

# Postsecondary Trends in the Metro Atlanta Region



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Bellwether Education Partners contributed to the research and analysis for this report. Any viewpoints or opinions should be considered those of the authors, Learn4Life, alone.

# Project overview

Nationwide, there has been a drop in the number of students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and enrolling in postsecondary institutions. These trends have been most evident among underrepresented students, particularly students from low-income schools where the decline was higher compared to middle and high-income schools.

Learn4Life is concerned about these patterns in Metro Atlanta<sup>1</sup> and seeks to build a deeper understanding of postsecondary trends across the region. The goal of this research presented here is to bring awareness to the issue and to motivate local organizations to better target resources and interventions to get students furthest from opportunity back on track.

## Our Guiding Questions

1. What are the trends in FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment rates among students in the Metro Atlanta region?
2. How do these trends compare with national trends during the same period?
3. What additional factors may impact trends in student enrollment rates?

# Executive summary of key findings

What are the trends in FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment rates in Metro Atlanta?

During the pandemic, FAFSA completion rates declined in the Metro Atlanta region by four percent. This decline translated into 1,100 fewer students submitting FAFSA applications.

How do these trends in Metro Atlanta compare to the trends nationwide?

The decline in FAFSA completion rates across Metro Atlanta is consistent with national trends. This translated into over \$2.6 billion in unclaimed financial support<sup>1</sup>.

What additional factors may impact postsecondary enrollment trends in Metro Atlanta?

During the pandemic, students in high poverty schools saw the biggest drop in FAFSA completions. Schools where at least 75 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch saw a five-percentage point decline in FAFSA completions in 2021 compared to 2020.

# FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment trends nationwide and in Metro Atlanta

# FAFSA is critical for postsecondary success

The Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) is used to determine eligibility for federal student aid including low-cost loans, grants, work study, and in some cases, state and school aid



Postsecondary Enrollment



Persistence



Completion

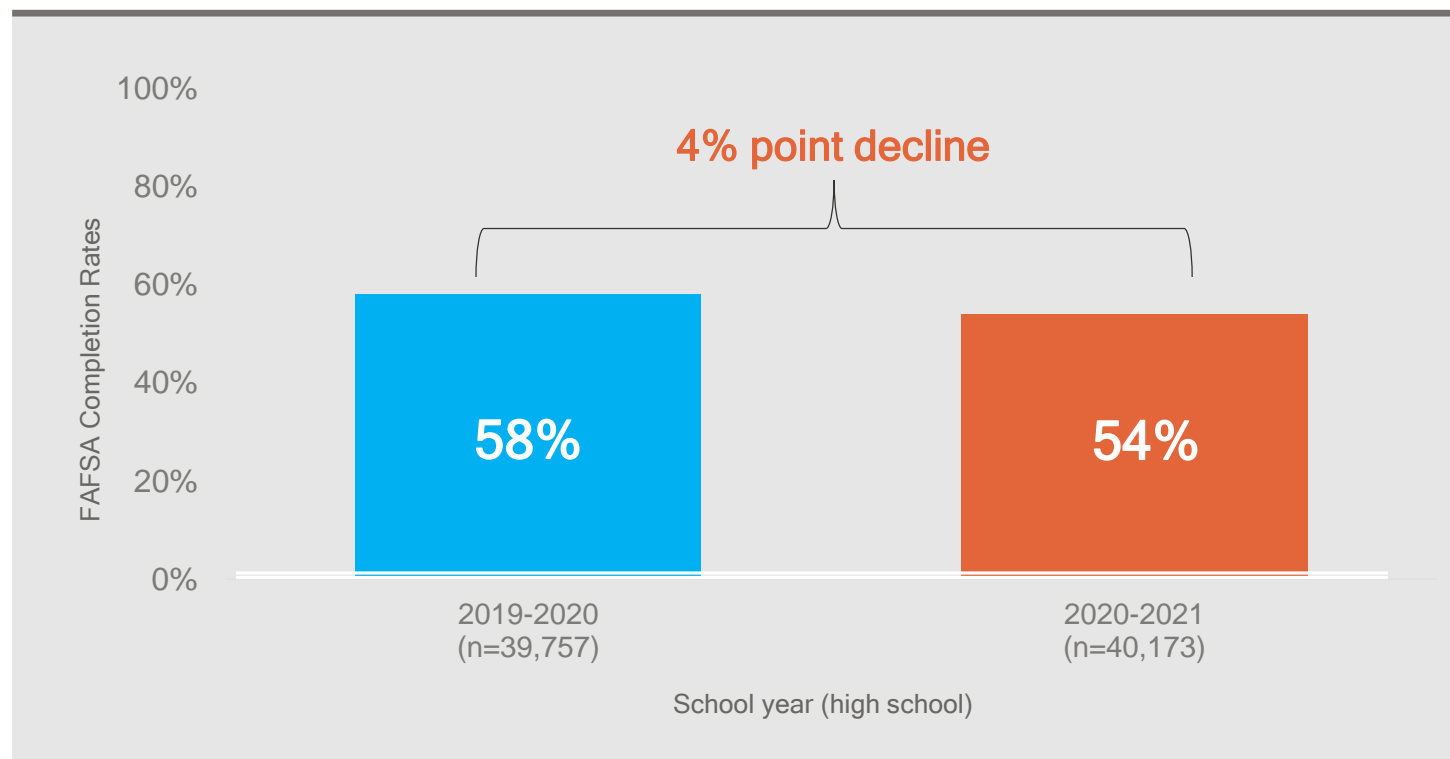
Completing the FAFSA increases postsecondary enrollment from 55% to 90%

