understand how financial aid matters to their future plans and multiple pathways.[6]

- Normalize filing for financial aid through visibility and repeated messaging throughout a student's K–12 enrollment.
- Make filing for financial aid easier by providing dedicated time and support in school, complemented by accessible support for students and families virtually and outside of school. Ensure students in Running Start have support even though they may not be in the school building during the day.
- Match support to need by providing a strong baseline of support for everyone, with additional targeted support for some students and families, including personalized, culturally, and linguistically responsive support, along with mentorship and case management from schools and trusted community partners.
- Make financial aid support coordinated and sustained. Connect schools, community partners, higher education institutions, and other supports through shared messaging, data, advising, and year-round collaboration on best practices.

College Place School District

College Place School District's FAFSA completion rate rose from 52 percent for the Class of 2025 to 76 percent for the Class of 2026. Completion among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch rose from 52 percent to 81 percent. Two notable changes coincided with this increase: First, beginning in the 2025–26 academic year, the district began requiring seniors to complete the FAFSA or WASFA (or opt out) to graduate. Second, the district continued its partnership with Elevate, which receives funding from WSAC's RCG program and the Gates Foundation's Horizons grant. Both grants support community-informed financial aid outreach strategies in College Place and the surrounding school districts.

A Consistent Baseline of Support, with More Help Where Needed

Every student should have a consistent baseline of financial aid support, while students and families facing greater barriers should have access to more targeted and intensive help. Likewise, some schools and communities may require additional capacity as well.

The consistent baseline of support for all students includes:

- Early awareness and postsecondary planning
- Consistent statewide and local messaging
- At least one individual FAFSA or WASFA conversation
- Dedicated completion opportunities
- Accessible information and assistance

Supports for students and families facing greater barriers may include:

- Proactive follow-up with students who have not completed an application
- Language-accessible and culturally responsive assistance
- Flexible support outside the school day and school year
- Trusted community-based support and navigators
- Ongoing mentoring, case management, or individualized navigation for students with greater barriers

Offering a consistent statewide experience does not mean providing the same support to everyone; it means ensuring every student has a strong foundation while providing additional help where it is needed.

White Swan High School

Yakama Valley Partners for Education (YVPE) supports alignment between schools, families, and community partners to offer culturally grounded financial-aid help that goes beyond rote translation. The organization works with schools to create welcoming, relevant spaces where Indigenous and Hispanic families can access information and support. With support from YVPE, White Swan High School, located on Yakama Nation land, is strengthening the local conditions that help young people and families pursue education after high school.

These coordinated efforts are helping to make postsecondary opportunity more accessible: White Swan High School's FAFSA completion rate increased by 11 percentage points in just one month (March to April 2026). The final completion rate for the Class of 2026 was 61 percent, compared with 51 percent for the Class of 2025. As the community recovers from recent wildfires that destroyed homes and disrupted essential services, the sustained, family-centered support that YVPE provides remains especially important.[7]

Near-Term Recommendations for Shared Responsibility

The Advisory Board emphasized that FAFSA or WASFA completion works best as a shared responsibility. No single organization can provide everything students and families need. Schools, community partners, higher education, and the state each bring different strengths and have complementary roles in this work:

- **Schools:** Set goals for financial aid completion; connect FAFSA or WASFA to postsecondary planning; provide individual conversations and dedicated completion time; identify students who need more help; coordinate with partners.

- **Community partners:** Extend trusted, culturally and linguistically responsive support to students and families, help build a postsecondary-going culture in their communities, and provide support outside of the school day and school year.
- **Higher education:** Help students navigate financial aid and enrollment, partnering with schools and communities; provide support through summer transitions.
- **State:** Coordinate the statewide campaign and messaging; strengthen data systems and shared resources; target support and investment for communities with the highest need; facilitate regional coordination and shared learning.

STCU and LaunchNW

In Eastern and Central Washington, STCU and LaunchNW are showing how trusted community institutions can expand FAFSA capacity and open postsecondary options for more students. STCU has trained more than 170 staff members as FAFSA Ambassadors so that all 52 branches offer private, trusted space where families can get FAFSA help, internet access, and after-hours appointments.

Working with partners like LaunchNW, College Success Foundation, Communities In Schools, WSAC, KHQ, and Mastercard, STCU hosted 38 in-branch FAFSA events, 47 online appointments, and 15 external events during the 2025-26 school year. In total, STCU and its partners helped more than 270 families complete the FAFSA this year. At one school where the group provided support, FAFSA completion reached 100 percent.

Together, these partners are working to normalize the financial aid application as a standard step toward college, especially for rural, first-generation, and low-income students.

Long-Term Opportunities to Strengthen the Statewide System

The Advisory Board also identified longer-term opportunities to build on existing state, school, higher education, and community assets while strengthening sustainable capacity to support FAFSA or WASFA completion. These include:

- Strengthen the High School and Beyond Plan and K–12 advising continuum to build earlier awareness of postsecondary pathways and financial aid.
- Build a stronger continuum of support, including sustainable roles for trusted community partners and navigators.
- Continue building college-going and postsecondary-going cultures in schools and communities, encompassing multiple education and training pathways.
- Strengthen data systems and data use to identify gaps, coordinate support, and continuously improve strategies.

What Comes Next: WSAC's Plan for the 2026–27 Academic Year

The 2026–27 campaign will continue the same core goals already established, with updated targets that reflect the current year's progress and priorities. These goals emphasize the need for equitable financial aid access for all of Washington's high school graduates. Progress in 2025–26 benefited from a national trend of increased growth—one which Washington exceeded. Continuing this trend requires making progress toward the Advisory Board's vision of financial aid awareness, access, and support.

The Governor's office will convene the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Advisory Board for a second year, and WSAC will once again lead this workgroup.

The continuation of this Advisory Board allows for sharing best practices, offering critical feedback on statewide strategies, and developing future recommendations accordingly. With so many efforts working in parallel across the state, the Advisory Board is an important avenue for creating momentum and lifting up critical learning without duplicating efforts.

Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign Goals for the Class of 2027

By September 30, 2027, the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign aims to:

1. Ensure 51,000 seniors complete the FAFSA or WASFA.
2. Maintain or increase FRPL-eligible student FAFSA completions at 300 schools.
3. Narrow the financial aid completion gap between FRPL-eligible and non-FRPL-eligible students to below 5 percentage points.
4. Improve FAFSA completion among high school seniors from historically underserved populations by reducing the equity gap score to below 1.78.

Building on the Advisory Board's recommendations, WSAC will lead an intentionally designed state and regional campaign that is powered by data and continuous learning. The campaign will focus on five strategies.

1) Build momentum throughout the year.

For the Class of 2027, WSAC will create distinct moments for statewide action throughout the academic year, giving schools, partners, and trusted messengers shared goals and opportunities to mobilize. These moments will include:

- A fall drive that will build early momentum around Financial Aid Advising Day and encourage students to complete their financial aid applications in time to maximize their aid and postsecondary opportunities.
- A spring push beginning in February and culminating during the week of March 22 (Finish Your Financial Aid Application Week) to reinvigorate statewide attention and remind students that aid is still available and that they should complete a FAFSA or WASFA before spring break to stay on track.
- A late spring/summer initiative to reinforce that it's not too late, reminding students that many schools are still accepting applications and offering financial aid. This drive also supports students in the final stages of the financial aid cycle, including steps like understanding their award letters and accepting their aid.

These financial aid drives will provide focused periods of action to help sustain attention and momentum throughout the academic year while giving educators, advocates, and trusted messengers common opportunities to rally around financial aid completion.

2) Mobilize partnerships for coordinated action.

WSAC will strengthen coordination among K–12 schools and districts, nonprofit organizations, libraries, higher education institutions, and other community partners so that they have greater visibility into emerging needs and available supports. A partnership workgroup will meet monthly and examine data to determine which regions and communities may need assistance, connect local communities to appropriate relationships and resources, and coordinate action.

WSAC will lead the Fall Financial Aid Summit with support from several community partners. It will kick off 2026–27 financial aid work, with partners learning about topics such as financial aid data, financial aid basics, working in rural schools, and the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign. Following this summit, attendees will continue to learn from each other about what is working in their schools and communities.

Methow Valley School District

The Methow Valley region is small in population but large in its geographic scale and isolation. It has limited access to a community college or skill centers. Because of these realities, community members have built a regional ecosystem of support that helps students gain career exposure, especially for pathways such as the trades and health care.

Methow Valley School District, an RCG partner, sees its community as its most powerful asset. The district has built a counseling team that shares responsibility for helping students and families navigate financial aid, postsecondary planning, internships, training, and employment. The team's coordinated approach supports staff, spreads awareness of financial aid resources, and ensures that all students, including adult learners, know who in the community can help them navigate career and postsecondary decision-making. FAFSA assistance is highly personalized, and staff often offer individual follow-up, after-hours meetings, and outreach to first-generation families.

With both a traditional and an alternative high school, the district's on-time FAFSA completion rate was 82 percent for Class of 2026, up 17 percentage points from June 2025. These improvements were possible because the school district and its leadership are committed to sustainable shifts in the community's culture of credential attainment.

3) Put more support where it's needed most.

WSAC will continue and strengthen the priority school pilot, which showed promising results during the 2025–26 campaign. Using data to identify schools that could benefit from higher touch supports, WSAC will partner with 25 priority schools. These schools will be selected based on a variety of factors, including:

- FAFSA completion rates for FRPL-eligible students
- Gaps in FAFSA completion rates when comparing rates by race and ethnicity
- Geographic and school size diversity

Each priority school will have a WSAC-designated lead who will connect the school to financial aid content, support, and data resources. The priority school leads will help with goal-setting as part of the larger campaign drives. Furthermore, WSAC will help make a peer mentorship connection between former priority schools and 2026–27 priority schools to enable best practice sharing from those closest to the work.

WSAC will also use real-time progress data to monitor other schools that may be struggling with FAFSA completion work. The partnership network can be mobilized to help support both priority schools and additional schools that may need a touchpoint.

4) Reach students and families directly.

WSAC will expand direct communication to approximately 200,000 high school students and families via mail, OtterBot (text), and email. Messages will be tailored to a student's specific grade level and, for seniors, to where they are in the FAFSA application process. Engagement data will be used throughout the year to refine the content of messages as well as the timing, frequency, and impact. WSAC will also run a statewide digital media marketing campaign that exposes students and parents to engaging WA Grant and FAFSA/WASFA content, such as new websites, videos, and testimonials.

