



THE FAFSA CHALLENGE:
Promising Practices to Increase
Financial Aid Access Among
Foster Youth

MARCH 2020



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

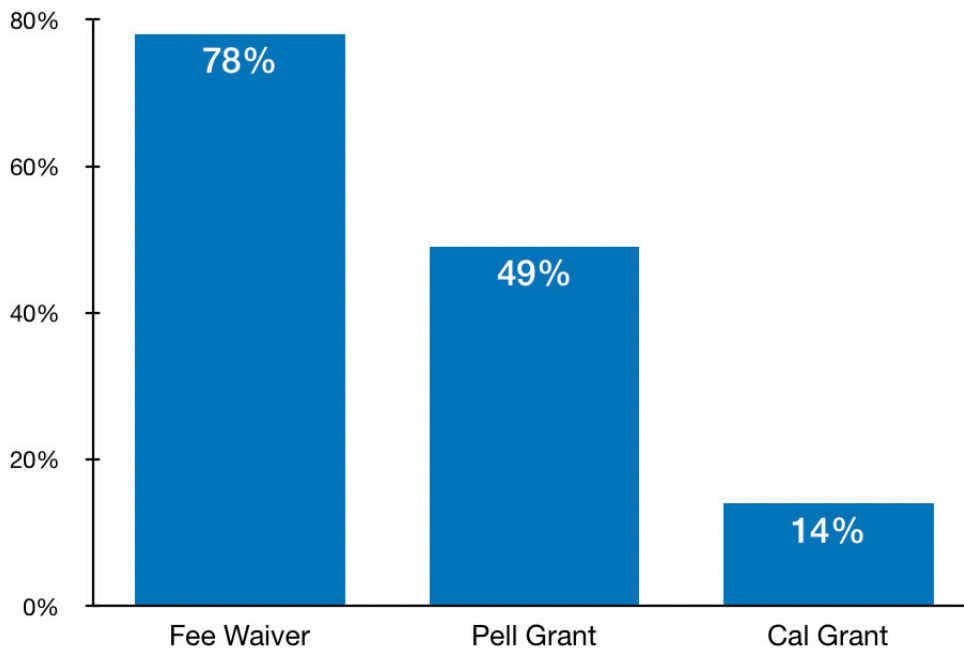
This publication was developed by John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) and made possible by funding from the Stuart Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, Pritzker Foster Care Initiative and Tipping Point Community. John Burton Advocates for Youth works to improve the quality of life for youth in California who have been in foster care or homeless by advocating for better laws, training communities to strengthen local practices, and conducting research to inform policy solutions.

The California Department of Education and California Community College Chancellor's Office were instrumental in the launch of the first California Foster Youth FAFSA Challenge in 2017. The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) has been an invaluable partner and the success of this work would not have been possible without their collaboration. We would also like to especially thank all of the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program staff who enthusiastically took up the mantle of the Foster Youth FAFSA Challenge and who continue to work to make college a reality for thousands of California's foster youth.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, billions of dollars in federal and state financial aid go unused because eligible students do not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA). According to the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), just 53 percent of California’s high school seniors in the class of 2019 completed the FAFSA or CADAA.¹ Foster youth in particular, who overwhelmingly meet eligibility criteria for financial aid, do not receive the full aid for which they are eligible. For example, only 49 percent of first year foster youth students at community college received a Pell Grant last year, the largest form of federal financial aid, and just 14 percent received a CalGrant.² This low receipt rate is despite 78 percent meeting the income criteria for these financial aid sources. With education a key driver toward financial stability in adulthood, and receipt of financial aid crucial to enrolling and persisting in college for youth from low-income backgrounds, foster youth need and deserve maximum access to financial aid.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOSTER YOUTH FINANCIAL AID ACCESS



In response to this, in 2017, John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY), in partnership with the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO), launched the California Foster Youth FAFSA Challenge. The FAFSA Challenge is a statewide campaign to increase the number of foster youth who are prepared for success as they matriculate from high school into college by ensuring that foster youth are accessing financial aid. From this effort, a number of best practices were identified, and this publication documents these strategies in order to inform foster youth FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts in the years to come.

¹ <https://webutil.csac.ca.gov/Dashboard/> accessed on February 10, 2020.

² CalPASS Plus foster youth data dashboard, accessed on February 10, 2020.

Financial aid is a valuable resource not only for students on a four-year bachelor's degree path, but also for students pursuing a two-year associate degree or certificate programs in career and technical education. Foster youth are often unaware that financial aid is available for shorter-term, career-focused post-secondary pathways in addition to more traditional college programs. The strategies described in this document are relevant to students pursuing a range of post-secondary pathways and this is important to keep in mind when reviewing the suggested approaches.

For most forms of financial aid, the first step is completion of the FAFSA, or for students ineligible for federal financial aid, the CADAA. Studies have found that for very low-income students, FAFSA completion is associated with a 127% increase in immediate college enrollment.³ For these students, financial aid is key not only to college enrollment but also to college success. A 2017 report found that 47 percent of California community college students who were low-income and received more than \$7,500 in financial aid graduated from college or transferred from a 2-year to 4-year institution, compared to 17 percent of those who received between \$1,001 and \$2,500.⁴

The low rate of financial aid attainment speaks to the fact that foster youth are not receiving the support they need to complete the required steps necessary to receive most forms of financial aid. Although there are numerous partner organizations that can play a role to help foster youth to complete a FAFSA/CADAA, including high school counselors, Independent Living Programs (ILP) and college support programs, historically there has not been an entity identified to coordinate FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts regionally.

When JBAY launched the California Foster Youth FAFSA Challenge, the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCP), housed within each county's office of education, were the obvious partners to facilitate this coordination. FYSCPs interface with school districts, child welfare and probation agencies, and community partners to coordinate educational support services for foster youth in their county. Further, they are tasked with coordinating support for college matriculation for foster youth and ensuring that foster youth pupils access programs that support their matriculation needs.

As a local educational agency (LEA), FYSCPs also have access to the systems that maintain student-level data such as the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), Foster Focus, and WebGrants that can be used to track FAFSA/CADAA completion. FYSCPs were recruited to participate in this effort, beginning with the 2017/2018 academic year, and 52 of California's 58 counties have opted to participate in the current year. All but one of the non-participating counties are very small counties with few high school seniors in foster care.

