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Fill Out the Form!

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If you see a young person at the mall wearing a FAFSA T-shirt, rest assured it's not the latest acronym from the world of texting.

FAFSA stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and it will be the subject of an awareness campaign in Albuquerque that will kick off next month.

The application is an online form that is required for all government-supplied financial aid, including Pell grants, subsidized loans and work study. Many universities also require students to fill out the FAFSA to be eligible for university-based aid.

Albuquerque Public Schools Counseling Manager Laura Owen said FAFSA completion is crucial to making sure all students can afford college.

"We see it really as an opportunity to look at college and career readiness for every child, and really promote being ready and having the financing to go to school," Owen said. "But on a bigger level, we want everybody to have the opportunity for postsecondary planning and opportunities."

The form — which requires bank statements, business records and tax documents — can be daunting even for knowledgeable families.

Statistics released for the first time from the U.S. Department of Education show that 37.9 percent of Albuquerque Public Schools seniors completed the form last year. Another 17 percent started but didn't finish.

Owen said the district hopes to get those numbers broken down by ethnicity, and even by school. The district is shooting for a 50 percent completion rate this year.

APS is one of six districts nationwide chosen for a federally funded publicity blitz about the FAFSA. Albuquerque and Philadelphia will have citywide efforts, while efforts in St. Louis, Detroit, Baltimore and Boston will be focused on just a few schools.

The Albuquerque drive is particularly aimed at getting Hispanic and Native American students to fill out the application.

In addition to publicity, APS will get money to set up "trusted centers," where families can go for step-by-step help filling out the form.

The campaign officially kicks off Feb. 1, and will be especially intense in the buildup to the March 1 priority FAFSA deadline. However, many schools accept the application as late as September.

A larger pool of 20 school districts nationwide was chosen to get unprecedented access to records showing which students have started the form and which have completed it. The idea is to help counselors target students who need the most help filling it out.

The publicity will include traditional as well as "guerrilla" advertising, with college-age experts on the FAFSA patrolling malls with shirts and other gear that urges teens to ask about the form.

"The idea behind this is called creating the buzz," said Luis Vasquez-Ajmac, the president of MAYA Advertising and Communications. "Creating the buzz, and then creating word of mouth. Because that's really what we want is for people to go home at nighttime, kids, and talk about, 'Wow, what's FAFSA? Who are these guys who have been at the mall all the time?'"

MAYA, which specializes in multicultural advertising, is contracting with the U.S. Department of Education for the publicity blitz.

The "trusted centers" will be at APS' 13 high schools, University of New Mexico and Central New Mexico Community College. Details will be announced Feb. 1.

"The U.S. Department of Education will be here the last week of January, first week of February, training volunteers from all over the community who will actually do the hand-holding, one-on-one mentoring with the parent and the students to help fill out the FAFSA," Owen said.

APS also hopes to seek business partnerships and provide incentives to students. Everyone who fills out the form would be entered in a drawing for a prize like a prom package or a set of dorm necessities. The district is seeking donors to provide the incentives, which are not part of the federal grant.

Owen said the FAFSA push will outlive its federal funding because the volunteers will already be trained, so the district will be able to continue its "trusted centers" and private incentives in future years.

"We really see this as a project that will go on for years and we'll refine, we'll get better, we'll form stronger collaborations and we'll really as a community say, 'What do we all need to do to come together to really promote helping our students to be ready for post-secondary opportunities,'" Owen said.