

**ALABAMA
Goes to
College**

2022-2023 AWARD WINNERS
Case Studies

Alabama Goes to College is an initiative of Alabama Possible.

Introduction

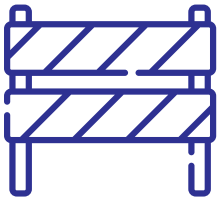
College affordability continues to be a primary concern for Alabama students and a central point of advocacy for Alabama Possible, a nonprofit organization that works to break down barriers to prosperity in Alabama. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the largest source of financial aid for postsecondary pathways and a critical part of closing the affordability gap. The FAFSA is not only used to determine eligibility for federal aid but also state and institutional aid for postsecondary education and training. Notably, completing this application is a strong predictor of whether high school seniors will enroll in their postsecondary pathway of choice the fall following their graduation.

Understanding the significance of this form, the state of Alabama added completion of the FAFSA to the graduation checklist for high school seniors, with the Class of 2022 as the first group of seniors with this task. In the first year, the percentage of seniors finishing this critical application rose 17.3%, ranking our state second in the nation for year-over-year improvement. However, despite the statewide policy leading to such remarkable improvements in FAFSA completion, high school seniors in Alabama still left an estimated 53 million dollars of free Pell grant aid on the table.



Alabama's Class of 2023 was the second group of high school seniors required to fill out the FAFSA as part of their graduation checklist. Despite the slight decrease in completion when compared to their predecessors, the Class of 2023 still ranked 11th in the nation for overall FAFSA completion, thanks to the support of dedicated high school educators. Knowing the significance of this task, Alabama counselors and career coaches spent the 2022-23 academic year emphasizing the importance of financial aid and strategies for accessing it.

In an effort to support and uplift these educators who work with high school seniors, the Alabama Goes to College Campaign recognizes high schools with the highest FAFSA completion rates and the greatest FAFSA improvement rates. In the 2022-23 academic year, the campaign expanded the end-of-year awards to include two more size categories, so that ten schools total were recognized for their achievements. While these schools represent different regions of the state, they share a commitment to overcoming challenges related to financial aid and postsecondary access. Their collective enthusiasm resulted in tremendously positive outcomes around this particular postsecondary task. The following profiles outline each school's most successful practices for promoting FAFSA completion.



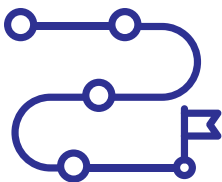
Common Barriers and Recommendations

To encourage families to attend postsecondary planning events, leverage partners to facilitate one-stop shops where students and parents can accomplish multiple tasks in one visit.

To engage hesitant parents in the FAFSA process, keep electronic communication informative and consistent while also offering in-person assistance to build trust and connection.

To support students who are more uncertain about their next steps, discuss the doors that the FAFSA can open and emphasize programs that are a good fit for both their career interests and financial circumstances.

To ensure students do not forfeit aid opportunities, communicate the advantages of the FAFSA and only promote the opt-out waiver with students who are ineligible for aid or face significant challenges in completing the form.



Successful Strategies and Practices

Increase capacity and layers of support by leveraging internal and external partners for your FAFSA team.