During the duration of the campaign, JBAY has provided ongoing technical assistance, including webinars and in-person training, to support FYSCPs in this effort.

³ National College Access Network, National FAFSA Completion Rates for High School Seniors and Graduates. <https://www.ncan.org/page/NationalFAFSACompletionRatesforHighSchoolSeniorsandGraduates> accessed on February 10, 2020.

⁴ The Institute for College Access and Success, *Aiding Success: The Role of Federal and State Financial Aid in Supporting California Community College Students* (2017).

OUTCOMES

The rate of FAFSA/CADAA completion among high school seniors in foster care in 2017/2018, the first year of the FAFSA Challenge, was 45 percent, a rate lower than that of other high school seniors, which was 56 percent. Given that the FAFSA Challenge was in place during 2017/2018, it is likely that completion rates for foster youth were even lower prior to this year. As a result of the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge, the completion rate increased to 57 percent in 2018/2019. County participation also increased from 42 counties in 2017/2018 to 52 counties in 2019/2020. Counties with the highest rates of FAFSA/CADAA completion each year were recognized by JBAY and received awards for their achievements.



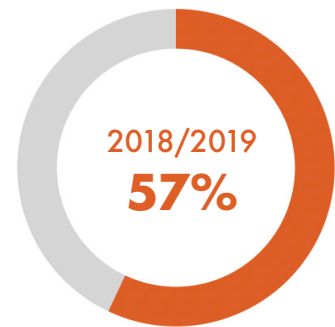
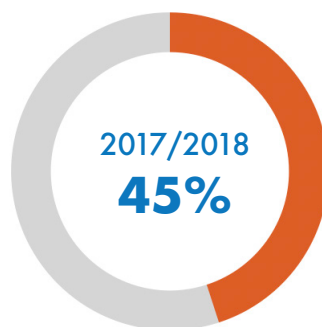
NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING COUNTIES



FAFSAS COMPLETED AS OF MAY 31



PERCENTAGE COMPLETION AS OF MAY 31



FAFSA CHALLENGE WINNERS



2017/2018

Large Counties:
Orange, San Diego

Medium Counties:
Fresno

Small Counties:
Sonoma

Very Small Counties:
Yuba, Shasta

2018/2019

Large Counties:
San Bernardino, Riverside

Medium Counties:
Fresno

Small Counties:
Tulare, Kings

Very Small Counties:
Nevada, Mariposa

Most Improved:
Tulare, Los Angeles ★

THE ROLE OF WEBGRANTS

Essential to the success of the FAFSA Challenge was the FYSCPs gaining access to the WebGrants system. WebGrants is an online portal available on the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) website that allows both students and education professionals to access student-level data related to financial aid. The WebGrants system allows authorized FYSCP staff members to review a variety of reports that indicate which students in their county have successfully completed a FAFSA/CADAA as well as whether the FAFSA/CADAA was matched to a high school GPA for the purposes of CalGrant eligibility. Utilization of WebGrants allowed FYSCPs to provide targeted outreach to students and support robust collaboration with stakeholders in child welfare and probation agencies, high schools, local colleges and universities, and community-based organizations.

RELEVANT LAWS

The Local Control Funding Formula (2013) overhauled the way California’s public K-12 schools are funded including new provisions related to foster youth. LEAs must document in Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP) strategies to support foster youth educational success and must report data specific to this subpopulation.

AB 854 (2015) redefined the role of the Foster Youth Services Program to focus on coordination of services for foster youth and ensuring that local educational agencies are providing services to foster youth pupils. Included is responsibility for coordination with local postsecondary educational institutions, to ensure foster youth pupils meet admission requirements and access programs that support their matriculation needs.

SB 12 (2018) requires social workers and probation offices to identify in the case plan of all foster youth aged 16 or older who will support the student with applications for college and financial aid.

AB 2015 (2018) requires, commencing with the 2020–21 school year, school districts to ensure that each of its pupils receives information on how to properly complete and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application, at least once before the pupil enters grade 12.



BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the rate of FAFSA/CADAA completion among foster youth in California, local educational agencies and child welfare and probation partners must identify opportunities to cultivate and forge new relationships and to strengthen communication and collaboration. There are a variety of approaches that can be used to increase rates of FAFSA/CADAA completion among foster youth, depending on the needs of each individual community. As these practices are put in place, institutionalization of these efforts is then crucial to ensure that this vital work continues into the future. During the FAFSA Challenge, a number of best practices were developed by FYSCPs and their partners. This publication documents these practices in order to inform FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts in the years to come.

The outcomes over the past two years have clearly demonstrated that increasing FAFSA/CADAA completion rates among foster youth is possible when partners work together towards a common goal. The recommendations and strategies described below comprise a range of approaches that can be adopted not only by FYSCPs but also school districts, child welfare and probation agencies, state institutions, and other community-based partners.



1. Ensure that all foster youth in twelfth grade have been accurately identified by FYSCPs and school districts at the start of the academic year and that foster youth new to a county or district during the course of the school year are also identified.

The first step to a successful FAFSA/CADAA completion effort is knowing who the foster youth are. While inaccuracies exist in the systems available to identify foster youth, they nonetheless provide a helpful starting place. The CALPADS system matches school enrollment data with child welfare data and allows FYSCPs and districts to generate a list of foster youth enrolled in school in their county or districts. With this list as a starting point, FYSCPs and districts can work directly with their local child welfare and probation agencies to improve the accuracy of these lists.

The Foster Focus system, a tool to help FYSCPs further manage their data, can also be used by FYSCPs to more easily track and manage foster youth data. Foster Focus offers a unique report, the Higher Ed Checklist, specifically to support FYSCPs with tracking FAFSA/CADAA completion and other key financial aid milestones. Districts can access the Foster Focus system as well through the local agency acting as the system administrator, typically the County Office of Education.

