



ALABAMA  
Goes to  
College



**2021-2022 AWARD WINNERS**

# Case Studies

Alabama Goes to College is an initiative of Alabama Possible.

# Foreword

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As students plan to continue their education after high school, they are often faced with the overwhelming task of figuring out how to afford their next steps. Although most high school seniors in Alabama qualify for free federal aid, nearly half of students fail to complete the application required to access this aid each year.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is used to determine eligibility for federal, state, and institutional aid. Even though completing the FAFSA is a strong predictor of whether students enroll in postsecondary education the fall following high school graduation, Alabama students leave millions of dollars of free aid on the table annually.

To ensure Alabama students can access financial aid to pursue postsecondary pathways, high school counselors and careers coaches dedicate time to promoting the FAFSA. As FAFSA completion became part of the high school graduation checklist, educators have invested in effective FAFSA strategies tailored to their student population and community.

Every year, the Alabama Goes to College Campaign recognizes high schools with the highest FAFSA completion rates and the greatest FAFSA improvement rates. While these schools represent many different regions of the state, they share enthusiasm for supporting students in this postsecondary task. The following profiles outline each school's most successful practices for promoting FAFSA completion.



# Geneva County High School



## Small School MVP

Geneva County High School, a rural high school located in southeast Alabama, has recently seen a rise in students pursuing college after graduating high school. With 54 seniors, Geneva County High School's Class of 2022 witnessed 100% of students apply and gain admission to college. An estimated 87% of those seniors are planning to attend 2-year and 4-year colleges this fall. With 100% of students receiving a Career Readiness Indicator, the remainder of the senior class plans to enter the workforce directly.

Casey Watters, the High School Guidance Counselor at Geneva County HS, employed several strategies to support seniors in their pursuit of postsecondary pathways. With **buy-in from the entire school staff** and support from external partners, Geneva County HS built awareness and encouraged preparedness by starting postsecondary conversations as early as 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Acting as a key partner, Enterprise State Community College offered two programs that provide **constant messaging** around college admissions and financial aid. Additionally, the Geneva Regional Technical Center teamed up with local banks to offer a financial literacy workshop to educate seniors on opening checking accounts, getting a loan, understanding credit, and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

With consistent messaging laying the foundation for awareness, Geneva County HS seniors also had opportunities to receive **hands-on support** during their senior year. Prior to FAFSA events facilitated by financial aid experts, the Career Coach assisted students with creating their FSA ID, the username and password for everything related to federal student aid. Once students had a chance to get started on their financial aid application, parents also had a few opportunities to come on campus and do their portion of the FAFSA.

While students had school hours dedicated to working on their financial aid application, they were also **incentivized to complete the application** on their own time. Seniors who completed the FAFSA were awarded a community learning day during which they did not have to report to campus. They could use the extra time to apply for scholarships, take college tours, work, or volunteer. This three-pronged approach used by Casey Watters—building early awareness, utilizing supportive partnerships, and providing incentives—motivated and empowered seniors to explore postsecondary pathways and confidently decide their next steps.



# Ramsay High School



## Medium School MVP

Overlooking downtown Birmingham, Ramsay High School provides ample opportunities for students to take Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. With an expectation that students will attend college, Ramsay High School starts postsecondary conversations early, introducing the FAFSA as soon as 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Faculty, staff, and administrators reinforce this **college-going culture** by sending a consistent message about the steps needed to prepare for and pursue postsecondary education.

Steven Tarver, the Lead Counselor at Ramsay, ensured that seniors had on-campus opportunities to receive guidance and direct support from community partners. Starting with a mixer held on October 1<sup>st</sup>, Ramsay set up a **one-stop-shop** for students to work on the FAFSA in a computer lab and then receive information on scholarships, the military, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Local community partners, including College Prep U and College Choice Foundation, supported the event and underscored the importance of the FAFSA.

