



**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

Amy Dowell, Connecticut State Director
Education Reform Now CT
February 12, 2020

Re: S.B. No. 17, An Act Requiring the Completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid

Chairmen Haddad and Haskell, Ranking Members Hall and Hwang, and Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of Raised Bill No. 17.

This bill would gradually roll out a new graduation requirement of completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), making it optional for local boards to implement for the graduating class of 2022, and mandatory as a requirement for the graduating class of 2023. Importantly, the bill also sets aside reasonable opt out and exemption measures to protect the interests of students and families who do not want to apply for aid. By having students default to filling out the form, the bill ensures that—at a minimum—all students are aware of the possibility of federal aid and are making a conscientious choice to apply, or not apply.

Nationwide, for students in the lowest economic quintile, FAFSA completion increases their likelihood of entering college by 127%.¹ According to the National College Access Network's state-by-state data, as of August 2019, Connecticut had a FAFSA completion rate of 68.8%, ranking 9th in the nation.² Since Connecticut students may not always know whether they're eligible for federal aid, requiring the remaining 32.2% of students to complete the application may increase their opportunities for higher education by helping them to afford higher education access that may otherwise be unattainable.

Louisiana, the first state to make FAFSA submission a high school graduation requirement, has seen incredible success with this reform, moving from a completion rate of only 56% in the 2015-16 school year to 82.6% as of August 2019—and becoming the highest ranking state

¹ DeBaun, B. (2019, National College Access Network). "Survey Data Strengthen Association Between FAFSA Completion and Enrollment". Retrieved February 2020 at <https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456025>

² National College Access Network (2019). "#FormYourFuture FAFSA Tracker" (% of Class Completed FAFSA for CT). Retrieved February 2020 at <https://public.tableau.com/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network#!/vizhome/FormYourFutureFAFSATracker-2019-20FAFSACycleThroughAugust232019/CurrentWeekRanking>.

for completion in the nation.³ Texas and Illinois (currently ranking 27th and 11th, respectively), also each undertook FAFSA reform this past summer.

Importantly, however, Connecticut should recognize that Louisiana's FAFSA-reform efforts coincided with several noteworthy implementation investments. The state also established a Financial Aid Working Group that built a state action plan, and the Department of Education created a Louisiana Counselor Assistance Center, which supports students, parents, and school counselors. The state also works directly with school systems to coordinate workshops and community events, rewards high schools for attaining the highest completion rate, and runs a student ambassadors initiative. Further, the Department has partnered with third parties to improve completion rates.⁴ In other words, beyond making requirements of local boards, the state's successes may also be attributed to substantial implementation investments, planning and energy.

If Connecticut does pass this legislation, it is my hope that the state will also provide funding to develop a strategy for execution and implementation of this policy—such as a communications roll-out plan, and support for school counselors, who will likely be asked to assist students and families with the process of filling out the FAFSA documentation. We cannot definitively count on an influx of significant federal dollars for students without meaningfully investing resources in this reform, and we would be mistaken to count this revenue stream without it.



³ Ibid (% of Class Completed FAFSA for LA). See also, How Louisiana Led the Nation in FAFSA Completion." Retrieved February 2020 at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/civiconation/2018/11/16/how-louisiana-led-the-nation-in-fafsa-completion/#4bd4d4b46413>.

⁴ See e.g., Blankley, B (2019, The Hayride). "Louisiana ranks 2nd in U.S. for FAFSA Completion". Retrieved February 2020 at <https://thehayride.com/2019/03/louisiana-ranks-2nd-in-u-s-for-fafsa-completion/>; Hill, A (2019, Hechinger Report). Opinion: Six Lessons from Louisiana about helping students obtain federal aid for college. Retrieved February 2020 at <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-six-lessons-from-louisiana-about-helping-students-obtain-federal-aid-for-college/>; and Louisiana Department of Education website. Financial Aid: Funding My Future. Retrieved February 2020 at louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives_financial-aid-support.pdf?sfvrsn=5.