Because foster youth experience high rates of mobility due to placement changes, it is important that FYSCPs and districts update their lists regularly to reflect students who have entered or exited the foster care system entirely or the county. For the purposes of the FAFSA challenge, JBAY developed a tool to track foster youth movement within the county and easily track completion rates (jbaforyouth.org/fafsatools). FYSCPs and districts without access to Foster Focus should use this tool or something similar to update their lists a minimum of once a month to ensure in particular that new foster youth who enter the county or district are captured.

2. Ensure that foster youth attending non-traditional school settings are included in efforts to track FAFSA/CADAA completion.

During the course of the FAFSA Challenge, at times, professionals from a variety of settings expressed the belief that college was not a realistic pathway for students in certain types of educational settings, such as alternative schools, probation schools, and non-public schools. This belief extended in particular to students with disabilities. This belief is in fact unfounded, as many students in non-traditional schools and/or students with disabilities go on to be successful college students. In California, post-secondary systems offer a variety of pathways including bachelor's and associate degree pathways as well as career and technical education (CTE) programs. Students enrolled in many CTE programs can qualify for financial aid and ignoring students who may not be pursuing a traditional post-secondary route in FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts does them a tremendous disservice.



College campuses also offer support services that can support these students to be successful in college. Students with a verified disability can enroll in Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS). Students participating in DSPS can receive specialized services such as additional counseling support, access to note takers, additional test-taking time, assistive technology and other accommodations to help them through their courses. Many California community colleges also offer adaptive courses specifically targeting

students with disabilities that offer modified curricula in a variety of topics from physical education to basic English and math. Students may also qualify to participate in educational support programs at the college, such as the Extended Opportunities and Programs and Services (EOPS) or the NextUp program, which offer a range of resources for students who need additional support to be successful.

Another common misconception is that foster youth who do not graduate with a high school diploma or obtain a GED are either ineligible to attend college or are not eligible for any financial aid and therefore are unlikely to succeed in college. Students not on track to receive a diploma are sometimes also excluded from FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts. In fact, youth are not required to have a high school diploma or GED in order to attend community college and these students, while not eligible for many forms of financial aid, are still eligible for the Chafee Grant, an award of up to \$5,000, and the California College Promise Grant fee waiver. Students with a GED qualify for all the same forms of financial aid as students with a diploma.

3. Ensure that foster youth have access to the CalGrant program by verifying that LEAs have submitted high school GPA verification.

The CalGrant is a state-funded program that provides grant funds to low-income California residents to pay both tuition and non-tuition costs for students attending both community colleges and universities. When all of the steps required to qualify for a CalGrant are not completed, foster youth can lose out on potentially thousands of dollars towards higher education costs. Students attending a California State University or University of California campus can receive a grant that pays the full cost of tuition, and both university and community college students can receive up to \$1,656 per year for non-tuition costs such as rent and textbooks. As of the 2019/2020 academic year, parenting students across all systems became eligible for awards of up to \$6,000 for non-tuition costs, making the CalGrant an even more essential resource for these students. As two thirds of women and half of men with experience in foster care have at least one child by age 24, this new benefit can make college possible for many parenting foster youth for whom college would have previously been unaffordable.⁵

Great strides have been made in the state of California towards ensuring that foster youth have access to these monies. In 2018, California adopted new standards for eligibility for foster youth that expand the time frame during which foster can qualify for a CalGrant and the duration of the availability of the grant. In order for a student newly entering college to qualify, however, they must demonstrate a minimum high school GPA of 2.0. Most high schools are required by law to electronically upload each student's GPA in October of the student's twelfth-grade year and again at the end of the academic school year into a centralized statewide database known as WebGrants. The WebGrants system then matches the student's uploaded GPA to a submitted FAFSA/CADAA to determine whether the student meets CalGrant eligibility.

Foster youth, on average, are significantly more mobile than students not in the foster care system. Studies have found that foster youth are four times more likely to change schools during the school year than other students.⁶ As a result, the high school that uploads GPA data in October is often not the same high school that a student lists on their FAFSA/CADAA several months later, leading to a failure in the data matching process. When this match is not successful through the automated system, unless manually corrected, the student is deemed ineligible for a CalGrant, causing them to lose out on thousands of dollars of potential financial aid.

There are a number of different partners who can play a role in ensuring that foster youth GPAs are matched to their FAFSAs/CADAA. FYSCP staff can verify if there has been a successful GPA match in WebGrants. If WebGrants indicates that a GPA is not uploaded for the student, the FYSCP should alert the appropriate school site personnel. Districts also have access to the WebGrants system. School counselors, administrators, and AB490 liaisons can monitor whether the match has been successful and provide manual corrections as needed in WebGrants or support students to update the high school information in their FAFSA/CADAA. Corrections in WebGrants can often be done electronically or if necessary, by submitting the paper GPA verification form available on the CSAC website (csac.ca.gov/student-forms-0).

⁵ Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2009) *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁶ Barrat, V. X., & Berliner, B. (2013). *The Invisible Achievement Gap, Part 1: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*. San Francisco: WestEd.

4. Pay special attention to ensuring that foster youth attending non-traditional school settings can be monitored for FAFSA/CADAA completion and have access to the CalGrant.

During the FAFSA Challenge, many counties struggled with obtaining data regarding students in non-traditional school settings, such as alternative education settings, probation schools, charter schools and non-public schools. In some cases, administrative hurdles prevented FYSCPs from gaining access to information in WebGrants about students attending non-traditional schools. FYSCPs should work with CSAC to troubleshoot barriers in order to gain access to all accredited schools in their county.

In other cases, student information was not available because the WebGrants system only allows accredited schools to upload data, and some non-traditional school settings are unaccredited. Consequently, partners monitoring FAFSA/CADAA completion were unable to identify the students who attend these schools who have not completed a FAFSA/CADAA. Monitoring FAFSA/CADAA completion for these youth may pose a challenge as the information will not be available on the WebGrants system.

For these students, FAFSA/CADAA completion must be verified manually. Adult supporters providing FAFSA/CADAA completion support to youth can provide a copy of the youth's FAFSA/CADAA confirmation report to the FYSCP or school district administrator monitoring FAFSA/CADAA completion. Students can also sign-up for a free WebGrants 4 Students account online (mygrantinfo.csac.ca.gov). WebGrants 4 Students is a free resource provided by CSAC that allows students to track the FAFSA/CADAA matching and awarding process for state aid including the CalGrant and Chafee grant. Adult supporters can help students request the FAFSA/CADAA completion confirmation from the student's WebGrants 4 Students account to verify FAFSA/CADAA completion and provide it to the FYSCP or district.

