



Policies & Procedures

Academic Year 2025-2026

THE CALIFORNIA FOSTER YOUTH FAFSA/CADAA CHALLENGE, led by John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) in partnership with the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCO), 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 they are accessing financial aid.

How The Campaign Works:

Local efforts are led by County Office of Education (COE) Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCP) in collaboration with local partners, including school districts, community-based organizations, child welfare and probation agencies, Independent Living Programs, and colleges. JBAY provides technical assistance, promotional materials, support for tracking FAFSA/CADAA completion, and other resources to FYSCPs to support them in this effort. FYSCPs taking the challenge will be recognized and celebrated throughout the campaign.

Campaign Goals:

The goal for 2025-26 is that at least **70%** of California's high school seniors in foster care complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA).



Background:

Every year, billions of dollars in federal financial aid go unused because eligible students do not complete the FAFSA. According to the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC), 74 percent of California's high school seniors in the class of 2023 completed the FAFSA or CADAA, but the challenging FAFSA rollout contributed to a drop to 64 percent in 2024. A slight increase was achieved in 2025 at 66 percent, but impacts were felt both years.

Historically, students in foster care have completed financial aid applications at a rate much lower than that of other high school seniors. 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, the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge brought attention to the widespread disparities youth in foster care face and the critical importance that foster youth have the same access to financial aid as their peers. As a result of the FAFSA/CADAA challenge, the completion rate among high school seniors in foster care increased from 45 percent in 2017-18 to 61 percent in 2024-25.

Successful completion of the FAFSA/CADAA is the single most important step in ensuring students in foster care receive financial aid and subsequently enroll and persist in college, including career and technical education programs provided by California's 115 community colleges. **Data shows that 90 percent of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA enroll in college within 12 months, compared to just 45 percent of high school seniors who do not complete the FAFSA.** A February 2017 report on community college students in California found that 47 percent of students with a zero-expected family contribution who 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 only received between \$1,001 and \$2,500.

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Partners:

The lead state agency partnering with JBAY on the California Foster Youth FAFSA/CADAA Challenge is the California Department of Education's Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP), a statewide program charged in state law with preparing foster youth for postsecondary education. This legislative mandate, established in 2016 with the passage of Assembly Bill 854, charges each of the 58 county FYSCPs to prepare foster youth for postsecondary education. Other partners include the California Community College Chancellor's Office and various local government agencies, school districts, and community-based organizations who directly support high school seniors in foster care with completing the FAFSA or CADAA.

The role of county FYSCPs in relation to FAFSA completion has been codified through SB 860, a legislative initiative that institutionalizes the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge by clarifying the role of FYSCPs to include coordination of FAFSA completion efforts. SB 860 was signed by Governor Newsom on September 28, 2020, and went into effect on January 1, 2021. JBAY worked closely with the California Department of Education to create guidance to support implementation that can be found [HERE](#).

How to Register:

Registration is open to FYSCPs only. FYSCPs can join the challenge by completing a short registration form that can be found [HERE](#). Partner organizations wanting to support the effort can use this same link to provide their contact information, and JBAY will connect them with their local county contact.

The deadline to register is September 26, 2025, however FYSCPs are encouraged to register as early as possible. Information requested in order to register includes:

- Name of the FYSCP point persons who will be JBAY's primary and secondary contact for the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge.
- Number of qualified high school seniors attending school in the county for the 2025-26 academic year (see the **"Determining the Baseline"** section for additional information on how to calculate this number).

Participating Counties Receive:

- [Free promotional materials](#) to communicate the importance of filing the FAFSA or CADAA, highlight things to know when completing the form, and remind students of key deadlines.
- **Access to free printed copies of JBAY's new Financial Aid Guide for California Foster and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth including a Spanish language version.** The number of copies made available will depend on the number of high school seniors reported. The Financial Aid Guide is [available online](#) for free download.
- **A chance to win up to \$1,000 in unrestricted program grant funds!** Winners will be selected in June 2026.
- **Technical Support**
 - Access to webinars on FAFSA/CADAA-related topics.
 - Phone and e-mail support for technical questions about the FAFSA/CADAA. In most cases, responses will be provided to questions within one business day.
 - One-on-one support via phone, e-mail, video conference and in-person meetings with developing a local campaign and tracking FAFSA/CADAA completion.