Every additional \$1,000 in financial aid increases postsecondary persistence rates by 4%

GA public university graduates earn on average \$850,000 more over the course of their careers than GA students w/HS diploma alone, and add \$2M to State's GDP

# FAFSA completion rates have dropped by four percentage points in Metro Atlanta

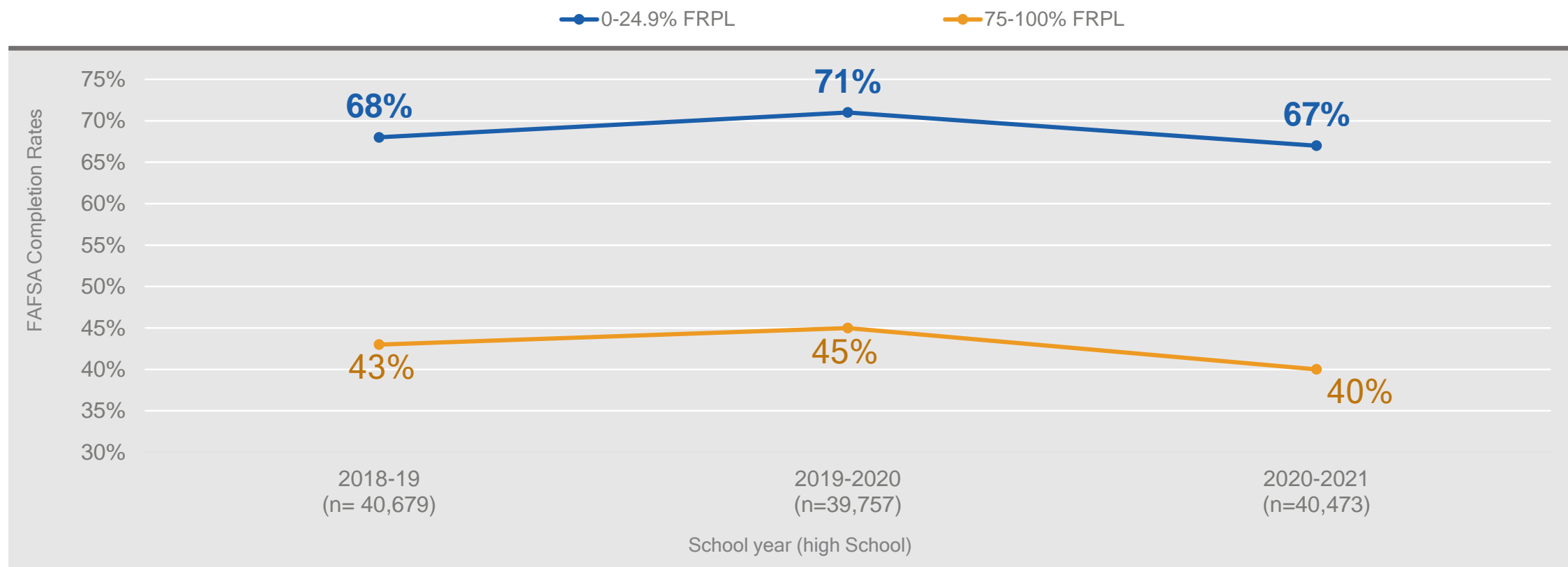
FAFSA Completion Rates By Metro Atlanta Seniors