As previously mentioned, most schools in California are required to electronically submit GPAs for their enrolled twelfth-grade students through the WebGrants system, and this GPA verification is necessary for a student to qualify for a CalGrant. If a school is not uploading information into WebGrants, these students are largely disqualified from state financial aid, unless the student proactively submits a paper GPA verification form (or in the case of a non-accredited school, SAT or ACT test scores). It is therefore vital that all accredited schools, including non-traditional settings, gain access to the WebGrants system (if they do not already have such access) and submit GPA verification for all twelfth-grade students, regardless of whether they are legally required to do so.



SPOTLIGHT

In Los Angeles County, during the first year of the FAFSA Challenge, it became apparent that the FYSCP did not have access to information about many students who were enrolled in charters and LACOE's Probation schools. These schools represented a significant number of students and the FYSCP worked closely with CSAC to determine each missing school and troubleshoot why the information was unavailable. In most cases, either the schools were missing from the FYSCP access due to administrative errors or the schools were not participating in WebGrants at all. The partners worked together to address any errors and add schools to the WebGrants system as necessary. This joint effort not only enabled the FYSCP and schools to track FAFSA/CADAA completion information, but also to ensure that student GPAs appeared, enabling students to qualify for CalGrants.

5. Execute data sharing agreements between FYSCPs, school districts and child welfare partners.

Verifying FAFSA/CADAA completion through the WebGrants system allows FYSCPs to provide accurate updates to stakeholders such as districts and child welfare partners. Providing regular updates to districts, schools, child welfare agencies, ILPs, and probation agencies allows them to provide targeted outreach to those students who have not yet completed a FAFSA/CADAA. Data downloaded from the WebGrants system can provide detailed information, including the status of FAFSA/CADAA completion and GPA verification, as well as whether there were FAFSA/CADAA submission errors.

Data sharing protocols can vary from county to county. County offices and districts can work with their local child welfare and probation agencies to develop a secure data sharing protocol to share student-level data between the agencies. Data sharing protocols between partners should include a regular data sharing schedule of at least once a month, beginning when the FAFSA/CADAA opens each year on October 1. Once districts have FAFSA/CADAA completion data, they can direct school counselors to support these students with FAFSA/CADAA completion. Child welfare and probation partners can follow up with adult supporters for youth on their caseloads regarding FAFSA/CADAA completion as well as engage with ILP to target outreach to students in need of support to complete a FAFSA/CADAA.



SPOTLIGHT

San Diego County has a number of community-based organizations dedicated to providing resources and services to college-bound foster youth. In the past, youth were often told about these services and expected to proactively reach out to these programs. FYSCPs discovered that foster youth were rarely successful reaching out to these programs without assistance. As a result, the FYSCP and the San Diego Department of Social Services created a “release of information” form that is distributed to the youth when they are told of a new service. When youth complete the form, their contact information is shared with the organization and a representative from the program contacts the youth or caregiver directly to share the resources and services their program can offer. A template release of information form can be found at jbaforyouth.org/fafsatools.

6. Leverage resources through collaboration.

As noted above, FYSCPs play a crucial role in FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts, by tracking FAFSA/CADAA completion status, sharing data with partners, and providing guidance regarding the specialized knowledge needed to support foster youth, in particular. FYSCPs, however, are limited in their capacity to provide direct student support, and so they must rely on other community partners to support this effort.

School counselors are a critical resource, as they have both access to students on-site at school campuses and expertise related to FAFSA/CADAA completion. New legislation passed in 2018 (Assembly Bill 2015) also requires schools districts, beginning in the 2020/2021 academic year, to ensure that each of its pupils receives information on how to properly complete and submit the FAFSA/CADAA, as appropriate, at least once before the pupil enters grade 12.



SPOTLIGHT

San Bernardino County FYSCP works collaboratively with the 33 school districts in the county to ensure high school counselors can adequately support foster youth to complete the FAFSA/CADAA. FYSCPs coordinate with districts and school sites to reserve dedicated time in school site computer labs where foster youth can complete the FAFSA/CADAA during school hours.

AB490 district liaisons and FYSCPs identify the youth at each school site and coordinate communication between school counselors and administrators to ensure each enrolled twelfth-grade foster youth has guidance to complete the FAFSA/CADAA. The FYSCPs are often on-site with the school counselors to provide additional support and answer child welfare-related questions. Since this practice has begun, school counselors and FYSCPs have noticed that youth who completed their financial aid applications tend to return to continue to get assistance on college applications, personal statements, and scholarship applications.

The Independent Living Program (ILP)

is a program operated through county child welfare agencies that can provide workshops, training, and benefits that assist foster youth to achieve self-sufficiency when they leave the child welfare system. The specific services available through ILP vary by county, but many ILP programs throughout the state host FAFSA/CADAA and college application workshops and provide one-on-one FAFSA/CADAA completion assistance. Some programs may provide transportation and incentives for attending and completing a FAFSA/CADAA and assist the youth to determine personal information, such as their social security number. During the FAFSA Challenge, many FYSCPs collaborated with their local ILP to support FAFSA/CADAA completion and informed school districts, caregivers, and other county partners about FAFSA/CADAA completion support available through ILPs.

Child welfare agencies and probation agencies

can engage social workers and probation officers to ensure that all students have an identified point person in the youth's case plan to assist students with financial aid applications, as required by Senate Bill 12. If a data sharing protocol has been

implemented between the FYSCP and child welfare and probations agencies, information regarding FAFSA/CADAA completion status can be shared with the social worker or probation officer so that they can initiate follow-up.