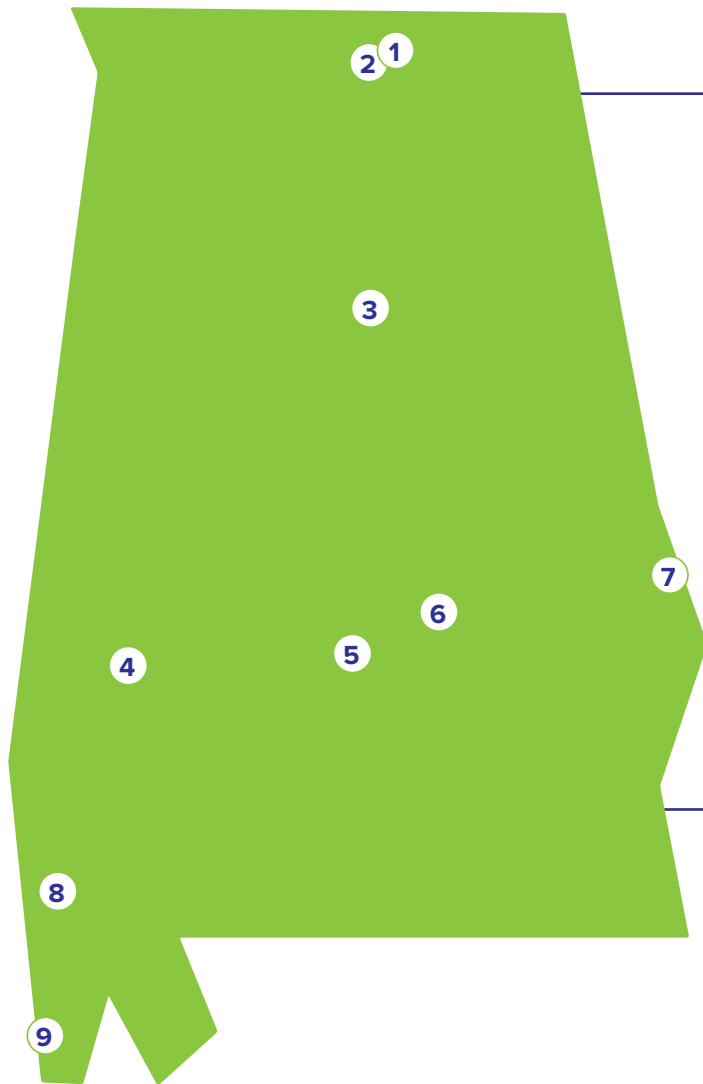
Encourage early completion through compelling incentives and strong messaging.

Use the FAFSA as a counseling tool to consider different postsecondary pathways.

Provide flexible options and varied approaches for completing the form.

Create an intentional timeline that provides structure and breaks tasks into manageable pieces.

Utilize external platforms to support postsecondary planning and monitor progress.



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- 1 Madison County Virtual Academy
 - 2 Lee High School
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 - 5 Central High School (Hayneville)
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Note: Central High School (Phenix City) was both the MVP and Most Improved Award Winner for Extra Large Schools



www.alabamapossible.org



algestcollege@alabamapossible.org



334.316.6155

Sweet Water High School



Extra Small School MVP

Sweet Water High School, a rural school located in the western central part of the state, has seen continued success with FAFSA completion. Consistently finishing in the top for FAFSA completion, this Marengo County school has been supported by staff who have refined and perfected its processes. Career Coach Amy Ward worked alongside Counselor Courtney Taylor and Senior Sponsor Angie Lewis to achieve a 100% completion rate for the high school's 26 seniors. Each year, they **set a goal for seniors** to finish this application within 30 days of the FAFSA cycle opening.

While Sweet Water staff accomplished their goal through several key events throughout the year, they also acted as a team to ensure that they are available to support their seniors at any moment. Starting with Open House at the beginning of the school year, they immediately tackled the task of creating FSA IDs with students and families. With the first step completed, seniors were ready to discuss and begin their financial aid application during their senior meeting with the school counselor. In addition to these two stand-alone opportunities, students had a daily senior seminar that afforded them **dedicated time in the school day** to prepare for postsecondary options, hear from college representatives, and work on their applications.

The Sweet Water team focused on consistent messaging that **promoted early completion and empowered families into the future**. Realizing that students have a better chance to receive aid by completing the application as soon as possible, the English teacher incentivized early completion by awarding an extra grade if students complete their FAFSA within a certain time period. Additionally, knowing that this is a task that students have to complete each year they are in a postsecondary program, Sweet Water staff worked to equip students and families with tools to take ownership of their FAFSA.