Determining the Baseline:

Upon registration, each FYSCP will be asked to provide the number of current 12th grade foster youth attending school in their county based on the information available in CALPADS. FYSCPs are requested to provide the number of 12th graders as indicated on their countywide [CALPADS 5.7 report](#), Foster Focus Financial Aid Checklist Report or other system used by the county.

All 12th graders should be included, regardless of credit count. While some 12th graders may not have enough credits to graduate, because it is administratively onerous for many counties to track this information on an ongoing basis, it is not practical for the Challenge to exclude these students from the count. Additional information regarding tracking students who enter or exit your county or foster care during the school year is included later in this document.

Who's included in the baseline?

Students attending school in the following settings are included in the baseline:

- traditional high schools
- non-public schools
- charter schools
- alternative education
- continuing education
- juvenile halls
- independent study

Non-diploma track and special education certificate of completion students are also included.

Finally, students in family maintenance and voluntary placements are also included in the baseline number.

JBAY recognizes that the number of 12th graders will change over the course of the year as students enter and exit counties. This baseline number is meant to provide JBAY with a general sense of the size of your county's eligible population.

Determining FAFSA/CADAA Completion:

FYSCPs can choose between two methods to determine FAFSA/CADAA completion using WebGrants, a database managed by CSAC. Both methods show which students have submitted a FAFSA or CADAA, which have not, which of these applications are complete, and which are incomplete. The information should then be matched to the cumulative list of foster youth (see template [HERE](#)) who are high school seniors within each county to determine the rate of FAFSA/CADAA completion overall. Note that all FAFSA/CADAA completions should be included regardless of whether the FAFSA/CADAA was completed before or after the FYSCP signed up for the challenge.

Information regarding FAFSA/CADAA completion is typically updated in WebGrants 5-7 business days after submission of the application. If a student completes the California Dream Act Application, information is updated in real time. WebGrants reports are updated every weekend.

- **Method 1:** The first method to verify FAFSA/CADAA completion requires a log-in credential. In order to request a log-in credential, FYSCPs should first determine if their COE already has a WebGrants administrator. COEs without an existing WebGrants administrator can contact JBAY for additional instructions or consult the WebGrants manual posted on the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge [webpage](#). Once a log-in credential has been obtained, FYSCPs can consult the WebGrants manual on the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge webpage or contact the JBAY support team for assistance with downloading the appropriate reports. The California Student Aid Commission also offers a user help line at schoolsupport@csac.ca.gov or (888) 294-0153.
- **Method 2:** The second method to verify FAFSA/CADAA completion does not require a log-in credential and instead utilizes a secure file transfer system that is connected but external to the WebGrants database. FYSCPs can contact research@csac.ca.gov to setup the secure file transfer system, which streamlines the verification process by enabling FYSCPs to upload a spreadsheet of their high school seniors and download a data-matched spreadsheet that indicates which students have submitted a FAFSA or CADAA. Additional instructions on using the secure file transfer system can be found on the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge [webpage](#).

WebGrants Verification:

It is required that FYSCPs utilize the WebGrants system as this will provide the most up-to-date and accurate information as well as be the easiest and most accessible method of tracking FAFSA/CADAA completion. If an FYSCP is unable to access WebGrants, please contact the JBAY team for additional guidance.

In the case of a student attending a non-accredited or non-public school whose information cannot be obtained through WebGrants, viewing the student's FAFSA or CADAA submission confirmation or Student Aid Report (SAR) is allowable, but only in these limited circumstances.

Student Outreach:

Based on the information obtained from WebGrants regarding which students have and have not completed the FAFSA/CADAA, FYSCPs should coordinate with other local partners, such as high school counselors and community colleges, to ensure direct support is provided to students who have not yet completed the FAFSA or CADAA.