Local community colleges and universities can provide financial aid expertise and support on-site at their local feeder high schools. Each community college has a Foster Youth Success Initiative liaison, and many have comprehensive foster youth support programs that can provide assistance. John Burton Advocates for Youth maintains a contact list of foster youth campus support programs at cacollegepathways.org/find-campus-support-programs/find-campus-support-programs-for-foster-youth/


Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) are authorized by law to advocate on the youth's behalf. They have access to the youth's records, engage in regular communication with their assigned youth, and many are also educational rights holders. CASAs engage in regular training on foster care issues, rights, and child welfare processes. Many programs are also integrating training regarding post-secondary matriculation into their curriculum. Although not all youth are assigned a CASA, for those who are, CASAs are in a unique position to provide focused FAFSA/CADAA completion support, troubleshoot FAFSA/CADAA submission errors, and follow-up on additional required financial aid documentation.

7. Provide extensive technical assistance.

Technical assistance is a broad term used to describe the act of providing subject-matter expertise and assistance through the sharing of information, knowledge, skills, training or consultation, in order to build the capacity of partners to reach a shared goal. With the passage of AB 854 in 2015, the role of the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs shifted from one of direct service to one of coordination and technical assistance. As such, FYSCPs are ideally situated to play this role in relation to FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts, providing technical assistance to ensure that partners receive the necessary support to be successful in this effort. The strategies below can help FYSCPs to be most effective in their provision of technical assistance:

- **Establish buy-in as a technical assistance provider.**

FYSCPs are uniquely positioned to provide technical assistance due to their mandate as a coordinating body and their intersection with multiple partners. While FYSCPs do not have formal authority over partner organizations, such authority is not required to promote change and effectively provide technical assistance. Technical assistance providers can begin by establishing a shared vision and goals to align missions and build rapport. References to existing expectations for high school counselors can help frame the importance and relevance of financial aid completion efforts for foster youth. For example, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) describes helping students navigate the financial aid process as a core responsibility. Helping partners to understand the unique needs of foster youth and why these students require additional support can help to shift school counselors' perspective or allow them to justify prioritizing these students



SPOTLIGHT

Shasta County FYSCP, school counselors, and ILP caseworkers meet together during school hours with their twelfth-grade foster youth twice a semester. This meeting allows the youth to discuss their options after high school and allows stakeholders to address and complete outstanding items such as completing a FAFSA/CADAA or completing a college application.

When co-developing strategies for success, conversations can begin by utilizing a “how can I help?” approach. Technical assistance is not about directing partners what to do, but about serving alongside partners to reach a shared goal.

- **Provide targeted training to school district and community partners.** While many districts are familiar with the general college matriculation and financial aid processes, many are not familiar with the unique considerations and challenges that youth in the foster care system may face. It is important that direct-service practitioners have training related to targeted strategies to address these unique considerations and the various benefits available to youth with experience in the foster care system. Often, foster youth miss out on critical resources and financial aid simply because they were not made aware of opportunities.

FYSCPs can provide or coordinate targeted training to district Foster Youth Liaisons (AB 490 Liaisons) and high school counselors, as well as community partners, such as CASA's, Resource Parents or Independent Living Program staff. Training can either be provided in-person or remotely via webinar depending on the needs of stakeholders. Campus-based foster youth support programs and FYSI liaisons from local colleges can be leveraged to assist with training opportunities.

It is recommended that training opportunities targeted to those working in districts also include information about how to create a WebGrants account, access FAFSA/CADAA completion data, and confirm a successful GPA match. In particular, non-traditional schools, such as non-public schools or charter schools, may not be as familiar with the WebGrants process and may benefit from training on how to utilize these systems.

- **Provide toolkits and quick reference materials.** Navigating the college matriculation process can often feel overwhelming, even for adult supporters and professionals in the field. Providing quick reference guides and toolkits for both youth and adult supporters can help to make the content feel more manageable. These resources can include JBAY’s Financial Aid Guide for California Foster Youth and the companion Visual Guide. It is important that materials provided are appropriate for the specific target audience. In some cases, audience-specific resources are available, such as the High School Counselor Toolkit.

SPOTLIGHT ON RESOURCES



Watch a webinar training:

JBAY’s webinar, *Completing the FAFSA: A How-To Guide for Assisting California Foster Youth*, can be found at: www.jbaforyouth.org/fafsatools



Provide a training:

JBAY has created a PowerPoint deck that can be downloaded and modified as necessary to provide training. The full in-person training lasts three hours and includes information on the FAFSA/CADAA, as well as information about matriculation steps and resources available to foster youth: www.jbaforyouth.org/fafsatools

Child welfare and probation departments can train caregivers, including Resource Parents and Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTP’s) with this *Turning Dreams into Degrees* curriculum: <https://www.jbaforyouth.org/training-curricula/>



Share toolkits and reference guides. The resources below are available at www.jbaforyouth.org/fafsatools:

- High School Counselor Foster Youth FAFSA Toolkit
- Financial Aid Guide for California Foster Youth
- FAFSA Visual Guide
- Foster Youth Educational Planning Guide
- FAFSA posters and stickers

- **Distribute promotional materials.** FAFSA/CADAA awareness posters that target foster youth and FAFSA/CADAA completion stickers can be distributed to districts and partners to encourage and motivate youth. These materials are available for download from JBAY at jbaforyouth.org/fafsatools/.
- **Use outcome data to drive technical assistance.** Data can be a powerful tool that FYSCPs can use to initiate a conversation and inform planning. For example, data can help FYSCPs pinpoint which districts need additional support to increase FAFSA/CADAA completion among foster youth. Data can also be provided to child welfare and probation agencies, so that social workers can include information about resources for FAFSA/CADAA completion during monthly home visits. Tracking rates over time can help FYSCPs to gauge whether efforts within the county are effective. FYSCPs can consider looking at not only FAFSA/CADAA completion data, but other relevant data points, such as college enrollment data. College enrollment data for foster youth, aggregated by county, district and school is now available through DataQuest (hdq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest), an online and public data dashboard created by the California Department of Education. These data points can be used to help identify strategies and inform how to best target resources to specific districts and schools.

8. Provide high-touch assistance to foster youth with the financial aid process.

Due to no fault of their own, youth in the foster care system often lack a consistent and positive adult mentor. In most schools, these youth make up a very small percentage of the student population and can easily fall through the cracks. As a result of the unique challenges and trauma that youth in the foster care system often experience, high-touch assistance is helpful to support these students to reach their postsecondary educational goals. For those partners engaging in direct work with students, the strategies below can be used to successfully support youth with the financial aid application process.