As students worked on their applications, Amy **monitored their progress** using the FAFSA Completion Portal updated regularly by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE). Making a concerted effort to leave no students behind, Amy focused on the last 30% of the student body, a group that might have been more uncertain about their next steps. This targeted approach ensured Sweet Water's overall goal was met with the entire class finishing the task ahead of their graduation date.

Loveless Academic Magnet Program High School



Small School MVP

Loveless Academic Magnet Program High School, known as LAMP, is located in Montgomery and served close to 115 seniors who largely go on to pursue a four-year postsecondary credential. **Fostering a college-going mindset** from students' first year of high school onward, LAMP was intentional about preparing graduates for their next steps. This schoolwide college-going culture was nurtured through strong relationships and consistent messaging, resulting in over 90% of the Class of 2023 completing a FAFSA.

Close partnerships were key to LAMP's success with ensuring that families understand the importance of the FAFSA. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and a nonprofit group, the LAMPlighters, worked alongside school leadership to spread FAFSA messaging. Both of these groups met with the principal monthly to discuss timely topics. Other organizations on campus joined in the messaging efforts by making consistent announcements to students and their families about pressing tasks and deadlines.

Students were **encouraged to start the FAFSA early** and were incentivized with rewards like dress-down days. Since many students sought to attend institutions outside of Alabama, they were motivated to complete the FAFSA early, knowing it is key to receiving all kinds of aid necessary to reduce the cost of out-of-state tuition. Additionally, students recognized that the FAFSA is the gateway to more than just federal aid since local scholarship organizations and programs also require the form to determine financial need. This understanding, fostered by supportive partners and a schoolwide culture of ambition, paved the way for LAMP seniors to finish strong in 2023.

Lee High School *(Huntsville City)*



Medium School MVP

Located in northern Alabama, Lee High School in Huntsville City served over 150 seniors. Senior Counselor Denise Lee and Graduation Coach Patrick Holder **leveraged the FAFSA as a counseling tool** during postsecondary planning conversations, resulting in more than 80% of the Class of 2023 completing a FAFSA. These conversations underscored the importance of the aid application, making clear to students the way completing the FAFSA can open many doors and fill any gaps. The district's College Counselor also visited the school regularly to reinforce this message.

Staff at Lee **provided several engaging opportunities** for students to work on the FAFSA, starting with creating FSA IDs before the FAFSA opened. Spearheaded by the band director, the school hosted FAFSA sessions during school hours and in the evenings for parents to join with college representatives there to support. In addition to these school events, families at Lee had the opportunity to attend citywide college nights and FAFSA nights supported by local colleges and community partners like North Alabama Center for Educational Excellence. With food provided and more than 20 professionals there to assist families at this one-stop shop, students had the chance to work on their application, hear from a college panel, and attend informative breakout sessions.

In order to make these events successful, staff at Lee **crafted messaging that is detailed and consistent**. All of the promotional materials for FAFSA events included explicit details about the documents and records needed to complete the FAFSA. Throughout the year, the completion of FAFSA was emphasized as the primary way to access financial aid and waivers were only utilized when absolutely necessary. Staff monitored students' progress with postsecondary planning and used the FAFSA as a tool for undecided students, highlighting that most Alabama seniors qualify for aid that covers a significant portion of the cost to attend two-year programs. The coordinated effort behind these in-school counseling opportunities and after-school hands-on events created a robust support system for seniors to prepare for their next steps.

Hewitt-Trussville High School



Large School MVP

Most of the 366 seniors of Hewitt-Trussville High School's Class of 2023 indicated that they planned to attend college. In her first year as a Career Coach, Lisa Smith embraced the opportunity to support seniors in planning for their postsecondary goals, including completion of the FAFSA. Leveraging class time and events on campus, Lisa succeeded in getting close to three quarters of these central Alabama students to complete their FAFSA.