These partners also supported Ramsay's "FAFSA Blitz" which took place **weekly** from October through May. To avoid interrupting instructional time, these FAFSA sessions were scheduled during students' elective classes. Parents also had the opportunity to attend workshops supported by Lawson State Community College, College Prep U, U.S. Air Force, and the U.S. Army National Guard. More than 100 parents used these opportunities to assist their students and complete their portion of the FAFSA.

While many students completed the application early in the year, incentives from the district kept up the momentum. Students were entered into drawings upon completion of the FAFSA. Students in the district have an extra incentive through the Birmingham Promise Scholarship, which provides up to four years of tuition assistance for graduates of Birmingham City Schools who attend any public two-year or four-year college or university in Alabama. Students must complete their FAFSA to be eligible for this scholarship. This investment, combined with the culture ingrained in the school, led Ramsay to great success with FAFSA completion.

# Hartselle High School

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## Large School MVP

Located in northern part of the state, Hartselle High School had the highest FAFSA completion rate for large Alabama high schools. With 252 seniors to assist along their individual postsecondary journeys, Counselor Cory Wilbanks built strong relationships with partners who share her mission in supporting students toward graduation and beyond.

Cory began her coordinated effort early in the year by meeting with seniors in a **small group setting** during their Government and Economics classes to discuss the importance of completing the FAFSA. The principal also sent emails and texts to reiterate this message to families. This clear and consistent messaging set the stage for students and parents to complete the FAFSA and some other key tasks at future events hosted on campus.

Hartselle HS leverages its **long-standing partnership** with Calhoun Community College to host several events throughout the academic year where students and parents can meet with financial aid and admissions representatives. These events were held during the day and after school to flexibly accommodate the schedules of each family. Students and their families could come and go as needed and could attend multiple sessions until tasks were fully complete.

Direct support led to great progress with FAFSA completion, and Cory built on this progress through her **strong relationship** with the senior class. She continued tracking student-level completion using an online portal available to educators. Students who had not completed their FAFSA by March met with her one-on-one during elective classes. After that, students who needed further assistance had time scheduled with a Calhoun financial aid representative. This organized effort to reach out to students and provide opportunities for hands-on support led to 87% of seniors completing their FAFSA before their graduation date.

# Barbour County High School



## Most Improved Small School

Barbour County High School, a rural high school located in southeast Alabama, witnessed an incredible year-over-year increase in FAFSA completion. As the winner of the Most Improved Award for small schools, Barbour County HS went from having fewer than 5 seniors in the Class of 2021 fill out a FAFSA to around 76% of students in the Class of 2022 completing a FAFSA before their graduation ceremony.

As a new counselor, Tiffany Davis saw that seniors were a little more hesitant about their next steps after graduation. But a slower start with postsecondary planning in the fall semester turned into a strong push in the spring semester as a nearby community college hosted a **one-stop-shop** for students to learn about the steps for applying to and enrolling in college. Wallace on Wheels, a program of Wallace Community College, gave students a chance to learn from admissions officers, financial aid representatives, program directors, and instructors right on their own campus. This dedicated time in February meant that students had a chance to apply to college and begin financial aid applications during school hours.

As students were accepted to college, Tiffany Davis and her team used the opportunity to **uplift and congratulate** those students on social media. This recognition not only motivated some of the other students to explore their options and complete their applications, but it also started conversations within families who had not previously considered college to be an option. Seeing their peers commit to their next steps encouraged the remaining seniors to move forward with the application process. With admissions applications out of the way, students had more support from Wallace on Wheels in completing their FAFSA and applying for scholarships.

For students who still had not completed their FAFSA by March, the counselor and principal called families and set up one-on-one appointments to complete the task. Once they understood this as a critical step towards graduation and postsecondary opportunities, parents made time to come on campus to do their portion of the financial aid application. Barbour County HS saw great improvement with these **intentional windows of time** where students and families could receive direct support with their postsecondary pursuits.