During student outreach, it is also strongly encouraged that FYSCPs and partners assist students to ensure that their high school GPA has been uploaded to WebGrants by their high school, to submit a [Chafee Grant](#) application (if eligible) and to sign up for a student [WebGrants Account](#).

- **GPA Verification:** In order to qualify for a CalGrant, students must have a verified GPA submitted to CSAC. In most cases, this will be submitted electronically by their high school. It is important to verify that the information has been correctly submitted and matched to the student's FAFSA/CADAA. Consult the [WebGrants User Manual](#) for additional information.
- **Chafee Grant Application:** If the student was a dependent or ward of the court living in out-of-home foster care placement at least one day between the ages of 16 and 18 they may be eligible for \$5,000 a year for their post-secondary education.
- **WebGrants 4 Students Account:** This tool helps students manage the financial aid process including managing their state financial aid such as Cal Grant, Middle Class Scholarship, and/or Chafee accounts. Students can create a WebGrants for Students account at [mygrantinfo.csac.ca.gov](#) after their FAFSA/CADAA has successfully processed. It can take 1-2 weeks for a FAFSA to process and link to WebGrants.

Data Submission Dates:

Participating counties will submit periodic reports with FAFSA/CADAA completion rates to JBAY. Data will be submitted to JBAY two times:

Report Deadlines	Period
February 6, 2026	Cumulative report on those who submitted between October 1, 2025 and January 16, 2025
June 5, 2026	Cumulative report on those who submitted between October 1, 2025 and May 15, 2025 (end of the Challenge)

Important Reminder About “NO SAI”

If a student shows up in WebGrants as "No SAI," meaning the student has submitted the FAFSA/CADAA but the application contains errors that do not allow the FAFSA/CADAA to be processed or the Student Aid Index (SAI) to be determined, the application will **not** count toward the Challenge. JBAY strongly encourages FYSCPs to follow up with any student who is designated as "no SAI" to correct errors so these students can get financial aid.



Helpful Tip: Challenge participants are strongly encouraged to get as many students as possible to complete the FAFSA/CADAA by the priority deadline of March 2rd, 2026 to ensure access to the greatest amount of aid.

Steps to Tracking Entries and Exits of High School Seniors & FAFSA/CADAA Completion

JBAY recognizes that foster youth are a highly mobile population and that new students will enter your county during the course of the school year, and students who were included in the original baseline count may exit. Below are the steps that JBAY recommends that FYSCPs takes to track both entries and exits of high school seniors and FAFSA/CADAA completion.

We recommend using an internal spreadsheet to track both the total cumulative count for the year and to easily track which students require additional outreach. Because the CALPADS reports provide only a point-in-time snapshot, the protocol described below should be used to track entries and exits of students in order to provide accurate reports. A template of this spreadsheet is available [HERE](#).

If you utilize **Foster Focus**, the Financial Aid Checklist Report will automatically generate a cumulative list of seniors who have been attending school in your county for 30 days. The protocol described below is not necessary.

STEP 1: Baseline Students

Beginning October 1, 2025, FYSCPs should prepare a list of all high school seniors who are identified as attending school in their county. All 12th graders in foster care should be included, regardless of credit count (see **“Determining the Baseline”** on pg. 3 for additional information).

While some 12th graders may not have enough credits to graduate, it is administratively onerous for many counties to track this information on an ongoing basis. Therefore, it is not practical for the Challenge to exclude these students from the count.

Note: *If a student is in a charter school that is incorporated in one county but physically located in a different county, the county of incorporation does not need to include that student in the count.*

STEP 2: Student Name & Start Date

Those who are included on the initial list should be given a "start date" that corresponds to the date that the list was pulled. **For a detailed example see FIGURE 1.2 in the tracking Visual Guide below.**

STEP 3: FAFSA/CADAA Completion

As FAFSAs or CADAAAs are completed and verified through WebGrants, use the drop-down menu to indicate "YES" completion on the spreadsheet. **For a detailed example see FIGURE 1.3 in the tracking Visual Guide below.**

STEP 4: Student Exits

As students exit the county or foster care, an exit date should be recorded on the spreadsheet. The spreadsheet will automatically populate the number of days the student resided in the county and if they will be included in your Challenge *Total Foster Youth Count*. **For a detailed example see FIGURE 1.4 in the tracking Visual Guide below.**

STEP 5: Total Foster Youth Count

The internal tracking sheet will automatically populate individual students who are included in the *Total Foster Youth Count*.