About 1,100 fewer students in Metro Atlanta have applied for the FAFSA since the start of the pandemic

# Students who are enrolled in high poverty schools saw the greatest declines in FAFSA completion rates

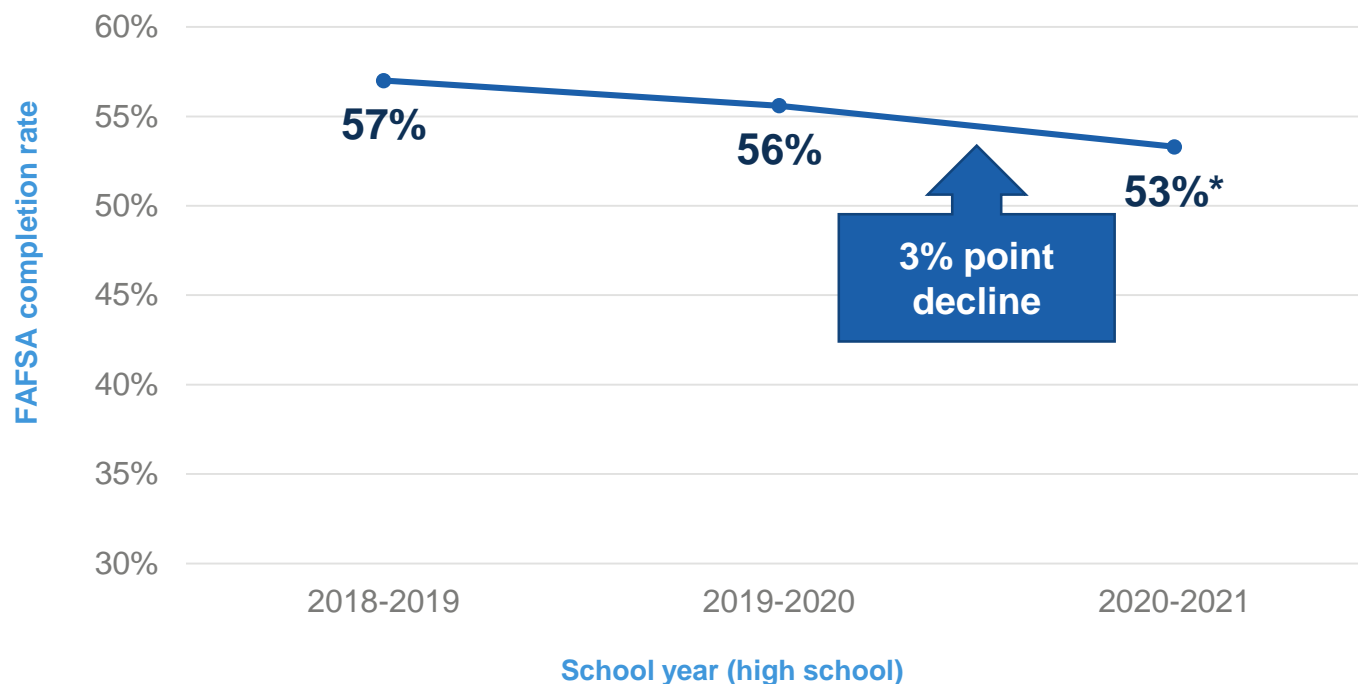
FAFSA Completion Rates for Students in Economically Disadvantaged<sup>1</sup> Schools in Metro Atlanta



Sources: <sup>1</sup>The [NCES](#) defines high-poverty as 75% or more of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