# Woodlawn High School



## Most Improved Medium School

Located in central Alabama, Woodlawn High School saw a significant improvement in FAFSA completion from the Class of 2021 (18.93%) to the Class of 2022 (55.97%). In her first year as Lead Counselor at the high school, Hope English employed a **strong communication strategy** to ensure students and families understood the importance of the FAFSA and took advantage of several opportunities for direct assistance with the application.

Every Friday, a small group of students were scheduled to attend the FAFSA Mo' Money Workshop supported by staff from College Prep U, a community-based organization that works closely with Birmingham City Schools. Having **small groups** of students not only made the workshop more manageable, but also allowed the counselor to strategically time outgoing notifications to families.

To ensure parents were prepared to support their seniors in this task, Hope emailed and called parents whose students were scheduled for the upcoming Friday workshop. In those communications, she informed parents of what documentation students would need to bring to complete their financial aid application. For parents who did not feel comfortable sending this information to school with their students, Hope instructed parents to have this information available during the time of the workshop so that students could call their parents to input the information.

Students could attend the Friday workshops until their application was complete, and Hope **regularly followed up** with students via Schoology, a learning management platform where educators can send direct messages to students. She informed them of any tasks outstanding or any issues with their application. These communication efforts were reinforced by the principal, who also used robocalls to contact families.

Woodlawn HS seniors have an **extra incentive** to complete their FAFSA, as the Birmingham Promise Scholarship provides up to four years of tuition assistance for graduates of Birmingham City Schools who attend any public two-year or four-year college or university in Alabama. Students must complete their FAFSA to be eligible for this scholarship.

Although many students planned to go directly into the workforce, Hope still encouraged them to complete their FAFSA while they had hands-on support. To open doors to multiple pathways, she reiterated the importance of getting familiar with the application now so that the process is easier when they pursue further training or education in the future. This supportive messaging allowed students to understand the many ways the FAFSA can support their goals.

# Decatur High School

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## Most Improved Large School

Located near the Tennessee River in north Alabama, Decatur High School saw a 100.63% increase in FAFSA completion over the last year. While less than 30% of the Class of 2021 completed the FAFSA, around 60% of the Class of 2022 completed the FAFSA before their graduation date. This improvement was supported by first-year counselor Sarah Wood.

With the support of other counselors and staff, she started the school year by visiting the Government and Economics classes to discuss the benefits of completing the FAFSA. After emphasizing how the FAFSA can open doors, Sarah had students create their FSA ID, the first step to completing the application. To ensure students do not lose this information, every senior completed a worksheet that was kept on file in their binders.

Decatur High School hosted FAFSA Days and Nights on campus with support from Calhoun Community College. To **streamline the process**, Sarah created a QR code that students and families could scan to sign up for an appointment that fit their schedule. Students usually utilized their elective classes to work on the application.

Throughout the year, Sarah shared information about the FAFSA on social media and within the school. Hoping to reach younger students and **build early awareness**, she set up an eye-catching display in the cafeteria that prompted 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade students to ask about the financial aid process.

As the academic year progressed, Sarah worked with the Career Coach to **track students** who still had items left to complete on their application. Students who were not finished by March worked with the Career Coach who came to campus once a week to provide direct assistance. To support the final push, students were offered an exam exemption to incentivize completing their application. The coordinated effort more than doubled the number of seniors completing this task before their graduation date.



# Key Lessons Learned

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**Gain buy-in from school leadership and staff:** Assisting students on the path to postsecondary requires a whole community of support.



**Consistently communicate key messages:** Reach families through multiple channels with clear and concise language that builds early awareness and highlights the importance of these tasks.



**Offer one-stop shopping:** Combining FAFSA completion activities with other college-going tasks allows students and families to accomplish multiple steps during one event.



**Leverage partners to provide direct assistance:** Local colleges and organizations can offer an extra layer of support and capacity that might allow for more hands-on support.



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