5) Connect financial aid to each student's future.

WSAC will work with schools and partners toward a shared aspiration: Every high school senior has at least one individual touchpoint about their future and postsecondary education, with a focus on how financial aid can help make future plans possible. This connection point is especially critical for students who may not see themselves pursuing postsecondary education. WSAC will reinforce this message in direct communications to students and their families. Additionally, WSAC will advance the message with communications to trusted messengers via email, mail, and during training. The High School and Beyond Plan statewide rollout of the digital tool will also allow for earlier awareness and connectivity of financial aid to postsecondary pathways of specific careers. This tool will align with advising requirements to ensure all students understand how financial aid can help them achieve their goals, as well as the mechanics of accessing aid.

Toppenish High School

Compared to the Class of 2025, on-time FAFSA completion for the Class of 2026 at Toppenish High School rose by 12 percentage points (from 72 percent to 84 percent). This gain was driven in part by Nashua Johnley, a senior who served on the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Advisory Board. Nashua worked with classmates to create social media content. He also worked directly with American Indian/Alaska Native students to debunk financial aid myths and highlight the value of post-high school education.

The effort illustrates the role student voices and peer outreach can play in strengthening FAFSA completion and other college-and-career efforts.

Across all five strategies, WSAC will use timely data and feedback from schools and partners to understand what is working, identify emerging gaps, adjust campaign tactics, target resources, and share promising practices across the state. This continuous-improvement approach will allow the campaign to learn and adapt throughout the year.

Conclusion



The 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign focused on strategically building new initiatives and strengthening existing strategies to generate statewide momentum that led more students to complete a FAFSA or WASFA. It leveraged a data-informed framework to focus on advancing equitable completion rates statewide and within schools. In this regard, the campaign was a success: More students than ever before completed a financial aid application, and nearly 300 schools increased the number of FRPL-eligible students who completed a FAFSA.

The 2026–27 campaign seeks to build on this momentum, starting earlier and centering the connection with students and families so that every high school student in the state benefits from a shared experience. Through a shared vision for Washington's financial aid support system, everyone who works with students and families on their post-high school planning can better connect applying for financial aid with the opportunities it enables after graduation.

Appendix A. Strengthen System-Wide Alignment

The first strategy area revolved around creating new initiatives to strengthen system-wide alignment. This approach included focusing on building a stronger infrastructure around the various levels of educational support in the state as well as harnessing the power of state-local partnerships. Within this strategy area are four distinct strategies:

- Establish a Governor-convened, WSAC-led FAFSA Advisory Board.
- Maximize WSAC resources to leverage support for FAFSA and WASFA completion.
- Host WSAC-WAGAP joint events on admissions and financial aid.
- Recognize schools and districts for college-going cultures.

Each of the above strategies integrated learning from the Spring 2025 campaign as well as WSAC's existing partnership initiatives.

Establish a Governor-convened, WSAC-led FAFSA Advisory Board.

Governor Ferguson's Executive Order convened an Advisory Board, led by WSAC, to guide the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign. The inaugural Advisory Board was composed of 14 members, including five students. Advisory Board members represented diverse communities, positions, and institutions from across the state. The Advisory Board included students as well as personnel from school districts, regional community organizations, statewide agencies, and multiple types of higher education systems.

The Advisory Board met monthly and provided feedback on campaign strategies and coordination in addition to producing a series of recommendations for future iterations of the Campaign. Throughout the Advisory Board meetings, representatives from various sectors shared promising practices and heard from others who were doing similar work in their communities. During meetings, WSAC also relayed resources and highlighted the concerted efforts of those with demonstrated progress in financial aid completion.

Based on the Advisory Board's guidance, WSAC expanded the network of partners with whom the agency collaborated on financial aid completion. The Advisory Board also provided tactical guidance on the design and implementation of the spring 2026 *Your Future, Funded!* initiative. Their recommendations informed planning for the 2026–27 campaign, including an expansion of partnership mobilization and beginning the *Your Future, Funded!* initiative earlier in the academic year. Finally, the Advisory Board recommended strategic communication efforts about the "why" behind pursuing postsecondary pathways into the mechanics of "how," insights that are being integrated into WSAC's communications for the 2026–27 academic year.

Maximize WSAC resources to leverage support for FAFSA and WASFA completion.

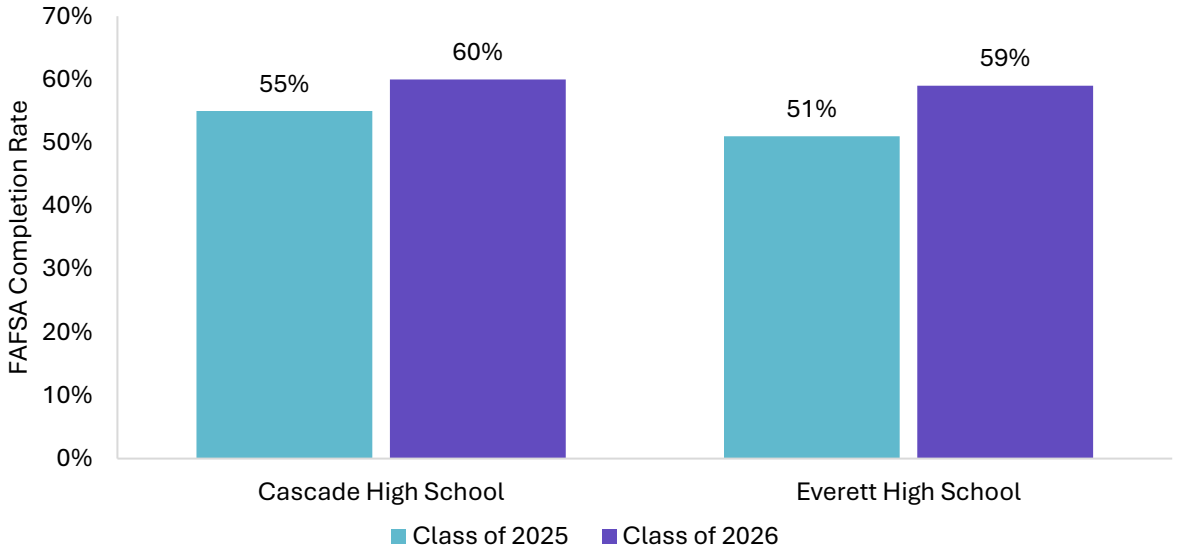
WSAC leveraged existing resources across the agency—including the State Work Study (SWS) program, the Regional Challenge Grant program (RCG), and Washington State GEAR UP—to expand FAFSA and WASFA completion support in priority communities. This strategy aimed to increase direct assistance for low-income students while strengthening coordination across WSAC programs. Implementation required collaboration across multiple WSAC divisions and the development of new partnerships with participating colleges and school districts. By leveraging existing funding, staff expertise, and community partnerships, WSAC increased trusted messengers' capacity to support students and families in their communities.

State Work Study (SWS) Pilot

For the first time, WSAC hired a State Work Study (SWS) student to directly support college and career planning at high schools locally. This student began work at two high schools (Cascade and Everett) in April 2026, providing one-on-one financial aid application assistance and supporting group financial aid events.

The pilot demonstrated promising results: Compared to the previous year, final FAFSA completion rates increased by 5 percentage points at Cascade High School and 8 percentage points at Everett High School (see Figure A1).

Figure A1. Year over Year Change in FAFSA Completion Rates for Cascade and Everett High Schools



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

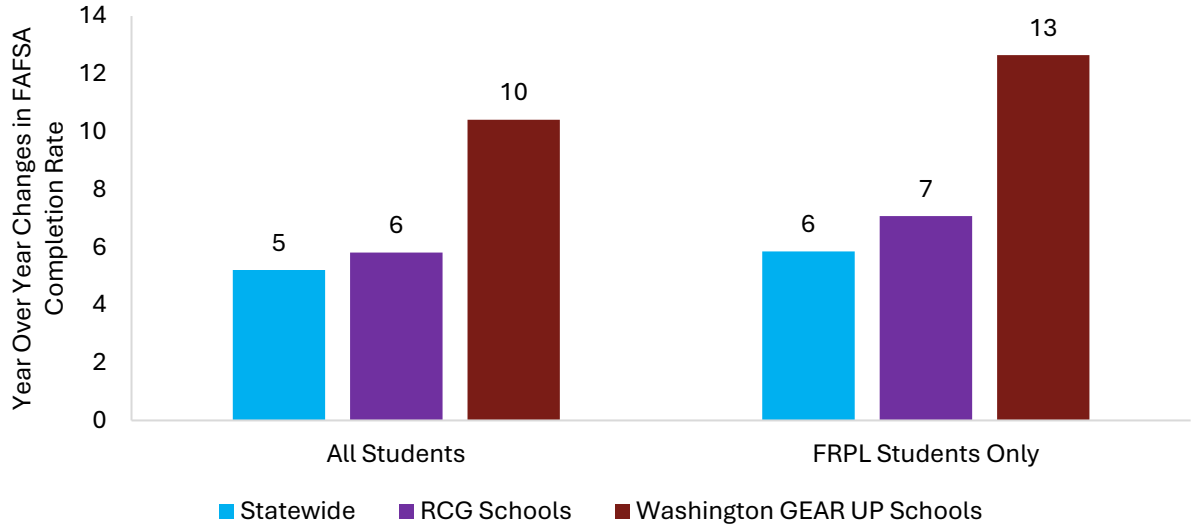
Washington GEAR UP and Regional Challenge Grants (RCG)

In parallel, three WSAC teams that directly support school and community partnerships developed a coordinated cross-team communications strategy. This coordination further supported capacity-building in communities where WSAC staff have been working with trusted messengers for several years.

For over 25 years, Washington GEAR UP has partnered with schools in rural Washington to support dedicated college and career advising and services. A more recent program, RCG offers an avenue for agency staff to deepen their relationships with CBOs and school districts that implement place-based strategies for shifting the educational culture in Washington's communities. Strengthening state-local relationships and helping school staff build trust with students and families supports increased completion rates in partnership regions, overall and among FRPL-eligible students.

In GEAR UP regions, year-over-year improvements are remarkable: On-time completion among all students at GEAR UP schools increased by 10 percentage points, and on-time completion among FRPL-eligible students increased by 13 percentage points (Figure A2).