# Nationwide, FAFSA completion rates have also declined during this same period

FAFSA Completion Rates by U.S. High School Seniors

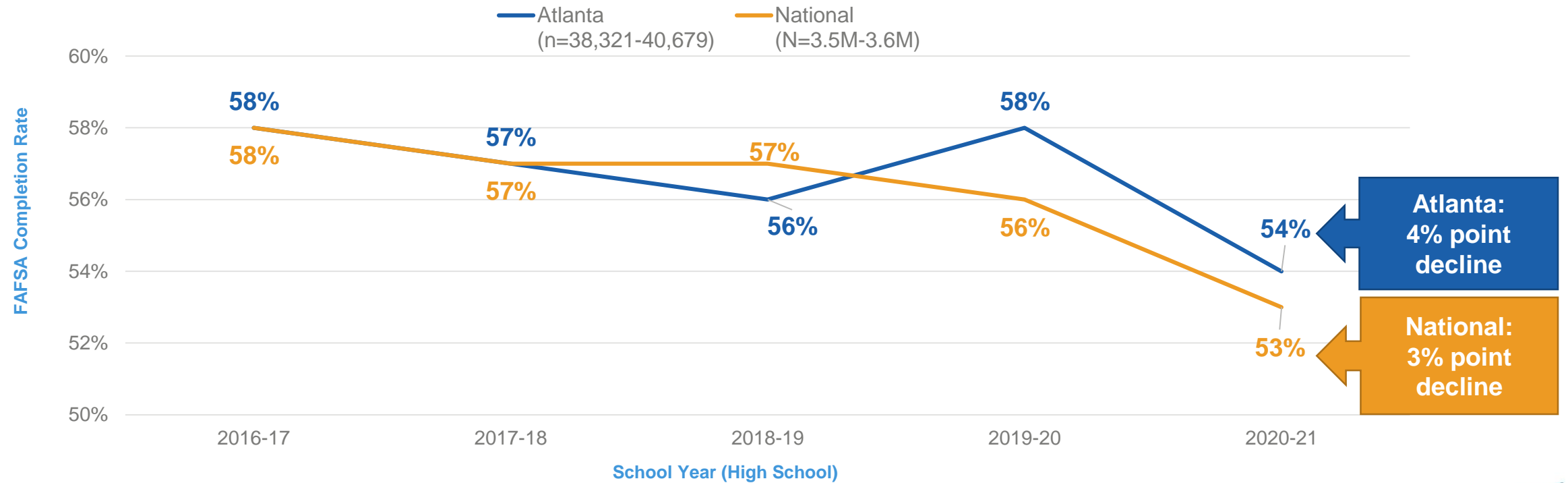


“Since the start of the pandemic, more than a **250,000 fewer students** completed the FAFSA than we expected, due to the pandemic<sup>2</sup>.”

~The National College Attainment Network

# FAFSA completions in Metro Atlanta are declining slightly faster than the national rate

FAFSA Completion Rates in Metro Atlanta and Nationwide



**What does this mean for students and their families?**

# Billions of dollars in free college aid are being left on the table

Nationally, over **650,000** seniors from the class of 2018 were eligible for a Pell Grant but did not complete the FAFSA



This resulted in an estimated **\$2.6 billion** in foregone funding

# What is contributing to these trends?

# The pandemic has exacerbated concerns about the affordability of postsecondary enrollment among students and families

**21%**

Of low-income students said money from their jobs is needed to support their family rather than paying for college expenses<sup>1</sup>

**44%**

Of parents said that they cannot afford to pay as much of their child's education as they had originally planned<sup>2</sup>

**50%**

Of students are concerned about graduating with a high amount of debt<sup>3</sup>

# Many students do not complete the FAFSA due to misperceptions about eligibility and the form's complexity

**Many students and their families believe that they are ineligible for student financial aid**

3 in 10 low-income families cited their perceived lack of eligibility as a reason for not completing the FAFSA in 2020-2021<sup>1</sup>

**Students are unaware that the FAFSA is for scholarships and not just loans**

Over a quarter of students did not complete the FAFSA because they did not want to take on debt<sup>2</sup>

**Students see the FAFSA as a complicated form that is difficult to complete**

Among those who did not complete a FAFSA, 69% of students (whose parents had a high school diploma or less) reported not filling out the FAFSA because they did not have enough information to do so<sup>2</sup>

# FAFSA completion is lowest among those who would benefit the most from federal aid

**FAFSA completion rates are lower in school districts with relatively higher levels of poverty**

In 2021, 27 percent of low-income students who needed financial aid to attend college have *not* taken any steps to receive the funding<sup>1</sup>

**There are large gaps in FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment based on students' socioeconomic status (SES)**

Only 37 percent of students in the lowest SES quintile, compared to 84 percent of students in the highest who do not fill out a FAFSA *and* enroll in a post-secondary institution immediately following graduation<sup>2</sup>