- **Connect foster youth to individualized one-on-one support whenever possible.** Given both the unique needs of foster youth and the specific considerations that foster youth need to be aware of, high-touch individualized assistance can be more effective than completing the FAFSA/CADAA in a group setting. Foster youth students frequently do not receive adequate support when connected to large scale college events or financial aid workshops that don't cater to their unique needs.

Applying for financial aid can often feel overwhelming and intimidating; individualized support can also assist students in maintaining their motivation to complete and persist through the arduous process. Some students may not feel comfortable asking questions or self-identifying as a foster youth when in a group setting with their non-foster youth peers. Individualized assistance helps protect their confidentiality and creates a safe and supportive environment to complete the process.



SPOTLIGHT

Kern County FYSCP utilizes peer ambassadors to engage youth in meaningful conversations about their college and career plans and support FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts at school sites. The ambassadors are current or former members of the Youth Empowerment Success program (YES!) located at six schools in Kern County. Ambassadors are trained and mentored by their school site counselor or social worker and provide one-on-one direct support to foster youth in their schools.

- **Use Peer Ambassadors to support high school students to complete the FAFSA/CADAA.** Students are often more receptive to peers than professionals. Training youth with experience in foster care on FAFSA/CADAA completion can create opportunities for providing support beyond that available from professionals. In some cases, programs that subsidize the cost of hiring young people, such as Americorps, can help to bring these resources to FYSCPs, school districts, ILPs or community-based organizations at little to no cost. Organizations such as iFoster and the Child Abuse Prevention Center have created programs that employ hundreds of foster youth through Americorps to work as peer supporters to other foster youth.
- **Be aware of the challenges of group events.** Providing individualized assistance may not always be possible when there are limited resources, however, FYSCPs have found that workshops provided outside of school hours often require intensive outreach and have low turnout due to challenges such as transportation and scheduling conflicts. Workshops are most effective when sponsors engage in multiple outreach strategies and offer intensive follow-up, transportation, snacks, student-friendly hours, and adequate computer and internet access.

Many counties have also found success with workshops embedded into other college events or tours targeted to youth in the foster care system. FAFSA/CADAA workshops can be hosted at a centralized school location during school hours with other students transported from neighboring schools, or as part of a planned field trip to a local college. Community partners, such as ILP or a local community college foster youth campus support program, can be leveraged to provide this assistance directly on a high school campus. If part of a field trip, these events can be paired with a college tour or other college matriculation activities. With advanced planning, transportation can be provided by the district or caregivers.



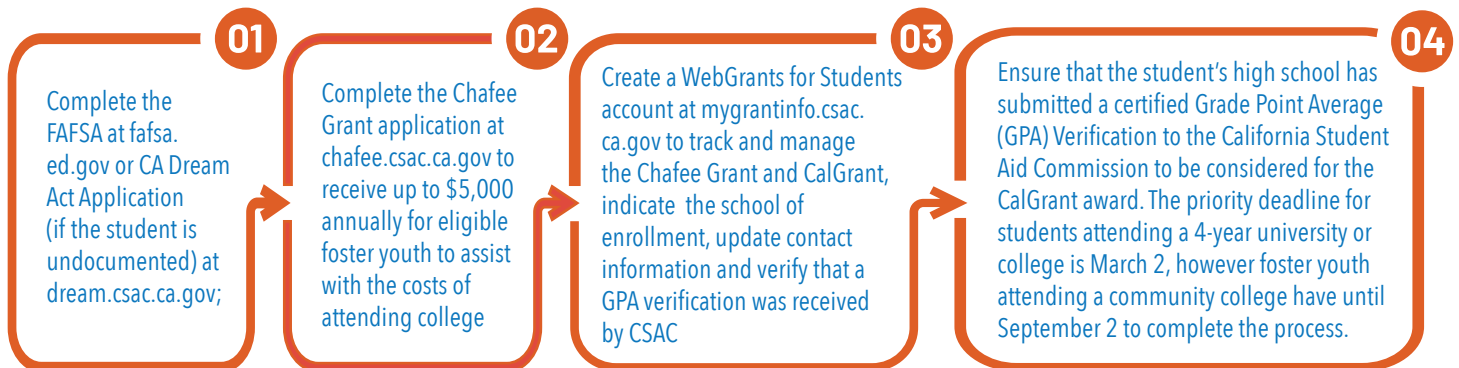
SPOTLIGHT

For the past 12 years, Fresno County FYSCP, in collaboration with child welfare and probation, school districts, group homes, local community colleges, and community-based organizations, hosts an annual all-day “Access to Higher Education” event at Fresno City College. Foster youth across the county are exposed to a variety of programming, including hands-on demonstrations from various campus departments to discussions with representatives from campus support programs sharing the services they can offer to the youth once they attend their colleges. Youth also participate in “extreme registration.”

During “extreme registration,” representatives from each local community college assist students with completing college applications. Students also receive an orientation, meet with an academic counselor to complete their student education plan, and work with financial aid staff to finish pending financial aid items. Before the event, the FYSCP works with each district and child welfare and probation agencies to ensure the youth complete the FAFSA/CADAA and Chafee application.

If an agency decides to offer group workshops, it is important that students are prepared in advance with the necessary information needed to complete their applications in the most productive manner possible. In particular, students must have access to their social security number, which may need to be obtained from the student's social worker, probation officer or Independent Living Program. FYSCPs and districts can partner with their local ILP to ensure that students have access to their social security number during a workshop. For example, ILP workers can be on-site during an event with a laptop to look up social security numbers and review Chafee Grant eligibility.

- **Prepare students in advance to bring what they need to fill out their FAFSA/CADAA. Use a checklist such as the one below.**
 - Name, exactly as it appears on their Social Security Card.
 - Social Security Number or Alien Registration Number, if applicable.
 - Statewide Student Identifier number (SSID) - Needed for CADAA applicants only.
 - Email address that they can check regularly.
 - List of up to 10 schools to which they want to apply.
 - Tax information (if they filed a tax return) or information about the income that they earned or received for the requested year. Note that students may be able to use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) to transfer income and tax information from a federal income tax return into the FAFSA.
- **Reinforce that filling out a financial aid application is a four-part process.** In order for students to receive the maximum financial aid, it is important that they receive assistance to complete the following four-step process:



These four steps typically take students one hour to complete if they have all the necessary information. It is important that adequate time is allocated to complete not just the FAFSA/CADAA, but the other steps as well.