Figure A2. Year over Year Percentage Point Change in On-Time FAFSA Completion Rates Overall and for FRPL-Eligible Students, by Partnership Region



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects year over year change in on-time completion rates. On-time completion is treated as any application completed as of the last weekly reporting date in June, in keeping with National College Attainment Network (NCAN)'s definition of on-time FAFSA completion. For the Class of 2026, that date was June 29, 2026.

Host WSAC-WAGAP joint events on admissions and financial aid.

The Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP) provides students with a guarantee of admission to nearly all public four-year institutions. As part of this effort,

WSAC worked closely with WAGAP to align communications and messaging around WAGAP, FAFSA and WASFA applications, and financial aid (specifically the WA Grant).

Going one step further, WSAC partnered with the Council of Presidents (COP) to host virtual admissions and financial aid events specifically for WAGAP students. In total, WSAC supported three virtual admissions and financial aid events for WAGAP students and their families (69 unique attendees). These events were tied to WAGAP admissions application cycles and emphasized the importance of applying for financial aid.

By managing event registration and participation, WSAC identified process improvements that will be implemented for the 2026–27 school year. These improvements include hosting fewer sessions earlier in the year and allowing more time in the sessions for students and guardians to receive financial aid application assistance.

This initiative aligned two statewide efforts: guaranteed admission and financial aid application completion. Consistent messaging helped students and families understand that an admissions offer is only one part of the path to college.

Recognize schools and districts for college-going cultures.

WSAC collaborated with the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) and the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) to develop an annual award that recognizes leaders who foster a college-going culture and schools where a robust college-going culture has taken root. The inaugural College and Career Culture Recognition program recognized three schools in September 2026. Additional schools will be recognized monthly in one of three tiers: Participating, Emerging, and Exemplary.

Over 75 schools self-nominated, with at least one school in each ESD submitting. In total, self-nominating schools serve more than 16,000 students. The median school had an on-time FAFSA completion rate for the Class of 2026 that exceeded 60 percent, as compared to an on-time completion rate of 54 percent for the Class of 2025.

Recognizing effective leaders is intended to drive stronger district-level buy-in and encourage peer learning across schools. Public recognition associated with the award will increase visibility for FAFSA/WASFA completion efforts and provide schools with an opportunity to celebrate staff who support students through the financial aid process.

To design the recognition program, WSAC staff established selection criteria and invited a small group of partners to review nominations. The collaborative approach strengthened relationships and established a foundation that can be refined and expanded in future campaigns.

Appendix B. Target Regional Supports

The strategies in this area focus on improving existing outreach activities led by WSAC because, historically, they have a positive impact on FAFSA completion rates. This year, these strategies were meant to have clear processes and metrics in mind to ensure the positive impacts could prove even more fruitful.

The strategies identified include:

- Expand relationship-building with schools and communities.
- Provide regional trainings for financial aid application support staff.
- Customize OtterBot with targeted messaging.

Expand relationship-building with schools and communities.

During the 2025–26 academic year, WSAC engaged 28 priority schools through the *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign. Priority schools received individualized coaching from the College Access Initiatives (CAI) team, customized OtterBot messaging for students, access to partnership opportunities and student incentives such as Seattle Kraken swag, and a $1,000 microgrant to support efforts toward achieving a 6 percent increase in financial aid completion.

The priority school strategy produced strong results. Eighteen of the 28 schools met or exceeded their goal of a 6 percent increase in financial aid completion among FRPL-eligible students. Every participating school hosted at least one financial aid outreach event. School staff participated in WSAC trainings, maintained regular communication with WSAC staff regarding completion data, and actively utilized both the College Bound Portal and FAFSA Portal. Although these tools were new to many of the priority schools, they will continue to support financial aid efforts in future years.

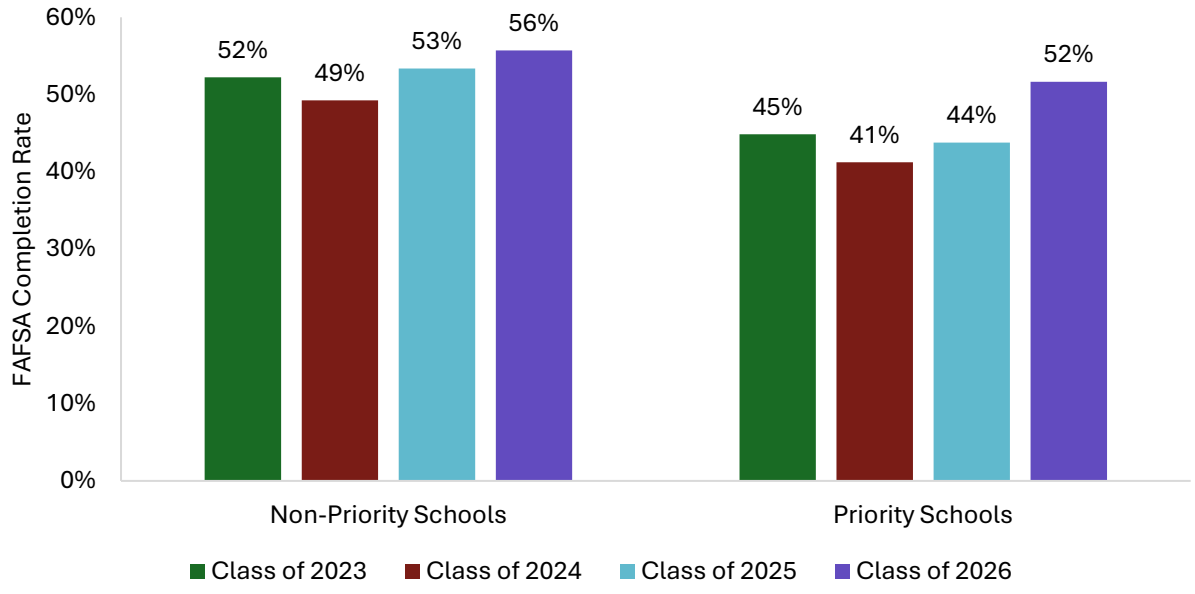
Throughout the campaign, school staff expressed appreciation for the state's increased focus and investment in financial aid outreach. In many cases, school counselors are solely responsible for financial aid education, leading to limited capacity to support this work within the school building. The heightened emphasis on financial aid during the 2025–26 campaign elevated the importance of their work and encouraged greater involvement from school administrators and staff. As a result, schools were able to reach significantly more students than in previous years.

Counselors are entering the 2026–27 academic year with increased confidence, stronger partnerships, and practical tools to sustain the momentum built this year. Because they established effective practices, expanded staff engagement, and increased familiarity with

available resources, priority schools are well positioned to continue improving financial aid completion rates and helping more students access postsecondary opportunities.

Moreover, the targeted support improved FAFSA completion outcomes for students. By the end of the 2025–26 cycle, 52 percent of students at priority schools had completed the FAFSA, an 8-percentage-point increase from the Class of 2025 final rate of 44 percent (Figure B1). Although priority schools continued to have lower FAFSA completion rates than non-priority schools, the gap narrowed from 9 to 4 percentage points. This pattern suggests the priority school model may accelerate FAFSA completion at participating schools.

Figure B1. Final FAFSA Completion Rates over Time, By Priority School Status



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Provide regional trainings for financial aid application support staff.

Through this strategy, College Access Initiatives (CAI) significantly expanded regional capacity by delivering three in-person Train-the-Trainer sessions in partnership with regional organizations, along with one statewide virtual Train-the-Trainer event. In total, CAI facilitated 32 training opportunities during the year, including 23 virtual trainings tailored to meet the unique needs of partner organizations. To further increase accessibility, the Financial Aid Basics training was made available asynchronously, allowing participants to complete the course on demand while earning clock hours (units of continuing education credit required for certain direct support school staff).

Overall, more than 200 individuals attended an in-person training and over 1,200 individuals completed the training through virtual learning opportunities. Individuals who attended in-person events covered nearly a third of all public high schools enrolling 12th grade students in the 2025–26 academic year. The overall number of individuals that WSAC trained decreased slightly this year relative to the 2024–25 academic year (approx. 1,500 trained). The elevated counts during the 2024–25 academic year reflect the higher demand for training that resulted from the bumpy rollout of the Better FAFSA.

Promotion through multiple statewide channels—including the Washington Council Fall Counselor Tour, the Washington Financial Aid Association (WFAA), the CAI newsletter, and targeted outreach to trusted messengers—helped increase awareness and participation. Collectively, these efforts strengthened regional networks, expanded financial aid expertise across Washington, and increased the capacity of local partners to provide accurate, consistent, and timely guidance to students and families.

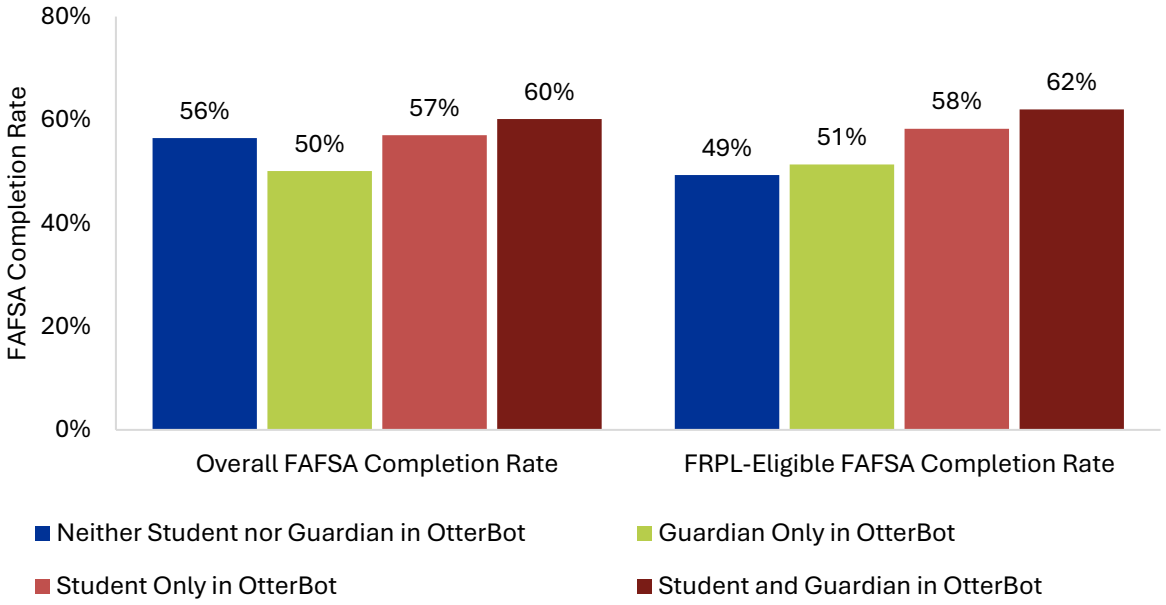
Customize OtterBot with targeted messaging

As evidenced throughout, CAI is continuously adapting and improving the statewide infrastructure for college outreach and support. Part of this infrastructure is OtterBot, a free, human-powered, AI-informed chatbot tool that serves as a technological megaphone for sharing information about college and financial aid to all high school students and their families. These messages are designed to help them take action: How to apply for aid, how to apply to college, how to pursue their post-high school pathway.