The sheet will also calculate the cumulative *Total Foster Youth Count*. **For a detailed example see FIGURE 1.5 in the tracking Visual Guide below.**

The numbers reported to JBAY are a cumulative total of the number of students enrolled in your county for at least 30 cumulative days **on or after October 1, 2025.**

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

For a detailed student examples, see the "student examples" on page 7 in the tracking Visual Guide below.

- All eligible students enrolled in your county for at least 30 cumulative days *AFTER October 1st* must be included in your *Total Foster Youth Count* for a given reporting period.
- If a student has been enrolled in your county for **less than 30 days**, that student should not be included in the *Total Foster Youth Count* **except** if the youth completed a FAFSA/CADAA while in your county. (see [student examples](#) on page 7 for a visual explanation).
- If a student left your county **after** 30 cumulative days, the student is still included in your *Total Foster Youth Count* even if they did not complete a FAFSA/CADAA while they were in your county.
- If, however, a youth is enrolled in your county for **less than** 30 days and you assist them with completing the FAFSA/CADAA while in your jurisdiction, that student may be added to the *Total Foster Youth* and *Total FAFSA/CADAA Submissions* counts.
- Students who graduate prior to the end of the school year, who were enrolled in your county for at least 30 days, should be included in your total. FYSCPs are encouraged to work with school staff to ensure these students remain eligible for the Cal Grant and that their GPA is submitted to CSAC.

Internal Tracking Sheet Visual Guide

Below you will find a visual guide to complement the steps in the previous section. **For the purposes of this guide, the visual guide will begin at STEP 2.**

You can find the JBAY internal tracking sheet [HERE](#).

Please note: this sheet is for **internal use only** and you are not required to submit the spreadsheet during the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge reporting requirements. JBAY will only request the information highlighted in yellow.

STEP 2: Example

Student First Name	Student Last Name	Start Date (no earlier than October 1, 2025)
Buzz	Lightyear	10/1/2025

Figure 1.2

Enter the **STUDENT NAME** and **START DATE**

STEP 3: Example

Student First Name	Student Last Name	Start Date (no earlier than October 1, 2025)	FAFSA/CADAA completed (Yes/No)
Buzz	Lightyear	10/1/2025	Yes

Figure 1.3

Select "Yes or No" in the **Drop-Down Menu** indicating if a FAFSA/CADAA was completed

STEP 4: Example

Student First Name	Student Last Name	Start Date (no earlier than October 1, 2025)	Exit Date	FAFSA/CADAA completed (Yes/No)
Buzz	Lightyear	10/1/2025	10/25/2025	Yes

Figure 1.4

Enter the students **EXIT DATE** (if applicable)
The tracking sheet will **automatically populate** individual students who are **included** in the **Total Foster Youth** count.

STEP 5: Example

Total:	3	4
FAFSA/CADAA Completion Rate		75%

Figure 1.5

The sheet **auto-calculates** the **cumulative Total Foster Youth** count.

The numbers reported to JBAY should be a cumulative total of the number of students enrolled in school in your county for at least 30 cumulative days **on or after October 1, 2025**

Student Examples

Buzz Lightyear: Buzz was under your jurisdiction for 26 days; however, he did not complete a FAFSA or CADAA. He is not included in the total count.

Bo Peep: Bo was under your jurisdiction on December 11 and left on January 14, 2026. She completed a FAFSA or CADAA and is counted towards the total count.

Lightning McQueen: Lightning was under your jurisdiction for more than 30 days and completed a FAFSA or CADAA. He is counted toward the total count.

