



March 21, 2023

To: Michigan Legislators  
From: Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative

We are educators representing rural and urban Michigan school districts and members of the Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative, a select group of educators co-convened by The Education Trust-Midwest and Teach Plus Michigan to strive to ensure that state policies benefit a diverse population of students. One area lacking equity and access in our state is post-secondary education. A major barrier for many students is the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Moving to state-wide universal FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement would help remove this barrier. We recommend the following:

- **Pass a new law requiring high school graduates to complete the FAFSA prior to graduation or sign a waiver acknowledging their decision not to complete the FAFSA.**

In schools like ours (both rural and urban), many students will be the first in their family to attend college. However, many students are unfamiliar with the process involved with FAFSA completion and even distrust it, especially the requirement for using their social security number. As such, these and other barriers have created inequitable access to college funding. Our students and their parents need support and education to build trust to complete the FAFSA.

- Less than half of the class of 2022 completed a FAFSA by graduation.
- More than \$93 million of allocated Pell Grant money remained unused (TICAS, 2023)
- FAFSA completion is an incentive for the lowest socioeconomic status to enroll in a post-secondary institution when they complete the FAFSA (College Attainment Network).
- Enrollment in Michigan colleges will increase when more students complete the FAFSA.

*"In the end, filing the FAFSA will only help a student's chances in receiving any type of aid. If a student files the FAFSA and chooses not to use what is offered, there is no harm to the student."* -Marielle Sirk, Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) Advisor, Sault Area High School.

- **Provide information on post-secondary options beyond college/university and require families waiving FAFSA completion to review and complete the packet.**

Throughout Michigan, students of all academic abilities are opting to forgo traditional college/university education to pursue the trades, armed forces, or join the workforce due to employment opportunities and passion for the field. A 2018 Detroit high school graduate excelled in Advanced Placement English, but his passion was with his Career and Technical Education courses in construction technology. Rather than take the traditional four-year college path, he realized his dream of building houses through other post-secondary options.

- Governor Whitmer's Sixty by 30 campaign recognizes their contribution to Michigan's economy.
- Governor Whitmer recommends allocating \$175 million toward programs encouraging post-secondary training outside of the traditional college/university path.
- HB 4953 requires districts to provide information packets to grades 8-12 regarding postsecondary vocational training and Armed Forces opportunities.



- We recommend that to fulfill graduation requirements, students must identify a post-secondary option and a plan of action if they waive FAFSA completion.

*“With post-secondary options, it is important to expose students to all options with a focus on the three Es -- enlistment, enrollment or employment. Employment is not just taking an arbitrary job but gaining life-long career skills. We still encourage students to complete the FAFSA because it helps students qualify for the Detroit College Promise which you can use at a community college or vocational training. FAFSA can also fund some vocational and professional training. One Detroit High School senior is in barber school because she filled out the FAFSA. She researched and found one that accepted FAFSA.” -Rakiba Mitchell, Professional Counselor and Educational Consultant, Metro Detroit.*

- Grant financial assistance to schools to provide trained support from other resources to assist families in completing the FAFSA.

In urban and rural districts across Michigan, school counselors face large caseloads and increasing obligations. In one rural Upper Peninsula high school, school counselors have a student caseload of approximately 400 to 1. With such large numbers, students were falling through the cracks with FAFSA completion. The addition of an MCAN advisor has helped catch many of these students; however, most districts in Michigan have not been so fortunate. By adding support, particularly an MCAN Advisor, schools can better ensure that all students fulfill the FAFSA requirement.

- Michigan has the second worst counselor to student ratio in the nation at 671 to 1. The Michigan School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 to 1.
- MCAN Advisors are invaluable in districts they serve, but are not ubiquitous in the state.
- Governor Whitmer recommends \$15 million toward increasing FAFSA submissions, an indication of financial support of this nature.
- Additional annual funding from the state, with specified structured use, to increase capacity of counseling departments to meet this requirement.

*“What makes [college access counselors] so valuable is the fact that they themselves have extensive experience in the hurdles of post-secondary education and they understand the importance of having someone there to help...especially for me because I was not born in the U.S. They were willing to work together, make enquiries from their friends and former colleagues at different universities and also take the time out of their days to do an immense amount of research, all so that I would be able to get benefits that wouldn't be naturally expendable to me.” -Anthony, Student, Detroit Leadership Academy*

In order to achieve Governor Whitmer’s Sixty by 30 initiative, create equitable access to college funding, and increase the number of credentialed adults in Michigan, more students need support for acquiring funding for post-secondary training. Adding Michigan to the list of states that currently support universal FAFSA completion can help achieve this goal.

Respectfully submitted,

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