**Decreases in FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment rates were highest in the most marginalized schools and regions**

The greatest declines were seen in Title I public high schools, with a high concentration of minority students located in cities and towns<sup>3</sup>

# The pandemic exacerbated challenges schools faced around FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment

**School counselors were already struggling with high counselor-student ratios**

In Georgia, the counseling ratio is 466 students for every one counselor. This is nearly twice the recommended ratio of one counselor for every 250 students.<sup>1</sup>

**Remote learning disconnected students from the normal support they may have received before the pandemic<sub>2</sub>**

Only 38 percent of seniors in 2021 reported that their schools provided support when applying for financial aid or college.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, there were limited recruitment visits from colleges to high schools due to remote learning.

Sources:

1. Strear, M., Duffy, H., & Aste, M. (2019). Building a System for Postsecondary Success: The Pivotal Role of School Counselors. *College and Career Readiness and Success Center*.

2. NBC News [Fewer Than 2 In 5 High School Grads Have Applied for College Financial Aid So Far](#)

3. EducationWeek [Helping Students Plan How to Pay for College Is More Important Than Ever: Schools Can Help](#)

# What can we do now?

# Metro Atlanta 2021 FAFSA Initiative



**Goal:** to increase postsecondary enrollment and completion by improving FAFSA completion across metro Atlanta



**Strategy:** Scale and accelerate the good work of the Scholarship Academy and the United Way's College Bound program by:

- Train volunteers to work directly with students to complete FAFSA
- Host completion events and office hours
- Provide marketing materials and incentives

# College Bound FAFSA Initiative

**Goal:** to increase postsecondary success by improving FAFSA completion across metro Atlanta

## United Way & The Scholarship Academy Services

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- Train volunteers to work with students to complete FAFSA
- Host completion events
- Staff virtual office hours
- Provide marketing materials and incentives

