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New York's low-income high school students are less likely than their wealthier peers to attend schools where filling out the forms is commonplace. | Getty

Partnerships boosting aid application rates for low-income students

By **ANNA GRONEWOLD** | 02/21/2019 05:01 AM EST

ALBANY — With more than \$152 million in higher education federal aid for New York students left on the table last year, high schools across the state with large low-income populations are ramping up efforts to ensure that poor students complete the applications for financial assistance.

New York's low-income high school students, who are more likely to qualify for federal grants, are less likely than their wealthier peers to attend schools where filling out the forms is commonplace.

Right now, schools with the fewest low-income students have a 36 percent higher completion rate of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid than the schools with the greatest share of low-income students, according to a new tool from Education Trust-New York that tracks FAFSA completion across the state's regions, districts and schools. Many of the 25 schools with the highest completion rates in the state are charter or specialized schools based in or around New York City.

But there are increasingly more outliers as districts realize the importance of getting students to apply for federal aid for which they are qualified. This year, as of Feb. 1, more than 100 high schools that enroll at least 40 percent low-income students are among the top FAFSA completion schools in the state, according to Ed Trust.

For most students, FAFSA is the deciding factor between attending college or not, said Eric Rosser, associate superintendent for student support services for the Buffalo Public Schools.

That's why Buffalo has cemented partnerships with both University of Buffalo and Say Yes, a last offer tuition assistance program that provides scholarships to Buffalo students, Rosser said. Seniors have to complete FAFSA and TAP applications to qualify for Say Yes, which then tracks completions and lets the district know which students and families they should follow up with to make sure applications are submitted on time.

Rosser said most of Buffalo's high schools also have specific spaces where students get advice and resources from University of Buffalo graduate student volunteers. Since the start of the partnership with UB and Say Yes in 2015, the number of FAFSA completions in Buffalo has nearly doubled, according to Say Yes. And currently Buffalo's Leonardo da Vinci High School's FAFSA completion rate of 68 percent is the highest among similar schools in Western New York.

Other districts, too, are bringing in the community to boost completion rates. Schools in Rochester receive support from the Rochester College Access Network, which sponsors events throughout the city to help families complete the FAFSA form, according to Ed Trust. Charter school Young Women’s College Prep’s 50 percent completion rate has become one of the highest in the Finger Lakes region among schools where the majority of students are low-income.

“Access to financial aid is a key factor in whether low-income students have the opportunity to attend college,” said Ed Trust-NY’s Executive Director Ian Rosenblum in a statement. “We hope this project spotlights the hard work that many schools are already doing to support their students in completing the FAFSA and inspires even more schools to take steps that research shows will help students realize the dream of a higher education.”

According to Ed Trust, 90 percent of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA go to college immediately after graduation compared to 55 percent of seniors who do not complete the FAFSA.

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