- Educate students that filling out the financial aid application is just the first step. The Financial Aid Guide for California Foster Youth provides detailed steps on what to do "after the FAFSA" and how to successfully maintain financial aid once it is awarded. Thirty percent of all students will be flagged to provide additional verification or documentation after completing their FAFSA/CADAA application, so it is important that students are informed to check their email, mail and WebGrants portal regularly, respond to any requests in a timely manner, and seek help with responding to requests when needed.

- Utilize the FAFSA/CADAA as an opportunity to have a conversation about the student's future. Applying for financial aid is more than just filling out an application. Applying for financial aid can be used as an opportunity to inspire, provide hope, and help students focus their career goals. Many students, in addition to being involved in the foster care system, are first-generation college students who lack college-educated mentors. Attending college may not be a pathway that they have ever explored or thought possible. They may not understand the breadth of options available for career and technical education pathways at community colleges. For some students, they may think that they can't afford to go to college or are not "college material" due to the trauma and abuse they have experienced. Applying for financial aid can create an opportunity to discuss their future and their potential.



SPOTLIGHT

In January 2020, Riverside FYSCP organized a college and career event with school districts, child welfare, local colleges, and county agencies. The youth received one-on-one assistance to complete the FAFSA/CADAA and Chafee grant application. They also attended a college and career fair, met with local businesses to discuss job opportunities, and discussed services available to support independent living after high school.

9. Institutionalize efforts within FYSCPs.

The efforts undertaken by FYSCPs over the past two years to increase rates of FAFSA/CADAA completion have been impressive, and the outcomes show the positive results that emerge from focused attention on an issue. It is crucial, however, that these efforts be institutionalized within COEs so that this work continues as staffing changes occur or priorities shift. While in the short term having individual champions for this effort is enormously helpful, over the long term, buy-in from administrators and policy-making bodies is key along with documented policies outlining expectations.

Messaging from institutional leaders. Formal letters of support from institutional leaders, such as a COE Superintendent, can help promote the significance of FAFSA/CADAA completion and set the tone about the urgency and importance of financial aid attainment for youth in the foster care system. Messaging from a COE superintendent to school district superintendents can help counselors and staff providing direct student support feel supported in their efforts as well.

Boards of Education: COE's can present to their Board of Education as one strategy to gain institutional support for efforts within the FYSCP program. Presentations can include information about past achievements, future goals, or support needed from the Board to maintain a high rate of FAFSA/CADAA completion. This can also be an opportunity to highlight the roles of other collaborative partners.

Codify efforts to achieve long-term institutional change. Priorities within a COE can fluctuate due to a variety of factors. COEs should codify their existing efforts permanently within their institutions to help ensure long-term implementation of financial aid application assistance for youth in the foster care system. This process can occur by updating internal policies and procedures to embed protocols related to financial aid completion efforts. Updating job descriptions to ensure that the work continues across internal staffing changes is also important.

Highlight successes: FYSCPs can elevate their accomplishments not only by presenting to their Board of Education as described above, but also through internal newsletters, garnering media attention and presenting about achievements at stakeholder meetings. Examples of media coverage obtained by FYSCPs for their FAFSA Challenge efforts can be found at www.jbaforyouth.org/fafsachallenge/.

10. Institutionalize efforts within school districts and child welfare departments.

While day-to-day collaboration with many different community partners is essential, school district, county child welfare and juvenile probation partners are at the core of this network. California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) specifically requires districts and other Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to address the needs of students in the foster care system and to detail these strategies in their Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). Child welfare and probation agencies also have legal responsibilities related to college matriculation. Child welfare social workers and probation officers must identify in the case plan of any youth aged 16 or older the specific person who will support that youth with applications for college and financial aid.

Local districts may have systems in place to support FAFSA/CADAA completion but may not have foster youth specifically on their radar and may not understand the nuances of supporting this population. Child welfare agencies are focused on the foster youth population but may not have an awareness of the importance of financial aid access to a youth’s long-term prospects and quality of life. FYSCPs are key to bringing these partners together to ensure engagement by all sectors and that efforts are coordinated.

Develop support among key leaders.

Institutional change can be influenced through continual and persistent engagement with key leaders within LEAs, child welfare agencies, and probation agencies. School superintendents, and directors of child welfare and probation departments can also support these efforts by sending supportive messaging to their staff to underscore the importance of the FAFSA/CADAA completion among foster youth. These messages can include relevant resources, checklists and toolkits and emphasize the importance of collaboration across systems.



SPOTLIGHT

In 2018, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a motion to facilitate enhanced support for postsecondary educational attainment for foster youth. This included activities such as developing strategies to improve financial aid application rates and directing the county’s child welfare and probation agencies to coordinate with the FYSCP to participate in the FAFSA Challenge. The full text of the board motion can be found at <http://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/bos/supdocs/126946.pdf>

Utilize policy-making bodies. Local Boards of Education and County Boards of Supervisors can also be leveraged to help direct departments and resources and codify existing efforts related to postsecondary educational support. For example, a motion issued by a County’s Board of Supervisors can formally direct county departments, such as child welfare and probation, to collaborate with other partners, distribute materials, align strategies or promote general awareness about the FAFSA/CADAA completion efforts. In order to move a board motion forward, it can be helpful to first identify one or two board members with a particular interest in this population or college access issues more broadly who can champion the effort.

Leverage existing regional meetings to set FAFSA/CADAA completion as a priority.

Establishing new planning meetings and workgroups can be difficult within systems that are often overburdened and under resourced. Where existing collaborative groups exist, these groups can be leveraged to discuss financial aid and other strategies to support successful transitions to college. While each county is unique in their structure, existing meetings across K-12 districts and child welfare should be explored as opportunities to set college matriculation as a priority.

Align with existing school district priorities to gain buy-in.

COEs can leverage existing Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP), the completion of which is required by all local educational agencies (LEAs) and is used to set goals, plan actions, and leverage resources to improve student outcomes. Providing FAFSA/CADAA completion assistance is a concrete activity that districts can include in their plan to improve the educational outcomes for their students involved in the foster care system.