Antonio Madrigal: Antonio was under your jurisdiction for 25 days; however, since he completed a FAFSA or CADAA, he is counted towards the total count.

Prince Naveen: Prince was under your jurisdiction for 50 days; however, he didn't complete a FAFSA or CADAA. He is counted towards the total count.

Student First Name	Student Last Name	Start Date (no earlier than October 1, 2025)	Exit Date	FAFSA/CADAA completed (Yes/No)	Include in count? (Yes/No)
Buzz	Lightyear	10/1/2025	10/25/2025	No	No
Bo	Peep	12/11/2025	1/14/2026	Yes	Yes
Lightning	McQueen	11/21/2025	12/31/2025	Yes	Yes
Antonio	Madrigal	11/22/2025	12/23/2025	Yes	Yes
Prince	Naveen	11/23/2025	1/10/2026	No	Yes

Figure 1.6

Submitting Data:

To qualify for the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge awards, a report of FAFSA/CADAA completion rates must be submitted to JBAY via the online form on or before the report deadline listed on page 4. An online form will be sent out to counties two weeks prior to the deadline. As a reminder, the total number of seniors who completed their FAFSA/CADAA must be verified by WebGrants.

Reports should include:

- 1.Cumulative total number of foster youth high school seniors who have attended school in the county during the reporting period for at least 30 cumulative days.
- 2.Cumulative total number of foster youth high school seniors who have completed a FAFSA/CADAA, as verified in WebGrants,
- 3.FAFSA/CADAA percentage completion rate. (Cumulative total foster youth seniors who completed a FAFSA or CADAA/Total foster youth seniors)

The report will also ask you to provide information regarding the source(s) of data used to determine each number.

FYSCP Awards:

Four participating organizations with the highest rates of FAFSA/CADAA completion among those of comparable size will be awarded unrestricted grants of up to \$1000 to promote foster youth success in matriculating from high school to post-secondary education. JBAY will divide participating organizations up by size (very small, small, medium, and large) based on their baseline number of high school seniors in foster care. The county with the highest rate of FAFSA/CADAA completion in each category will receive the award. **One round of awards** will be given for the highest cumulative at the close of the campaign in June 2026. If more than one organization has the same highest rate, a winner will be selected at random from among those with the highest rates.

Celebrating Successes

Award recipients will be highlighted in JBAY communications, and JBAY will provide press releases to local and statewide media to support additional recognition. Winners will be acknowledged publicly to the extent that opportunities are available to do so.

Significant Dates:

September 2025

September 26, 2025: Deadline to sign up for the challenge. [Register HERE](#)

October 2025

October 1, 2025: 2026-27 FAFSA/CADAA forms are released to all students by Federal Student Aid (FSA) and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC).

The FAFSA/CADAA Challenge begins. Register to take the Challenge [HERE](#).

February 2025

By February 6, 2026: FYSCPs submit to JBAY the number of students who have completed the FAFSA or CADAA between **October 1, 2025** and **January 16, 2026**. FYSCPs will be emailed a submission link at least two weeks prior to the report deadline.

March 2026

March 2, 2026: Priority FAFSA/CADAA deadline. Challenge participants are strongly encouraged to get as many students as possible to complete the FAFSA/CADAA by March 2nd to ensure access to the greatest amount of aid.

May 2026

May 15, 2026: The FAFSA/CADAA Challenge ends.

June 2026

June 5, 2026: Final round of data collected for the FAFSA/CADAA Challenge. FYSCPs submit to JBAY the cumulative number of students who have completed the FAFSA or CADAA between October 1, 2025 and May 15, 2026. FYSCPs will be emailed a submission link beginning at least two weeks prior to the final report deadline.

By June 30, 2026: Final award announced and winners notified.

Resources to Support FAFSA/CADAA Completion for Foster Youth

- [Financial Aid Guide for California Foster and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth](#)
- [FAFSA & CADAA Visual Guides](#)
- [High School Counselor Foster Youth FAFSA/CADAA Toolkit](#)
- [Recorded FAFSA/CADAA Webinar Training](#)

