



School-Led Strategies to Help Washington Students Complete Financial Aid Applications

October 22, 2025 AI Summary

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This session brought together student leaders, school leaders, a high school counselor, nonprofit professionals, and a state official to share proven strategies for increasing FAFSA and WASFA completion rates across Washington state.

Opening with Purpose and Equity

Arik Korman, CEO of the League of Education Voters and a passionate advocate inspired by his son's educational journey, opened the webinar by grounding the conversation in equity, justice, and liberation. He emphasized that education must be a tool for dismantling racial and disability injustice, and that every student deserves access to the life they choose.

Korman introduced the goals of the webinar:

- Spotlight innovative, school-led FAFSA/WASFA completion strategies.
- Elevate student voices to understand real-world barriers.
- Share insights from Governor Bob Ferguson's Washington Completes FAFSA executive order.
- Provide actionable resources from statewide partners.

Governor Ferguson's Message: A Call to Action

Governor Bob Ferguson addressed attendees via a pre-recorded message, sharing his personal connection as a parent of high school seniors. He emphasized that Washington offers the most generous financial aid package in the country, yet ranks 48th in FAFSA completion. His executive order aims to reverse this trend by launching a statewide campaign to increase awareness, track progress, and support students.

Ferguson highlighted:

- The Washington College Grant, available to nearly half of Washington households.
- Eligibility for undocumented students through the WASFA.
- The importance of completing FAFSA to unlock federal and state aid for college, apprenticeships, and job training.

Student Perspectives: Navigating the FAFSA Maze

Three student leaders—Meisha Situ, Aanchal Batwara, and Mason Grose—shared their experiences and challenges:

- Meisha, a first-generation student from Kent Ridge High School, described the confusion she faced navigating FAFSA terminology. With her mother’s help, they researched together and completed the form early, turning the process into a bonding experience.
- Aanchal, a senior at Tesla STEM High School, noted that many students in her affluent community lacked awareness about FAFSA. She emphasized the need for better communication from counselors and proposed peer-led initiatives to increase engagement.
- Mason, from Toutle Lake High School, stressed the importance of family involvement and shared plans to complete FAFSA with his parents. He highlighted the need for clearer guidance in small schools with limited resources.

Their stories revealed the emotional and logistical hurdles students face—and the power of support systems in overcoming them.

Granger High School: A Model of Embedded FAFSA Culture

Jasmine Aldaco, counselor at Granger High School, presented a comprehensive strategy that led to 80% FAFSA completion last year:

- Curriculum Integration: All seniors take a college and career prep class and a personal finance class. Students create FAFSA/WASFA infographics and presentations, which are posted around the school.
- In-Class Support: Jasmine and her colleague visit classrooms to help students create FSA IDs and complete the student portion of FAFSA.

- **Community Engagement:** Granger hosts Financial Aid Nights with bilingual outreach, text message reminders via Thrillshare, and support from WSAC and ESD 105.
- **Cultural Responsiveness:** Materials are provided in English and Spanish, and undocumented/mixed-status families receive confidential, one-on-one support.

Jasmine emphasized the importance of individualized attention, especially in a small district with 118 seniors. Her approach centers on trust, accessibility, and proactive outreach.

Summit Atlas: Building Systems of Support

Dan Effland, former principal at Summit Atlas in West Seattle, shared how his school achieved 88% FAFSA completion:

- **Culture of Completion:** FAFSA is framed as a universal expectation, not an optional task. Every student deserves access to college, even if they choose a different path.
- **Advisory Integration:** Weekly mentor sessions (advisory periods) are dedicated to college readiness starting in junior year. Students and teachers co-learn through webinars and work sessions.
- **Leadership and Accountability:** Clear goals are set, and a designated point person tracks progress. Training is provided to navigate complex data systems.
- **Family Events:** “Cash for College” nights offer food, support from college reps, and hands-on FAFSA help.

Dan emphasized that culture can be built through leadership and training. His story of a student who resisted FAFSA but ultimately enrolled in college illustrated the transformative power of belief and support.

Neah Bay High School: Community-Driven Success

Danielle Denney, from Neah Bay Junior/Senior High School, shared how her school reached 100% FAFSA completion:

- **Relational Approach:** A young, relatable counselor built trust with students and persistently encouraged them to apply.

- Tribal Partnerships: The local tribe's higher education program collaborated with the school to provide culturally sensitive support.
- Privacy and Respect: Students were given private spaces to complete FAFSA and discuss financial concerns, addressing stigma around income disclosure.

Danielle highlighted the importance of community alignment and relationship-building in a rural Native American setting.

College Success Foundation: Statewide Capacity Building

Raul Sanchez, Regional College Access Manager, outlined how the College Success Foundation supports schools across Washington:

- Trainings: Line-by-line FAFSA walkthroughs for educators, counselors, and community members.
- Resources: Recorded webinars, troubleshooting guides, and scenario-based support for foster youth, unaccompanied minors, and undocumented students.
- Outreach Tools: Calendly for event registration, reminder emails, and incentives like food and gift card raffles.
- Prioritization: Focus on rural, low-income, and BIPOC schools with limited college readiness staff.

Raul emphasized the importance of being responsive, knowledgeable, and accessible—especially when federal systems are complex and slow.

Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC): Tools for Transparency

Sarah Weiss, Director of College Access Initiatives, shared key WSAC resources:

- [Apply Page](#): Helps students determine whether to use FAFSA or WASFA, with privacy statements and grant info.
- [Train the Trainer Portal](#): Offers professional development, clock hours, and ready-to-use presentation decks.
- [FAFSA Completion Dashboard](#): Tracks real-time completion rates by school and district, with a secure portal for staff to view student-level data.

Sarah invited student leaders to join the advisory board for the executive order and emphasized the importance of student input in shaping statewide resources.

Student Reflections and Takeaways

In closing remarks, Mason and Aanchal expressed gratitude and excitement:

- Mason praised the dashboard and training resources, and planned to bring ideas like “Cash for College” nights to his school.
- Aanchal admired Granger’s flyer strategy and emphasized the power of visibility and repetition in building FAFSA awareness.

Both students committed to sharing what they learned with their peers and counselors.

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