High school seniors and their guardians receive messages that target financial aid completion steps. In the 2025–26 academic year, OtterBot sent over 577,000 messages about financial aid to high school seniors and their guardians. Halfway through the senior year, OtterBot messages vary based on a student's FAFSA filing status, where users who have already submitted receive information on what to do after completing. Those who have not yet filed receive encouragement and support, and those who have submitted but not completed get access to resources that can help them navigate processing errors or other common challenges.

Statewide data demonstrates the positive impacts of messaging that extends to both students *and* guardians. Overall, and among FRPL-eligible students, completion rates are highest when both students and guardians receive messages (Figure B2). By contrast, some of the lowest FAFSA completion rates are among students whose guardians alone receive messages.

Figure B2: Final FAFSA Completion Rates by Type of OtterBot Messaging Received

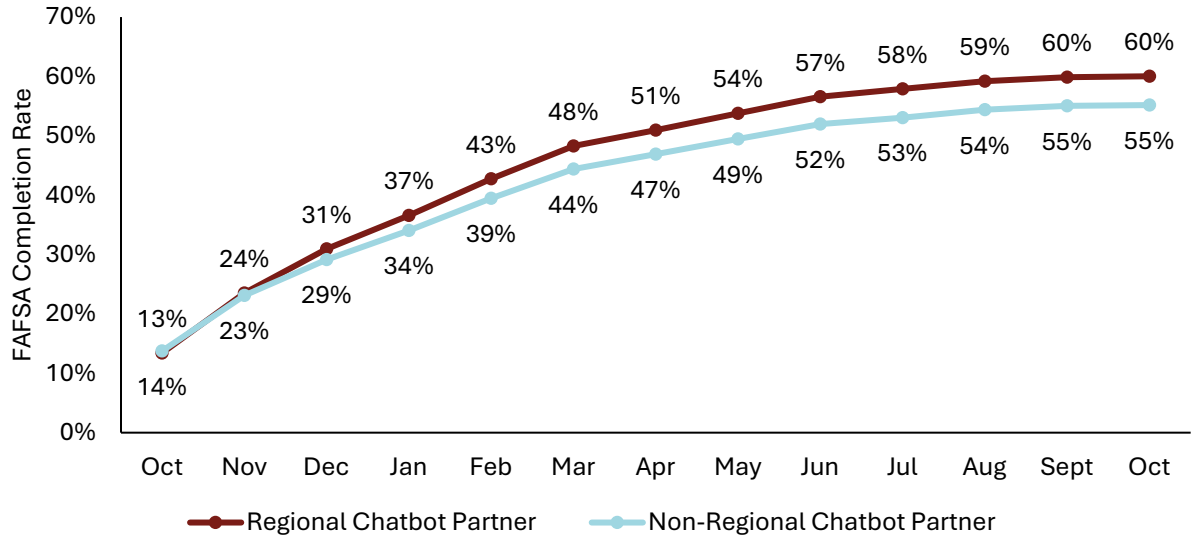


Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Building on the positive potential of OtterBot, WSAC integrated into this year's campaign two pilot initiatives: chatbot regionalization in five communities across the state, and dual-generation messaging that offered guardians a path to information to help them pursue their educational goals. Although the dual-generation pilot encountered implementation challenges, the regionalization efforts surfaced meaningful impacts as well as critical learning that will inform the 2026–27 campaign.

Since November 2025, schools that were a part of the regional chatbot pilot had higher FAFSA completion rates than those who were not. Since March 2026, chatbot partner school completion rates have remained more than 4 percentage points higher than non-partner schools, and this further increased starting in June where chatbot partner schools had completion rates that were 5 percentage points higher than non-partner schools. This shows that partner schools are not only completing the FAFSA at higher rates than other schools, but they are also moving through the process earlier.

Figure B3: FAFSA completion rates, by chatbot partner status (2025 – 26 *Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign*)



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: This chart captures the FAFSA completion rate as of the final weekly report in each month throughout the 2025 – 26 *Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign*.

Appendix C. Strengthen Trusted Messenger Data Use and Communications

The last strategy area comprises strategies with proven impact. Changes made to strategy implementation during the current year reflect WSAC's practice of integrating programmatic improvements in real time.

This strategy area includes:

- Enhance portal user outreach and training.
- Refine WSAC's delivery of the annual Governor's letter to high school seniors.
- Overhaul trusted messenger communications and redesign the FAFSA dashboard.

Enhance portal user outreach and training.

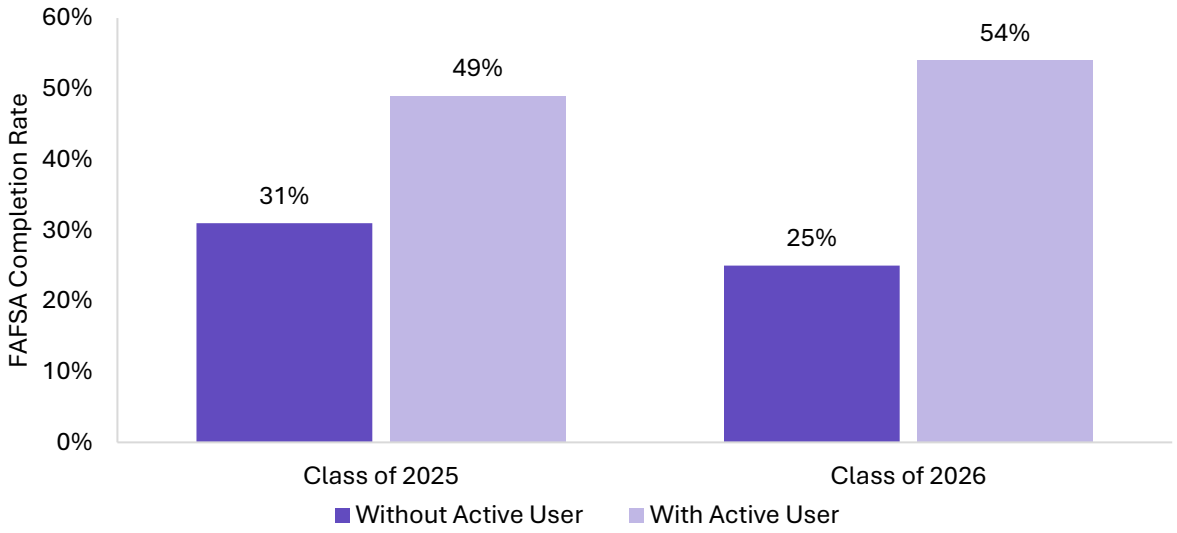
This strategy expanded upon the previous work that has been done to increase active FAFSA Portal usage among trusted messengers who directly provide financial aid application support to students and families. The FAFSA Portal shows approved school staff which high school seniors have completed a FAFSA application. As it relates to this year's campaign, WSAC increased the total number of active users and improved active users' understanding of how to wield the portal as a tool in their daily work.

To increase the number of active users, the agency targeted districts where prior access was expiring as well as those where access had never been established. Since November 2025, over 260 districts have signed Data Sharing Agreements with WSAC, and approximately 900 staff in schools, districts, and community-based organizaitons have signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement that allows them access to the FAFSA Portal. This represents approximately 45 school districts and more than 200 additional active users over 2024–25 engagement counts.

To improve active users' understanding of the FAFSA Portal, WSAC provided three trainings designed around users' common requests and inquiries. Across the trainings, over 130 attendees joined from schools, districts, and other outreach-based organizations.

As a result of these concerted outreach efforts, more than 80 percent of public school districts now have at least one active user and nearly 95 percent of high school seniors attend a school with at least one active portal user. Moreover, the on-time FAFSA completion rate is higher among students at schools with an active user, as compared to those without one (54 percent vs 25 percent for the Class of 2026; see Figure C1).

Figure C1. On-Time FAFSA Completion Rates for the Class of 2025 and 2026, by Presence of Portal User in Corresponding Year



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects on-time completion rates. On-time completion is treated as any application completed as of the last weekly reporting date in June, in keeping with National College Attainment Network (NCAN)'s definition of on-time FAFSA completion. For the Class of 2026, that date was June 29, 2026.