Districts are required to identify in their LCAPs the strategies that will be used to support educational success for three identified populations, one of which is foster youth (the other two being low-income students and English language learners). FAFSA/CADAA assistance can be viewed as a means to help them reach the goals within their LCAP. As noted previously, districts will also have new responsibilities related to AB 2015, which requires school districts, beginning in the 2020/2021 academic year, to ensure that each of its pupils receives information about how to properly complete and submit the FAFSA/CADAA.

Utilize the requirements enacted through SB 12 to gain buy-in among child welfare and probation agencies.

As noted previously, SB 12, enacted in 2018, requires social workers and probation offices to identify in the case plan of all foster youth aged 16 or older who will support the student with applications for college and financial aid. This requirement can set the stage for conversations about the role of these agencies in supporting FAFSA/CADAA completion.

Codify efforts to achieve long-term institutional change.

Similar to COEs, priorities within districts and partnering departments can often vary over time. Codification of practices within formal policy guidance, policy manuals, and job descriptions is an essential component of the longevity of this work.



SPOTLIGHTS

- San Luis Obispo County includes college matriculation as an agenda item at general counselor meetings.
- San Bernardino County has “higher education and transitions to college” as a standing agenda item on all monthly regional meetings.
- Kern County promotes college access at relevant meetings including their group home coalition meetings, Foster Family Agency (FFA) coalition meetings, AB 490 Liaison meetings, district LCAP Technical Assistance meetings, ILP staff meetings, and AB 12 (extended foster care) staff meetings.

SPOTLIGHT: LOS ANGELES COUNTY

How the nation's largest child welfare jurisdiction beat the odds for foster youth.

Los Angeles County has the largest foster youth population in the United States. The sheer numbers add a layer of complexity to any countywide effort, which is further complicated by the vast geography of the region and the challenges inherent in coordinating across multiple systems. In 2017-2018, just 33 percent of foster youth enrolled in their senior year of high school in the county completed a FAFSA/CADAA. Spurred by these poor outcomes, the county engaged in an effort to develop and implement new strategies and activities across the region. These efforts were extremely successful and 61 percent of Los Angeles County's 709 high school seniors (excluding students attending nonpublic schools) completed a FAFSA or CADAA. This was greater than the completion rate of only 58 percent for all high school seniors in the County. As a result of this 28-point increase, the County was awarded the statewide "most improved" designation.



There are many lessons that can be learned from Los Angeles' experience. Given the size and complexity of the county, replication of this effort should be more straightforward in a smaller county. The following activities were instrumental in this remarkable achievement.

- **County Board of Supervisors' Board Motion.** The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a board motion to direct LA County Probation and Child Welfare to participate in the Challenge and collaborate with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) to increase the rate of financial aid applications. In addition, this motion declared October "Foster Youth College Awareness Month" to promote the importance of postsecondary educational attainment for foster youth and direct County departments to distribute relevant materials, such as the Financial Aid Guide for California Foster Youth to stakeholders, staff and youth.
- **Collaboration across systems.** As a result of this Board Motion, leadership across LACOE, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Probation Department coordinated efforts to increase financial-aid application rates. Staff communicated regularly to discuss data and align strategies across the county. These efforts were reinforced by institutional leaders across departments who communicated the importance of the Challenge. For example, the LACOE Superintendent sent a unified message to all 82 school district superintendents to request their participation and the Director of DCFS sent a message to all staff county-wide.

- **Data-sharing.** Through CSAC’s WebGrants system, LACOE accessed FAFSA/CADAA data for individual foster and probation students. LACOE then created custom reports for each high school district on their system-involved seniors, plus weekly custom reports for DCFS and Probation. This approach allowed school counselors, social workers, probation officers, and others to strategically target students for individualized assistance in completing their applications or addressing any errors that could prohibit them from being awarded financial aid.
- **Leveraging school districts.** Los Angeles County is home to 82 districts. Unique strategies were developed for each district based on their size, location and availability of resources. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is not only the largest district within Los Angeles County, but it is also the largest district within the state. Given the size of their foster youth population, LAUSD received in-depth targeted training for their specialized foster youth counselors and developed a system to provide individual assistance to each youth with the FAFSA/CADAA. These efforts led to a 73% application completion rate for LAUSD, successfully serving 123 out of their 169 high school seniors in the foster care system.
- **FAFSA/CADAA workshops for one-on-one help.** LACOE hosted several foster youth-specific FAFSA/CADAA completion workshops across Los Angeles County, and DCFS and Probation also coordinated with community partners and districts to provide FAFSA/CADAA assistance and information about ILP benefits at countywide workshops. Rather than create stand-alone FAFSA/CADAA workshops, which have proven challenging at times to fill, LACOE leveraged other events and incorporated FAFSA/CADAA workshops within them. For example, Probation hosted a FAFSA/CADAA workshop as part of its annual College Summit that assisted 55 students to complete their applications, and DCFS hosted a workshop within its annual high school graduation celebration event that assisted 163 students.



11. Put structures in place within the WebGrants system to make access to foster youth data more streamlined for FYSCPs

While access to the WebGrants system was instrumental to efforts to track FAFSA/CADAA completion among twelfth grade foster youth, the system has also been cumbersome to use for this purpose. CSAC is currently engaged in a process to modernize the grant delivery system and so now is the ideal time to incorporate functionality that will support these efforts. During the 2019/2020 school year, CSAC created a pilot program that allows large counties to provide a list of students to CSAC and receive back a report from CSAC showing financial aid application status. Functionality that would allow all counties to produce such reports within WebGrants would be extremely valuable. These reports should include not only FAFSA/CADAA status but also whether the student's application was matched to a high school GPA and whether a Chafee application has been submitted and verified by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).



In addition, FYSCPs should have the ability to search for individual students by their name or Statewide Student Identifier (SSID) rather than only by school. Given the high rates of mobility among foster youth, having this search capacity would make it substantially easier to track information for these students.

As mentioned previously, CSAC should work with non-traditional schools to ensure GPA uploads are taking place. This is particularly crucial for foster youth, who are over-represented at these types of institutions.

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