

City schools join \$100,000 competition

FAFSA

Goal aims to increase student aid applicants

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District will be competing to win \$100,000.

The goal of the competition, which will end June 30, 2019, is to increase the number of FAFSAs, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid forms, that are completed by city students.

The FAFSA Completion Challenge aims to:

- Push to increase financial aid for city students.
- Increase the number of events to help students fill out forms, called FAFSAs.
- Increase awareness about FAFSA events.

Monika Rucker, who recently finished her senior year at All City High School, participated in a FAFSA Fest put on by the Rochester Education Foundation, which gives students free help filling out their FAFSA forms.

“It was very helpful,” Rucker said. She now plans to attend Monroe Community College this fall to study human services and criminal justice.

“This is a great opportunity to help more students obtain financial support for college,” said Rochester Education Foundation executive director Pat Braus.

The Rochester Education Foundation, or REF, has been hosting FAFSA Fests since 2015. These events are usually held from October to March, but Braus said REF would be hosting additional events from March to June in order to reach more students.

“Many of our kids apply after March, especially for community college,” said Braus.

REF also plans to train more people who can help students with their FAFSAs as well as ramp up the FAFSA Fest marketing. Since 2014, the year prior to the first FAFSA Fest, REF said it has seen a more than 70 percent increase in the number of early FAFSA submissions by city school students.

FAFSAs in Rochester

The FAFSA is a gateway to post-secondary education, National College Access Network deputy director Sara Melnick said about the value of the funding competition. “It can change the culture of the community to one where there is an expectation that students can and will pursue post-secondary education.”

The competition will be judged on “a holistic review of the percentage growth in completions, adoption of effective strategies, barriers overcome, and the likelihood of sustainability,” said Melnick.

Mayor Lovely Warren said in a statement about this challenge that it “will not only give our students a ticket to a higher education, but also reduce the burden of student debt once they graduate.”

During the 2016-2017 academic year, 1,234,249 high school graduates in America did not fill out the FAFSA. According to a study done by NerdWallet, more than half of those students would have been eligible for Pell Grant money, meant to help students pay for college. Those Pell Grant-eligible students who did not fill out their FAFSA missed out on an average of \$3,583 each.

The same study showed that the class of 2017 missed out on \$2.3 billion by not filling out their FAFSAs. Statistics from REF show that out of the 1,788 Rochester city school graduates in 2017, about 792 filled out FAFSAs.

The Rochester City School District graduated 51.9 percent of high school

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Students fill out their FAFSAs at one of the Rochester Education Foundation's FAFSA Fests.
ROCHESTER EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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seniors in June 2017. That is up from June 2016's 47.7 percent but still the lowest mark among New York state's large urban districts.

Rochester also has 50.3 percent of its students living in poverty. Rochester is only one of seven districts in the country with over half its students living below the poverty line, according to 2016 Census Bureau estimates.

Rochester was one of the 25 cities selected by the National College Access Network to participate in the challenge.

The winner will be announced in September 2019.

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