Refine WSAC's delivery of the annual Governor's letter to high school seniors. Each year, WSAC partners with the Governor's Office to send a letter to high school seniors who have not yet completed the FAFSA. For the Spring 2025 campaign, this letter went out in May and June by email, text message, and letter. In the two weeks following the initial letter delivery in May 2025, overall completion among letter recipients increased by 2 percentage points (approx. 1,000 students completed FAFSAs). This year, the WSAC team worked closely with the Governor's Office to implement a two-stage outreach model:

- February: Postcard reminder to complete the FAFSA
- May: Letter to students who still had not completed the FAFSA

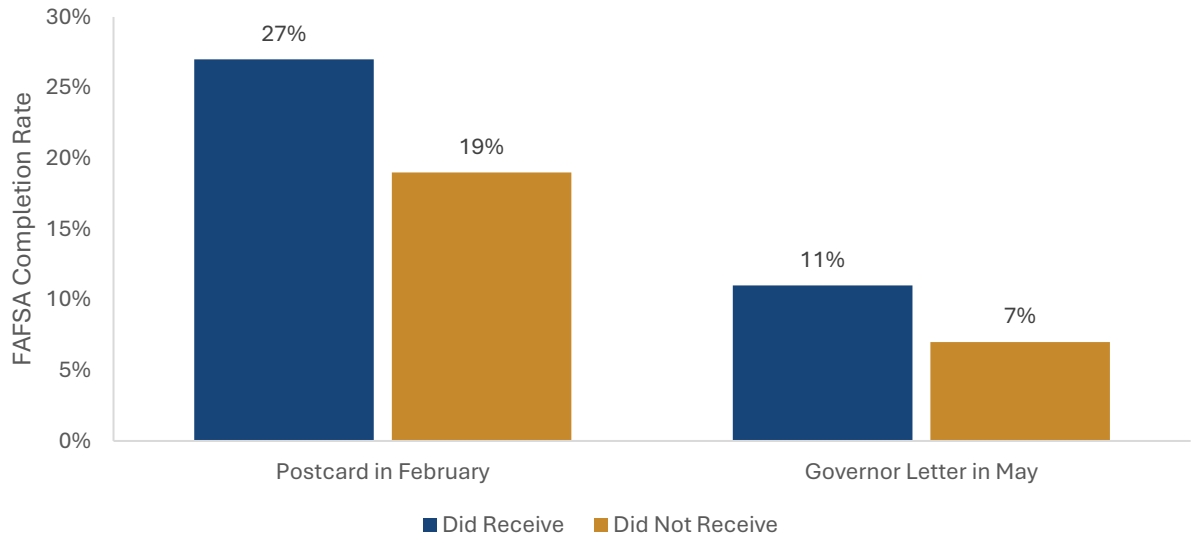
Aligned with the timing of both mailings, WSAC sent follow-up emails and text messages to students whose contact information was up to date. Contact information was not available for all students targeted for outreach, which creates an opportunity to compare the relationship between receipt of the Governor's outreach and subsequent FAFSA completion (Figure C2).

- Of the more than 50,000 students who received the postcard in February, a total of 4 percent had filed the FAFSA within two weeks and a total of 27 percent filed by the end of July. By comparison, only 19 percent of those who did not receive the mailing did so by the end of July.

- Of the more than 41,000 students who received a letter in May (81 percent of those who received the February postcard), 2 percent completed a FAFSA within two weeks and 11 percent completed by the end of July. By comparison, only 7 percent of non-recipients did so by the end of July.

These findings suggest that the postcard's earlier delivery led to larger increases in FAFSA completion than outreach in May. These findings align with feedback from trusted messengers and Advisory Board members that earlier outreach is more effective.

Figure C2. End of July FAFSA Completion Rates among Recipients, by Mailing Date



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects completion rates as of the end of July 2026.

Overhaul trusted messenger communications and redesign the FAFSA Dashboard

WSAC also overhauled several core trusted messenger resources: the newsletter managed by the agency's College Access Initiatives (CAI) team, and its FAFSA Completion Dashboard for High School Seniors.

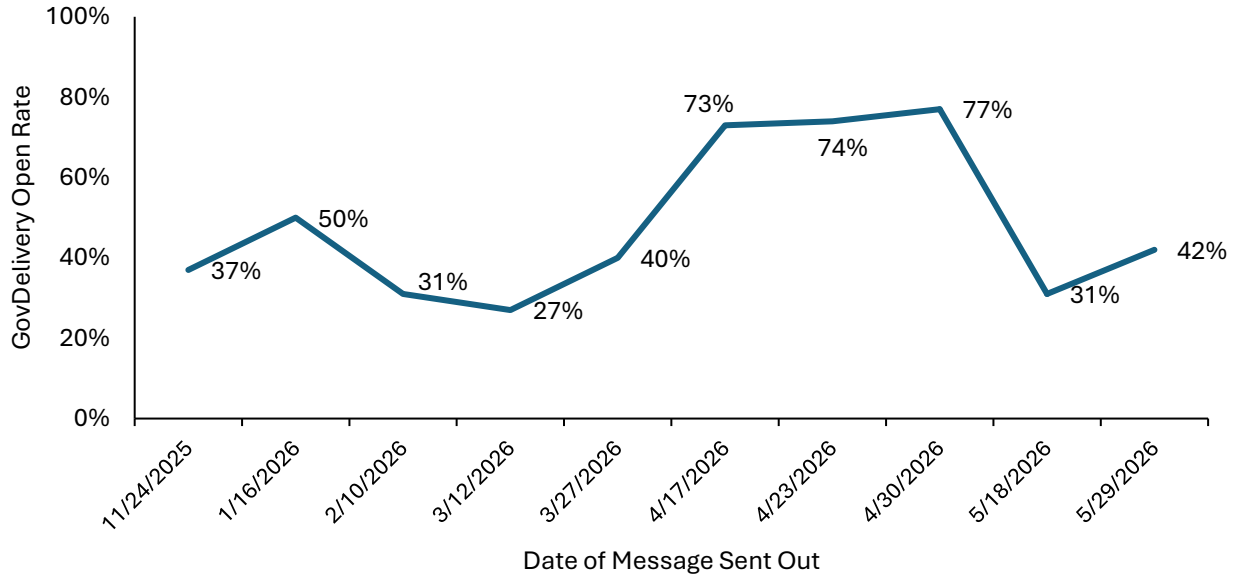
Overhauled Newsletter to Trusted Messengers

Beginning in the Fall of 2025, WSAC consolidated its existing email campaigns into a single newsletter with an annual schedule of topics. WSAC leveraged the overhauled newsletter format to amplify agency resources, such as the redesigned FAFSA Completion Dashboard for High School Seniors and the spring 2026 *Your Future, Funded!* campaign.

WSAC also carefully tracked trusted messengers' interactions with the newsletter, building a baseline understanding of how engagement varies across the academic year. Open rates improved throughout the year, peaking in late April (Figure C3). The sharp

decline in May aligns with feedback that trusted messengers have shared about the difficulty of integrating financial aid-related outreach into the school day as high school seniors and their families prepare for high school graduation.

Figure C3: Open Rates of GovDelivery Messages Sent to Trusted Messengers in the 2025–26 AY



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart displays open rates for each GovDelivery message sent to trusted messengers during the 2025–26 AY. Open rates are measured 1-2 weeks after each send.

FAFSA Dashboard and WIAA League Competition

The redesigned dashboard allows users to compare FAFSA completion rates across schools within the same Washington Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) league. This information spurred friendly competition among neighboring districts and schools throughout the year, driving more users to the dashboard and more awareness about financial aid. The updated dashboard has been viewed over 31,000 times, and the integration of WIAA league information has engaged schools across the state, as demonstrated by the social media post below (Figure C4).

Figure C4. Social Media Post on WIAA League Competition



Source: Facebook https://www.facebook.com/GrangerHS.gsd/posts/huge-shout-out-to-the-whole-spartan-staff-for-working-with-students-and-making-i/1751703399509829/

Notes: This social media post was posted by Granger High School on April 8, 2026 and included a re-share of the initial Washington Student Achievement Council Facebook post from that day.

Your Future, Funded!

Your Future, Funded! was a spring initiative to encourage late filers to complete their FAFSA. During the lead-up to and during *Your Future, Funded!*, WSAC shared FAFSA completion success stories on its social media channels to encourage friendly FAFSA completion competition. As part of the initiative, Governor Ferguson designated the week of April 20 to 24, 2026 as Finish Your Financial Aid Application Week.

WSAC's *Your Future, Funded!* webpage was visited over 4,000 times by over 1,280 unique users between March 9 and April 30. Most visitors arrived at the website via an email campaign, and the average user returned more than 3 times. Social media posts promoting the initiative had engagement rates reaching up to 9 percent, considered high by industry standards of 1.5-3.5 percent for government agency posts.[8] Most importantly, overall applications ticked upward during the campaign period, as compared to the same period the previous year, reflecting both improved completion and a larger senior class.

Appendix D. Themes from Advisory Board Meetings

WSAC staff conducted a thorough analysis of all discussions at Advisory Board meetings as well as the responses to an Advisory Board survey, conducted in April 2026. From that analysis, five themes emerged as critical to the conversation.

Build trust through trusted messengers.

Students and families trust people they know personally: counselors, teachers, coaches, peers, alumni, and community leaders. Advisory Board members shared that one-on-one conversations, home language outreach, and calls from staff helped families feel more comfortable talking about sensitive topics and showing up to events. Although highly effective, trusted personalized support is resource-intensive and difficult to scale.

Implications for next year:

- Expand trusted messenger outreach to families, including communication in families' home languages and direct follow-up from schools or community partners.

Make financial aid messaging clearer, more visible and motivating.

FAFSA/WASFA language was often confusing or stigmatized. Students responded better when financial aid was framed in plain language. Advisory Board members recommended leading with myth-busting financial aid or money for college/training before naming FAFSA/WASFA, using student-friendly terms like "FAFSA/WASFA Lab" and framing FAFSA as useful for many pathways. Schools that made financial aid visible, normal, and motivating saw stronger engagement; examples included TV screens, posters, daily reminders, challenge weeks, incentives, recognition tools, and celebrations.

Implications for next year:

- Use plain language and make financial aid more visible throughout the year.
- Frame financial aid as relevant to four-year colleges, community colleges, apprenticeships, military, and training programs.

Provide timely and personalized hands-on support aligned to the school year.

Financial aid momentum often dips after winter break, making late January feel like a reset point. Advisory Board members emphasized challenge weeks, school day support, progress tracking and visible reminders, one-on-one support at events, repeat conversations with unsure students, and following up with seniors individually.

Implications for next year:

- Align outreach and support to anticipated friction points within the school year.
- Plan stronger winter reset, targeting February/March follow up and spring support on parent/guardian steps and individual barriers.

Strengthen school capacity, data use, and flexible implementation support.
Schools needed clear data and easy ways to track progress, including identifying new submissions, understanding status changes, and knowing which students still need help. Data difficulties identified by the Advisory Board include super seniors not appearing in the portal and filing data not showing why a student's application was submitted but not completed. Small, rural, and under-resourced schools often needed flexible funding, staffing support, and localized approaches.

Implications for next year:

- Continue strengthening data tools and providing targeted technical assistance.
- Schools that have capacity constraints may still struggle with prioritizing financial aid application completion and may need additional support.

Connect financial aid to students' aspirations for post-high school pathways.
Financial aid made more sense to students when it was connected to their goals. Advisory Board members recommended using youth voices, alumni, current college students, peer-led messaging, and community partners to normalize asking for help. Students considering the military, apprenticeships, work, or community college still need messaging that shows financial aid could be relevant to their plans.