New to her role, Lisa **took time to understand the communication preferences** of students and their families. She utilized English class to meet with seniors regularly and took advantage of Alabama College Application Week to have focused conversations about applying to and paying for college. With parents, she started monthly emails that underscored the importance of the FAFSA and offered assistance with completing the form during in-person appointments supported by the Financial Aid Office of Jefferson State Community College. After building relationships with both students and parents, Lisa found that completion steadily increased.

Staff at Hewitt-Trussville also **leveraged two important external platforms to support the college-planning process**. Students completed Jefferson State Community College's free interest assessment to explore career pathways and recorded their results as a class assignment. The Career Coach then used students' advisory period to talk to them about their options and how to fund them. While promoting the FAFSA, Lisa monitored ACHE's FAFSA Completion Portal to check on students' progress. Using the information from the portal, she partnered with the counselor to conduct targeted outreach to both students and their families. These platforms acted as critical tools to power the constant communication that allowed Hewitt-Trussville staff to successfully engage families in postsecondary planning.

Central High School *(Phenix City)*



Extra Large School MVP

Located on the far eastern side of the state near the Georgia border, Central High School in Phenix City had the largest senior class among the Cash for College award winners. With 417 seniors to support on their postsecondary journeys, Erin Jane had a demanding task as a first-year senior counselor. Working alongside the College and Career Counselor and the School Improvement Coordinator, she felt that they created a close partnership and accountability system that led to nearly 70% of their seniors filling out a FAFSA.

Erin created **several flexible opportunities for families to complete pieces of the FAFSA**. She started by visiting all the senior history classes to create FSA IDs. FAFSA sessions were held in the media center for parents to come at their leisure during the day or evening, with lunchtime being a particularly popular time. These hands-on sessions served as a relationship-building opportunity and helped families feel comfortable with the process. Students were able to leave class to work on the application and could celebrate with Kona Ice once the task was complete.

During the second half of the year, Central High staff **closely monitored students' progress** with this task. The School Improvement Coordinator regularly checked ACHE's FAFSA Completion Portal and contacted families who still had items to finish. Staff met with students individually and in small groups for a final push. This targeted support at the end of the year resulted in an impressive completion rate for Central High seniors. On top of this accomplishment, the school also managed to achieve the greatest FAFSA completion improvement rate for schools in the extra-large size category.

Central High School *(Hayneville)*



Most Improved Extra Small School

Central High School of Lowndes County serves a rural population within Alabama's Black Belt. As a first-year counselor, Jwana Perkins had the opportunity to be very hands on with a senior class of only 42 students. Central High significantly improved its completion rate from the Class of 2022 to the Class of 2023, more than doubling the percentage of seniors filling out the form. Although half of Central High seniors typically go directly into the workforce, Jwana used the FAFSA as a counseling tool to encourage students to consider continuing their education.

With support from internal and external partners, Jwana tackled the FAFSA by **strategically breaking down the process into manageable pieces** throughout the fall semester. Starting in September, partners from the 4-H Extension office educated students on the financial aid process and provided an actionable checklist so that students understood their next steps. In October, students had dedicated time during history class or their elective hour to create FSA IDs and complete the student portion of the form. Taking place in the library so that computers were available, these FAFSA sessions were supported by Alabama State University's TRIO program, resulting in most students finishing their own section of the form. With assistance from the Career Coach, Central High coordinated a FAFSA night in November supported by Wallace Community College Selma. These in-school opportunities were especially important for families who did not have reliable internet access.

Jwana checked in with students regularly and **utilized the FAFSA as a counseling opportunity** to talk about postsecondary opportunities. Finding that students were more likely to consider programs when they understood the financial aid available to them, she was able to motivate students to apply to more schools. She especially encouraged students to apply to programs that were a good fit based on field of interest and financial cost. By employing her social work background to connect students to resources that made them confident in pursuing their next steps, Jwana succeeded in drastically improving FAFSA completion at her high school.

