Earlier this month, the Louisiana Department of Education celebrated National School Counseling Week, spotlighting counselors and focusing public attention on the unique contribution of school counselors within U.S. school systems. These educators serve as an integral part of every school’s education team and to student success.

Comprehensive school counseling programs help to increase student achievement and provide a much-needed resource for students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Among their many duties, counselors take the lead on informing students and families of financial aid opportunities to help fund their postsecondary pursuits, as financial aid planning is now a requirement for high school graduation in Louisiana.

School counselor Kenya Fields, of Ellender Memorial High School in Terrebonne Parish, recently hosted a series of financial aid planning events that were well received and attended. We sat down with Fields to discuss the importance of parent engagement. During our conversation, she shared her experiences with ensuring successful outreach and best practices to help students secure financial aid.

Fields believes that parent engagement is critical in education and that it has a direct impact on student achievement, especially at the high school level. She stresses the importance of communication, noting that partnerships among school systems, students, and parents is key to student success and buy-in.

“Parental involvement is important because it opens lines of communication, which play a large role in achieving success for students in school and beyond.”

Over the summer, Fields began planning a series of financial aid planning events at her school as a way to improve parent engagement and increase her school’s Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) submission rate.

Financial aid can remove barriers to accessing four-year universities, two-year community colleges, and technical training programs. By not completing the FAFSA, Louisiana students forego millions each year in federal grants, state opportunities, and other postsecondary funding. Fields equips parents with this knowledge and supports them through the process of securing financial aid, serving as a valuable resource to parents, students, and her school.

Many types of financial assistance support resources for students, parents, and advisors are available in the form of scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study programs. With this in mind, Fields used her communication skills to spread the word and reach out to representatives of local colleges, community colleges, career and technical education (CTE) programs, and the state department to assist.

“Prior to the events, I held class presentations explaining the importance of financial aid. I invited admissions counselors from local colleges to speak with my students,” said Fields. “Students don’t always listen to what their educators say because we say it all the time. But when they hear it from someone else, like an admissions counselor, it becomes real.”

She reminds her students and parents at every opportunity that all high school seniors in Louisiana are required to submit the FAFSA, apply for the Louisiana Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), or receive a waiver in order to graduate. For these events, she distributed flyers, made announcements at her school, and used JCampus—a school-approved resource—to support her in calling, texting, and emailing students and parents in the weeks leading up to the FAFSA events.

“I encourage all of my students to complete the FAFSA. I like to think of it as providing my students with a plan B. Young people tend to want everything right now, and they want it their way,” said Fields. “They have difficulty seeing what will happen later on. I provide them with a fallback plan, a what if plan because once financial aid is completed, the sky is the limit.”

Fields remains relentless and determined with her outreach. Her hard work on the FAFSA events has led to an impressive increase in parental involvement and awareness. Moreover, through her intricate planning and persistence, her school’s FAFSA submission rates have already doubled since this time last year, from 30 percent to 60 percent.

FIELDS SHARES BEST PRACTICES TO HELP STUDENTS SECURE FINANCIAL AID

- Seek principal and administration approval and support.
- Plan events in advance and include representatives from local colleges, the state department, etc.
- Meet with juniors prior to senior year to let them know the importance of financial aid.
- Hold classroom presentations for all 11th grade students, providing an overview of the various types of financial assistance available.
- During senior year, conduct classroom presentations with guest speakers from colleges, community colleges, and CTE programs.
- Identify specialty students that may need additional assistance—unaccompanied/homeless youth, special circumstances, foster care—and work with them to ensure completion.
- Utilize multiple communication avenues, including creating flyers, making announcements, and sending automated calls, text messages, and emails to parents and students.
- Provide students and parents with resources that might not be available at home.

For two years, Louisiana has ranked No.1 in the nation for its FAFSA completion rates, according to the National College Access Network. With the help of educators like Fields, Louisiana will continue to focus on equipping schools, students, and families with the training and tools they need to fund their future. Visit the Department’s Financial Aid webpage to learn more.