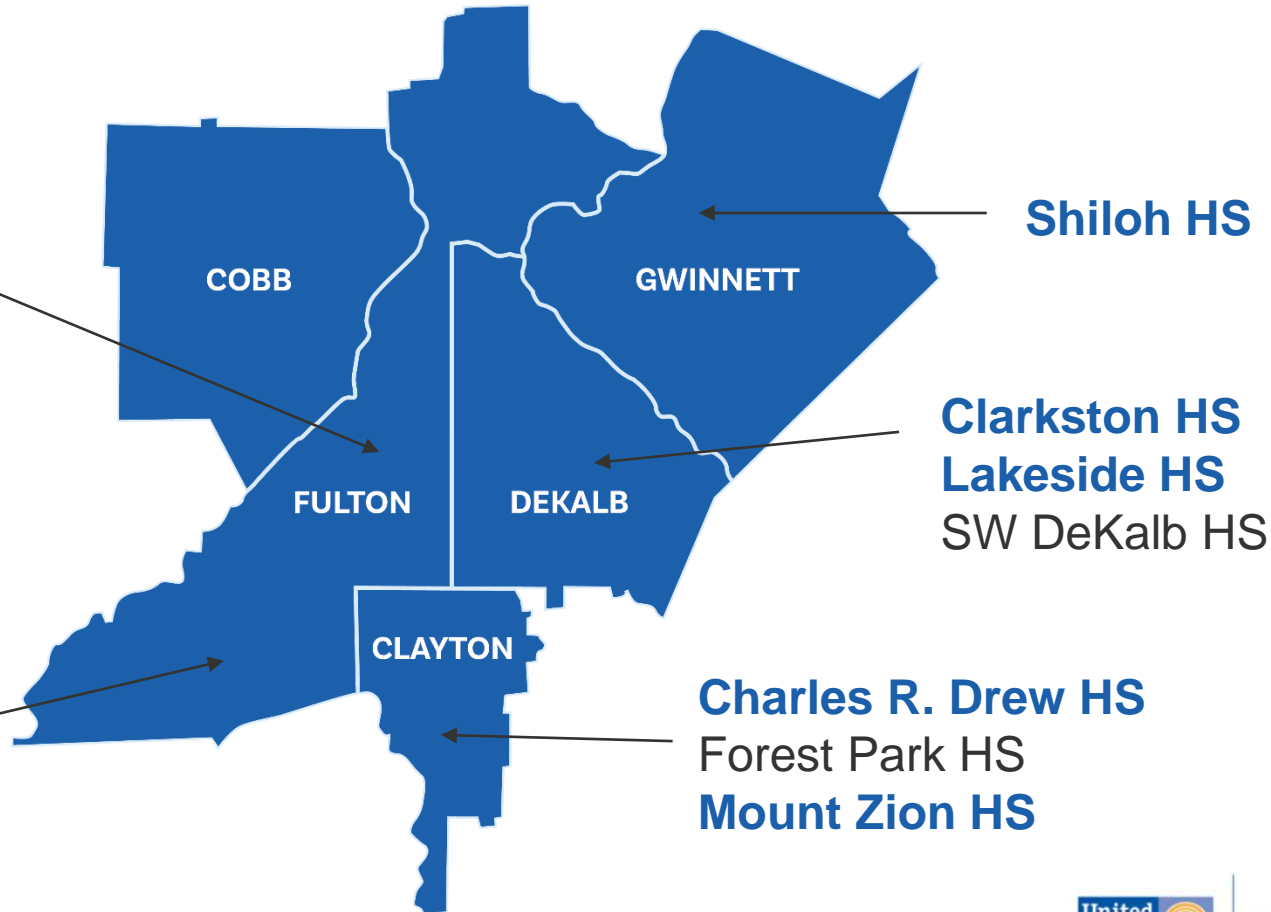
## Learn4Life Support

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- Incorporate insights from Postsec Network
- Cultivate district level support and buy-in
- Market events via social media and blogs
- Stakeholder engagement and outreach



# FAFSA Completion Phase I: 10 schools



## Phase 1 Schools

- FAFSA Completion Average 2020: **43%**
- Title I: **100%**

Banneker HS  
Creekside HS  
Tri-Cities HS

Clarkston HS  
Lakeside HS  
SW DeKalb HS

Charles R. Drew HS  
Forest Park HS  
Mount Zion HS

Shiloh HS



# Data collection and analytic approach

# Our data sources

We used several data sources to understand postsecondary trends across Metro Atlanta and nationwide, including:

- **The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (School-Level Data) Reports**
  - We accessed data for each school serving twelfth grade students in Metro Atlanta<sup>1</sup> to determine student enrollment and characteristics (e.g., percent of students receiving free and reduced priced lunch) at the school level from 2015-2021 (as available).
- **US Department of Education (Federal Student Aid) FAFSA**
  - FAFSA submission and completion data were accessed for all high schools in the 8 districts of interest in Georgia at the school level from 2015-2021.
- **National College Attainment Network**
  - We leveraged national FAFSA completion rates from comprehensive reports by the National College Attainment Network (NCAN).

The specific data sources are listed in the footnotes of each slide.

# Our definitions and formulas

- **Metro Atlanta:** Atlanta Public Schools, City Schools of Decatur, Clayton County, Cobb County, Dekalb County, Fulton County, Gwinnett County, and Marietta City Schools
- **FAFSA Completion rate:** Number of students who successfully *completed* the FAFSA (by June 30th of each year) divided by the total number of seniors for the respective school year
- **Number of Seniors:** The number of seniors enrolled during the Fall (October) of the respective school year
- **Postsecondary Enrollment:** Number of students enrolled in a postsecondary institution within 16 months of high school graduation
- **Data Averages by District and Region:**
  - When raw data were available, we calculated “rates” (e.g., post-secondary enrollment) using the relevant population total (e.g., number of seniors or total school enrollment)
  - When appropriate, we calculated weighted averages when rolling up to the school and/or the district level

# Data Analysis Notes

## Schools excluded from analysis due to insufficient data across multiple years

- **Atlanta Public Schools**
  - Carver High School
  - Charles Drew Charter High School
  - KIPP Atlanta
  - Atlanta Classical Academy
  - Crim High School
  - Carver High School
- **Fulton County**
  - Skyview High School
- **Gwinnett County**
  - McClure Health Science High School
  - Paul Duke STEM High School
- **Cobb County**
  - Campbell High School
  - Cobb Horizon
- **DeKalb County**
  - Tapestry Public Charter School

## Other Considerations

- When raw numbers are reported (e.g., the number of FAFSA completions), this number does not control for the total number individuals (e.g., the total number of seniors in 2019 versus the total number of seniors in 2020).
- When rates are reported, this data does consider the number total number of individuals. That is why this number is reported as a percentage.