Madison County Virtual Academy



Most Improved Small School

Serving a student population that does not regularly attend a physical campus, Madison County Virtual Academy (MCVA) utilized some unique strategies to connect with over 100 high school seniors throughout their postsecondary planning process. MCVA aimed to **create a culture of College and Career Readiness (CCR)** early on in their students' high school experience, with all students working towards a CCR credential. This intentional focus on preparing for life after high school led to a significant improvement in FAFSA completion.

Although students are not on campus each day, there were **several opportunities for students to receive in-person support** for college-going activities. Public and private colleges from Alabama and Mississippi participated in Fab Five College Night where all high school students, not just seniors, could learn more about the institutions. A few of these institutions visited campus regularly to recruit and answer college-related questions. Furthermore, FAFSA Days and Evenings offered dedicated times for students to receive direct support with their financial aid form.

In addition to assistance from colleges and universities, MCVA **leveraged the support of local organizations** like the North Alabama Center for Educational Excellence which offered several postsecondary preparation events to these virtual students. Local support like this provided an extra layer of encouragement to students who were navigating their next steps. Even without a campus that students attend daily, MCVA was able to connect students to resources that would support their postsecondary dreams.

Citronelle High School



Most Improved Medium School

Citronelle High School, located in the southwestern part of Alabama, served more than 150 high school seniors. Stephen Watts and Heather Byrd, both in their fourth year as counselors, **carefully structured the year** so that prospective graduates had time to complete many of the tasks necessary for their postsecondary pursuits. This intentional timeline resulted in Citronelle almost doubling its FAFSA completion percentage from the Class of 2022 to the Class of 2023, with 65% of the most recent class completing the application.

Postsecondary planning events started early, with group meetings happening during the first and second semester of Junior year so that students could **become familiar with their graduation checklist** which would continuously be revisited. During September and October of senior year, students discussed things like Kuder, College and Career Readiness Indicators (CCRI), scholarships, and FAFSA during individual meetings. At the end of the calendar year, students assessed their progress towards completing the checklist before meeting as a group in the New Year. In February, FAFSA workshops were hosted during math class. The math teacher, who also served as Senior Sponsor, provided an extra layer of support and regularly monitored students' progress with the ACHE FAFSA Completion Portal. Finally, in March and April, the students reviewed their updated graduation checklist to ensure they were on track.

Stephen and Heather credited the increase in FAFSA completion to the combined effort of staff members to deliver consistent and informative FAFSA messaging. Focusing on motivating students to learn more about their aid eligibility, the counselors **emphasized the advantages of completing the FAFSA** and did not mention opt-out waivers until later in the spring semester. Although some students ended up having to use the waiver, the majority of students completed their application for aid, setting them on the path towards their postsecondary future.

Alma Bryant High School



Most Improved Large School

Serving over 300 seniors, Alma Bryant High School is a rural school in the southernmost part of the state. Senior Counselor Monica Davis led the Class of 2023 to a FAFSA completion rate almost double that of the Class of 2022. Working with other staff at the school, Monica put together a team that encouraged students to start early and monitored their progress throughout the year.

Key to Alma Bryant's success was **consistent messaging that engaged stakeholders across multiple platforms**. In this small rural community, Alma Bryant spread the word to families at churches and football games. During the school day, Monica got students involved with this messaging by having the broadcasting team promote the FAFSA and the cheerleaders make a FAFSA banner. The high school also turned to social media to reach a wide audience.

The school also hosted events and **set deadlines** to encourage students to complete early with the assistance of educators during dedicated FAFSA sessions. During "Reach Time," students had an opportunity to set up their FSA IDs. Additional FAFSA events were held before and after school so that students could ask questions as they navigated the remainder of the application. Like other schools, Alma Bryant was careful not to promote the opt-out waiver until the end when students actually needed the option to complete their graduation checklist.