Implications for next year:

- Balance "how to apply" with "why it matters."
- Focus on framing and communicating that financial aid is a tool for many post-high school pathways.

Appendix E. Key Stories from the Data

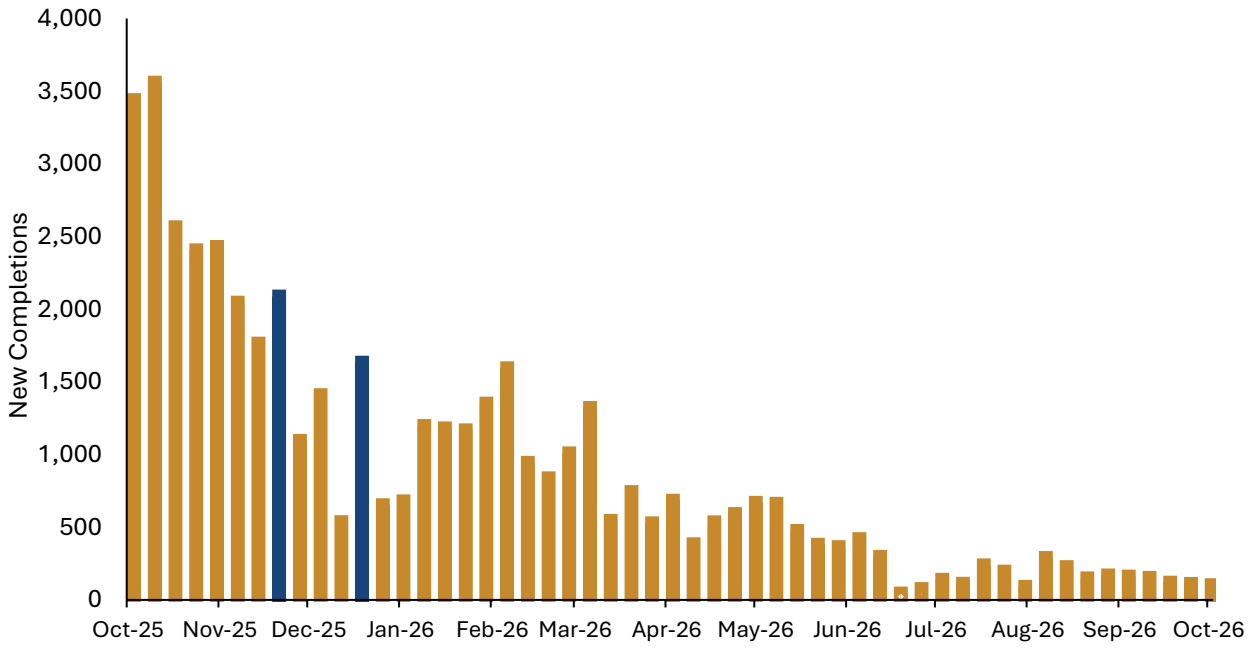
Included in this section is additional information on FAFSA completion trends observed across Washington. The findings outlined here are intended to encourage curiosity that leads to innovative ideas for increasing FAFSA completion rates for high school seniors.

Trends in Week-By-Week FAFSA Completion Volume

Weekly volume of new FAFSA applications was highest at the start of the cycle (October and November), then slowly trended downward the rest of the year. Even so, there are several points in the year where unexpected jumps in weekly volume point to targeted timing of student and family outreach (Figure E1).

For example, applications rose the week before Thanksgiving and again the week before Christmas—suggesting that families work together on planning steps before the holidays. Applications then remained above 1,000 per week throughout January, aligning with an intentional push early in the calendar year, as students return to school and embark on their last six months in high school. A final peak occurs in March, after which volume declines precipitously through the remainder of the year.

Figure E1. New FAFSA Completions by Week, Statewide



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart captures the number of new FAFSA completions among public high school seniors each week of the 2025–26 AY. The tick mark represents the first week that WSAC had data for each month.

This cycle is generally in line with trusted messengers' feedback on statewide financial aid application cycles: Early momentum matters, and by the spring in-school time pivots to preparing juniors for senior year and seniors for graduation activities.

District-Level Trends (Overall Final FAFSA Completion Rate)

The widespread increases in FAFSA completion rates are visible in district-level on-time completion rates across the state (Figure E2). Increases ran down the I-5 corridor and include sections of north central Washington, such as the Methow Valley School District – the state's largest school district by geographic area. Overall, across the state's public school districts where sample sizes allow:

- 143 districts increased their final FAFSA completion rate relative to last year by more than 1 percentage point.
- 53 districts experienced a decrease in their final FAFSA completion rate by more than 1 percentage point.
- 22 districts finished the year within 1 percentage point of their final rate last year.

Of the 53 districts that experienced decreases:

- 14 were still above the statewide average for the Class of 2026 (indicative of overall high completion despite smaller year over year growth).
- 3 were operating under binding conditions, suggestive of meaningful financial duress that could negatively impact district capacity for student support services.

Of the 143 districts that experienced increases:

- 120 set a record high for their final FAFSA completion rate for the Class of 2026.
- 45 had at least one school that works with a WSAC-supported partnership (including priority schools, RCG partnerships and Washington GEAR UP schools).

For a list of the top 20 districts based on final overall student FAFSA completion rates, see Table E1. The top 20 districts based on year-over-year improvements in overall student FAFSA completion rates are included in Table E3. Note that these lists include only those districts for which rates do not require data suppression.

District-Level Trends (FRPL-Eligible Student Final FAFSA Completion Rate)

Across the 183 school districts where sample sizes allow for dedicated assessment of changes in FRPL-eligible student FAFSA completion rates:

- 112 districts increased their FRPL-eligible student final FAFSA completion rate relative to last year by more than 1pp.
- 56 districts experienced a decrease in their FRPL-eligible student final FAFSA completion rate by more than 1pp.
- 15 districts finished the year within 1pp of their FRPL-eligible student rate last year.

There is not a consistent geographic pattern to these year-over-year changes in FRPL-eligible student final FAFSA completion rates. Collections of improving districts are visible along the I-5 corridor in western Washington, in the Yakima Valley region, and in the northern part of the Spokane metropolitan area. Yet, in each of these areas, neighboring districts experienced decreases (Figure E3).

Of the 56 districts that experienced decreases:

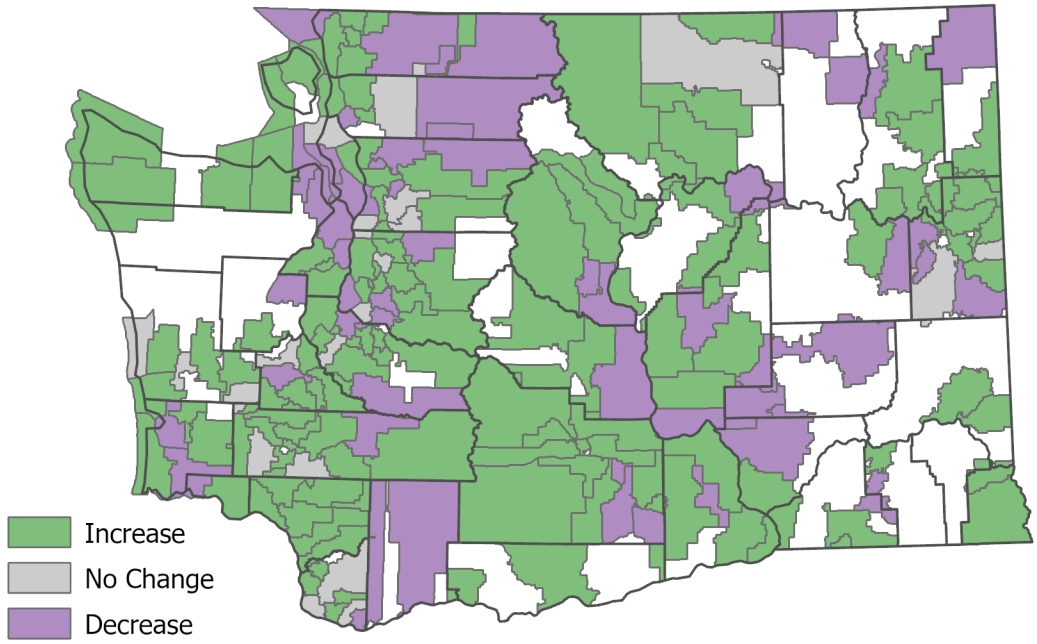
- 13 were still above the statewide average for FRPL-eligible student completion rates for the Class of 2026 (indicative of overall high completion despite smaller year over year growth).
- 2 were operating under binding conditions, suggestive of meaningful financial duress that could negatively impact district capacity for student support services.

Of the 112 districts that experienced increases:

- 93 set a record high for their FRPL-eligible student FAFSA completion rate for the Class of 2026.
- 38 had at least one school that works with a WSAC-supported partnership (including priority schools, Regional Challenge Grant partnerships and Washington GEAR UP schools).

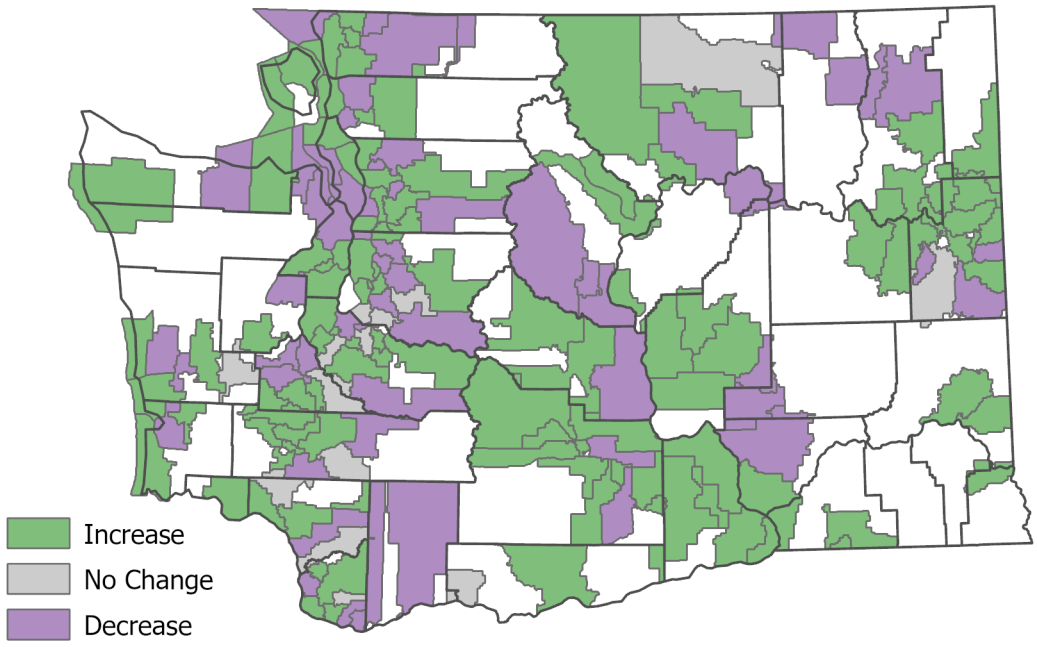
For a list of the top 20 districts based on final FRPL-eligible student FAFSA completion rates, see Table E2. The top 20 districts based on year over year improvements in FRPL-eligible student FAFSA completion rates are included in Table E4. Note that these lists include only those districts for which rates do not require data suppression.

Figure E2. Map of Year-Over-Year Changes in Final FAFSA Completion Rates for the Class of 2026, by School District



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Map reflects year-over-year changes in final FAFSA completion rates by school district.

Figure E3. Map of Year-Over-Year Changes in Final FRPL-Eligible Student FAFSA Completion Rates for the Class of 2026, by School District



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Map reflects year-over-year changes in FRPL-eligible students' final FAFSA completion rates by school district.

Table E1. Top 20 Districts by Final FAFSA Completion Rate for the Class of 2026

District Name	Final Completion Rate (%)	Year-Over-Year Change (pp)	Partnership Presence[a]
Summit Public School: Sierra	98%	+13	
Wahkiakum School District	94%	+46	
Riverside School District	90%	+28	RCG
Coulee-Hartline School District	90%	+14	
Summit Public School: Atlas	90%	+2	
Manson School District	88%	+17	WAGU
Toppenish School District	83%	+9	RCG
Methow Valley School District	82%	+13	RCG
Brewster School District	81%	+22	WAGU
Tukwila School District	81%	+7	
Cape Flattery School District	78%	+2	
Seattle Public Schools	77%	+3	RCG
College Place School District	76%	+24	RCG
Nine Mile Falls School District	76%	+20	RCG
Granger School District	76%	-4	RCG
Winlock School District	74%	+27	
Highland School District	74%	+8	
Onalaska School District	72%	+19	
Peninsula School District	72%	+17	
University Place School District	71%	+8	
Anacortes School District	71%	+8	
Shoreline School District	71%	+1	

Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data

Notes: Table reflects final completion rates for each cohort. Due to a three-way tie for 20th position, the above list includes 22 districts. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.[a] Priority indicates that a school participated as one of WSAC's priority schools during the 2025–26 academic year. Schools marked with RCG operate within the service region for a Regional Challenge Grant partnership that supports high school seniors. WAGU indicates that a school is served by Washington state's GEAR UP grant, which WSAC leads.

Table E2. Top 20 Districts by FRPL-Eligible Final FAFSA Completion Rate for the Class of 2026

District Name	Final Completion Rate (%)	Year-Over-Year Change (pp)	Partnership Presence[a]
Summit Public School: Sierra	100%	+14	
Wahkiakum School District	92%	+46	
Manson School District	91%	+29	WAGU
Riverside School District	91%	+33	RCG
Summit Public School: Atlas	89%	0	
Columbia (Walla Walla-Burbank) School District	85%	+55	Priority
Toppenish School District	84%	+9	RCG
Selkirk School District	82%		
College Place School District	81%	+29	RCG
Onalaska School District	81%	+13	
Brewster School District	81%	+24	WAGU
Methow Valley School District	80%	+21	RCG
Tukwila School District	80%	+5	
Mercer Island School District	79%	+4	
North Beach School District	79%	+17	WAGU
Granger School District	78%	-1	RCG
Highland School District	76%	+2	
Winlock School District	76%	+22	
Bainbridge Island School District	74%	+17	
Seattle Public Schools	73%	+3	RCG

Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data

Notes: Table reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.[a] Priority indicates that a school participated as one of WSAC's priority schools during the 2025–26 academic year. Schools marked with RCG operate within the service region for a Regional Challenge Grant partnership that supports high school seniors. WAGU indicates that a school is served by Washington state's GEAR UP grant, which WSAC leads.

Table E3. 20 Most Improved Districts by Final FAFSA Completion Rate for the Class of 2026

District Name	Final Completion Rate (%)	Year-Over-Year Change (pp)	Partnership Presence[a]
Wahkiakum School District	94%	+46	
White Pass School District	60%	+30	WAGU
Columbia (Walla Walla-Burbank) School District	66%	+29	Priority
Riverside School District	90%	+28	RCG
Winlock School District	74%	+27	
Oroville School District	64%	+27	
College Place School District	76%	+24	RCG
San Juan Island School District	66%	+24	
Wellpinit School District	39%	+24	
Brewster School District	81%	+22	WAGU
Chief Leschi Tribal Compact	49%	+22	
Nine Mile Falls School District	76%	+20	RCG
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe	70%	+20	
Ocosta School District	57%	+20	
Davenport School District	52%	+20	
Onalaska School District	72%	+19	
Royal School District	68%	+19	Priority
Freeman School District	68%	+19	Priority
Lake Chelan School District	65%	+19	WAGU
Eastmont School District	59%	+18	Priority
Bridgeport School District	59%	+18	Priority

Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data

Notes: Table reflects final completion rates for each cohort. Due to a two-way tie for 20th position, the above list includes 21 districts. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.[a] Priority indicates that a school participated as one of WSAC's priority schools during the 2025–26 academic year. Schools marked with RCG operate within the service region for a Regional Challenge Grant partnership that supports high school seniors. WAGU indicates that a school is served by Washington state's GEAR UP grant, which WSAC leads.

Table E4. 20 Most Improved Districts by FRPL-Eligible Student Final FAFSA Completion Rates for the Class of 2026

District Name	Final Completion Rate (%)	Year-Over-Year Change (pp)	Partnership Presence[a]
Columbia (Walla Walla-Burbank) School District	85%	+55	Priority
Wahkiakum School District	92%	+46	
Riverside School District	91%	+33	RCG
College Place School District	81%	+29	RCG
Wellpinit School District	48%	+29	
Manson School District	91%	+29	WAGU
San Juan Island School District	64%	+27	
Colfax School District	54%	+27	
Ocosta School District	53%	+25	
Lake Chelan School District	66%	+24	WAGU
Brewster School District	81%	+24	WAGU
Royal School District	71%	+24	Priority
East Valley (Spokane) School District	66%	+23	RCG
Chehalis School District	62%	+23	RCG
Rainier School District	52%	+22	
Winlock School District	76%	+22	
Chewelah School District	53%	+21	
Methow Valley School District	80%	+21	RCG
Deer Park School District	53%	+19	Priority
Peninsula School District	66%	+19	
Ellensburg School District	58%	+19	
White River School District	46%	+19	

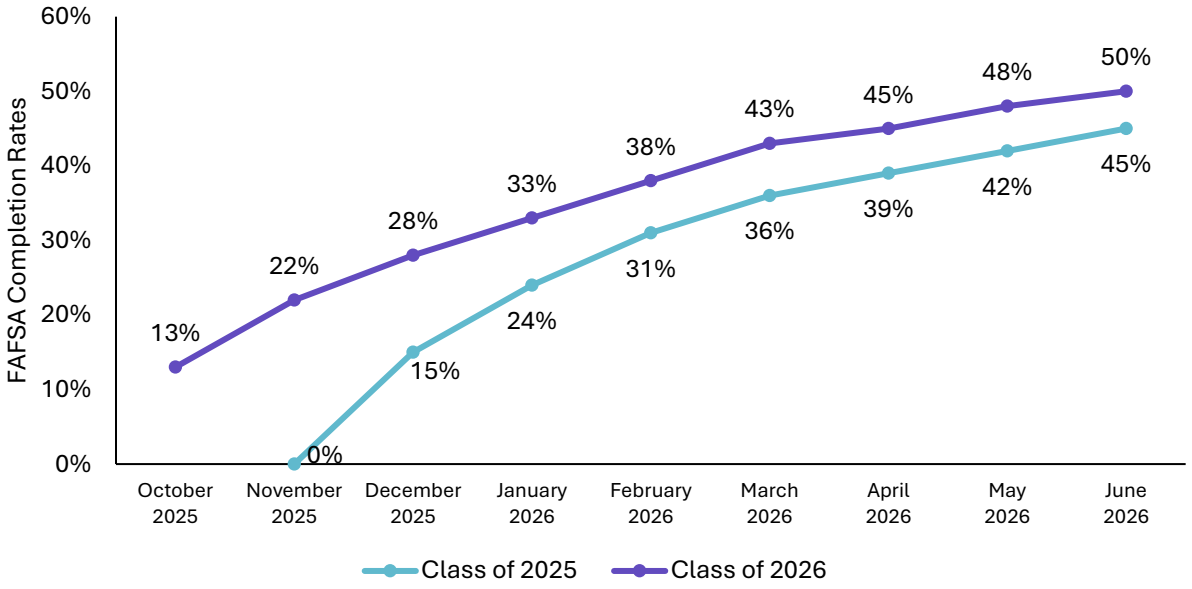
Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data

Notes: Table reflects final completion rates for each cohort. Due to a tie for 20th position, the above list includes 22 districts. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.[a] Priority indicates that a school participated as one of WSAC's priority schools during the 2025–26 academic year. Schools marked with RCG operate within the service region for a Regional Challenge Grant partnership that supports high school seniors. WAGU indicates that a school is served by Washington state's GEAR UP grant, which WSAC leads.

Rural FAFSA Completion Trends

Across the state, rural students made substantial progress in on-time FAFSA completion; by June 2026 the on-time completion rate for the Class of 2026 achieved a 50 percent completion rate compared to 45 percent for on-time completion for the Class of 2025 (Figure E4).

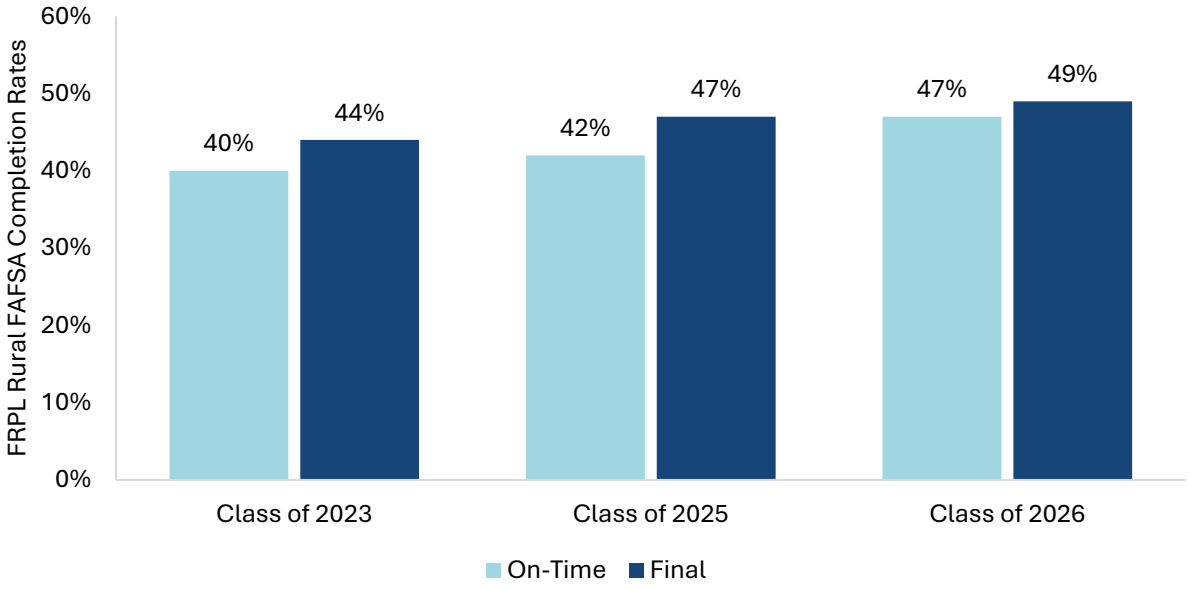
Figure E4: Comparison of FAFSA Completion Rates across Rural Schools each Month, by Cohort



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Chart reflects the FAFSA completion rate as of the final weekly report in each month.

Among FRPL-eligible students in rural communities, on-time completion rose by 5 percentage points (42 percent in June 2025 to 47 percent in June 2026). This suggests that FRPL-eligible students in rural regions may have been better able to receive financial aid support during the school year. Moreover, the gap between on-time and overall completion among FRPL-eligible, rural students has shrunk *and* the overall completion rate for these students has increased (Figure E5). In 2023, the gap between on-time and final FRPL-eligible, rural student completion was 4 percentage points. This gap grew to 5 percentage points in 2025. For the Class of 2026, the gap was only 2 percentage points. One plausible hypothesis for this increase is that rural, FRPL-eligible students received more support throughout the year, which resulted in fewer completions during the summer.

Figure E5: On-Time FAFSA Completion Rates for Rural, FRPL-Eligible Students by Graduation Year



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data

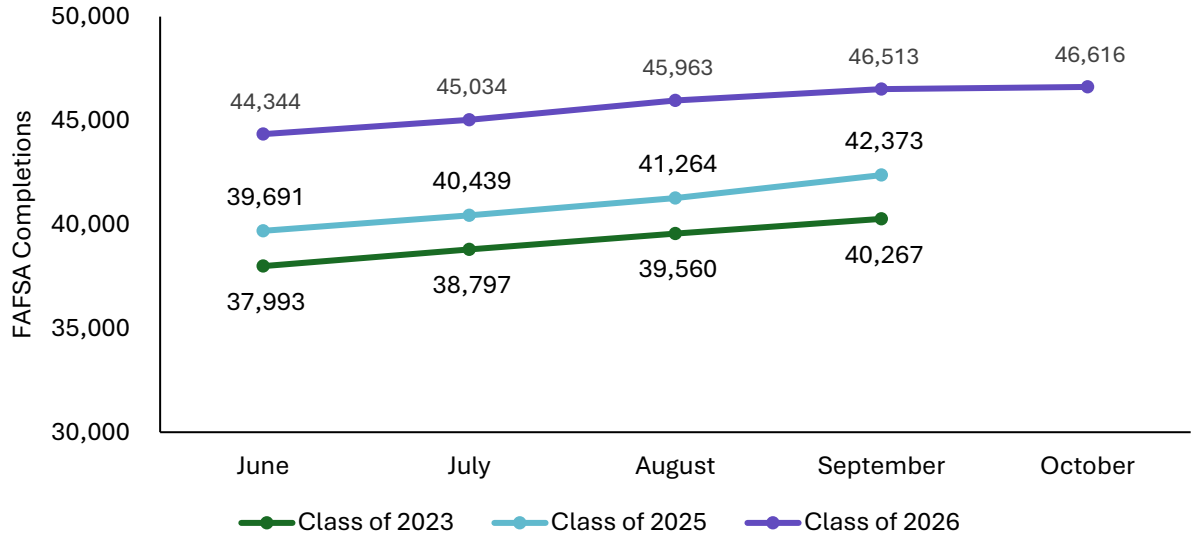
Notes: Chart reflects on-time versus final completion rates. On-time completion is treated as any application completed as of the last weekly reporting date in June, in keeping with National College Attainment Network (NCAN)'s definition of on-time FAFSA completion. For the Class of 2026, that date was June 29, 2026. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Summer FAFSA Completion Trends

Most high school seniors file the FAFSA during the school year; however, there are some who file in the summer after high school graduation. For the Class of 2026, 5 percent of seniors who completed the FAFSA did so in July, August, or September.

Overall, summer completions were higher in 2026 than in 2025 and 2023, with especially large increases in August (more than 900 completions; see Figure E6). This August increase may reflect families doing what we would expect at the start of a new school year: preparing to return to class, confirming financial aid packages, and meeting college enrollment deadlines. These data suggest a broader catch-up trajectory as students, families, and schools regained momentum in accessing college opportunity.

Figure E6. Cumulative Number of FAFSA Completions Each Summer Month, by Cohort



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: This chart captures the total number of FAFSA completions as of the final weekly report in each month, focusing on the three months after the on-time completion cut-off at the end of June. The count for October captures the completions that occurred between the end of September and the formal end of the 2025–26 *Washington Completes FAFSA* Campaign on October 5, 2026.

Summer completers in 2025-26 are concentrated among students who are (Table E5):

- Male (54 percent of all summer filers)
- White or Latino (42 percent and 28 percent of all summer filers, respectively)
- Non-English Language Learners (Non-ELL; 88 percent of all summer filers)

Among specific subgroups, summer FAFSA completion is especially pronounced. For example, when looking at the Class of 2026, 10 percent of *all* AI/AN students who filed the FAFSA did so during summer months. Among both Black/African American and Native

Hawaiian Pacific Islander students, 7 percent of all filers for both demographic groups did so in the summer. These patterns align with national evidence that students of color are less likely to complete the FAFSA on time and more likely to file late.[9] In a similar way, 8 percent of all ELL students who filed the FAFSA did so during the summer, as well as 6 percent of all FRPL-eligible students and 6 percent of all male students who filed. More to the point for the campaign outreach, higher summer completion rates for some student populations point to the possibility of achieving progress by implementing targeted summer strategies.

Table E5: Demographics of Students who Complete the FAFSA during Summer Months, Class of 2025

	Pct of Summer Filers	Pct of All Filers in Demographic Sub-Group
Statewide	100%	5%
By FRPL Eligibility		
Eligible	50%	6%
Not Eligible	50%	4%
By Gender		
Male	54%	6%
Female / Non-Binary	46%	4%
By Race/Ethnicity		
AI/AN	2%	10%
Asian	8%	3%
Black/African American	8%	7%
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	28%	6%
NHPI	1%	7%
Two or More	10%	5%
White	42%	4%
By ELL Status		
ELL	12%	8%
Non-ELL	88%	5%

Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data
Notes: Table captures the percentage of summer filers by demographic subgroup as well as the percentage of students in a given subgroup that complete the FAFSA during summer months (July, August, September).

Endnotes

[1] Alvarado, N. & Deane, K. (2025). *Turning Data into Opportunity: A Case Study of WSAC's Spring 2025 Financial Aid Campaign*. Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC). https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025-Turning.Data_.into_.Opportunity.Report.pdf

[2] Aaron Lemon-Strauss (Posted June 2026). *Real-Time FAFSA Results are here*. Accessed on August 17, 2026. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/alemonstrauss_real-time-fafsa-results-are-here-activity-7467231169537953792--71P.

[3] Kukreja, A. & Deane, K. (2026). *From Statewide to Personal: The Power of Customized College and Career Outreach*. Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC). https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025-26_OtterBot-Regional-Pilot.pdf

[4] For NCAN's Class of 2025 FAFSA tracker, see: https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network/viz/NCANsFAFSATracker-2025-26FAFSACycle/HomePage. For NCAN's Class of 2026 FAFSA tracker, see: https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network/viz/NCANsFAFSATracker-2026-27FAFSACycle/HomePage

[5] Based on a Class of 2026 total completion count of 48,177 and a Class of 2025 total completion count of 43,594. Historical final completion counts for FAFSA only are available on WSAC's SAP Dashboard, in the Affordability cluster: https://wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard.

[6] For more on the myriad pathways that students pursue after high school, see: https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Sequences_to_Success_in_WA_State_Infographic.pdf

[7] Rattner, M., & McNamara, M. (2026, August 3). *Post Office, Church and several homes destroyed in ransier fire near White Swan*. NonStop Local Tri-Cities/Yakima. https://www.nbcrightnow.com/news/post-office-church-and-several-homes-destroyed-in-ransier-fire-near-white-swan/article_4817e0b2-c491-4381-8c7a-917d99dbfed5.html.

[8] Mikolajczyk, K. (2026, July 10). *Government social media benchmarks: 2026 update*. Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard. https://blog.hootsuite.com/government-social-media-benchmarks/

[9] NASFAA | Report: FAFSA Rollout Disproportionately Affected Low-Income Black and Latino Students. https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/34066/Report_FAFSA_Rollout_Disproportionately_Affected_Low-Income_Black_and_Latino_Students