

EDUCATION LAB

# South Carolina sees small boost in applications for college financial aid

BY MAURA TURCOTTE MTURCOTTE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM  
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Nearly 32,000 completed FAFSA filings have been tallied for the 2023-24 school year in South Carolina by the National College Attainment Network, which tracks data from the Office of Federal Student Aid. File/Staff  
FILE/BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

Slightly more South Carolina high school students applied for federal financial aid this year than last, signaling **college enrollment could be on the mend** after a decline earlier in the pandemic.

**More than 32,500 completed filings** for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid for the 2023-24 school year have been tallied in South Carolina by the National College Attainment Network, which tracks data from the Office of Federal Student Aid. That marks a 1.9 percent increase in filings from last year.

Rising FAFSA completion rates can be a good indicator that more students might be attending college; the application opens doors to loans, grants and scholarships that make higher education more accessible, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.

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In turn, opportunities through FAFSA can help students from lower-income communities break the cycle of poverty, said Bre Pressey, cofounder and executive director of the **Southern Scholars Initiative**. The organization, which partners with schools in Bamberg and Orangeburg, offers scholarships, mentorship and networking programs to help students of color access college and prepare them for careers. A part of the group's efforts includes raising students' awareness about the application and offering assistance with the filing process.

### MORE INFORMATION

The Post and Courier Education Lab is a multi-year project, employing four reporters, focused on the need for public education reform in South Carolina. The Coastal Community Foundation and Spartanburg Foundation serve as fiscal sponsors for the Education Lab, which is supported by grants from the Jolley Foundation, Intertech, anonymous donors, and generous donations on behalf of donors to The Post and Courier Public Service and Investigative Fund who designate to the Education Lab.

Completing the FAFSA can be difficult to navigate for many students. The form itself is complicated, asking for important identification documents and parents' income.

If a student doesn't have parents that attended college or doesn't live with their parents, that can add more confusion to the process.

"I have seen how the FAFSA becomes kind of a window into a level of knowledge about parents', about family members' income that

the students often don't feel privy to or comfortable with," said Devin Thornburg, a board member of Southern Scholars and a professor at Adelphi University. "It's kind of a veil of not knowing that has to be lifted."

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BY MAURA TURCOTTE MTURCOTTE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

High schools serving more students from low-income backgrounds in South Carolina did have some gains in applications this year, seeing a nearly 3 percent rise. Higher-income schools had an estimated 2 percent increase.

Overall, nearly 60 percent of the class of 2023 in South Carolina has completed the federal aid application for the 2023-24 school year as of Aug. 18, according to the National College Attainment Network. That total leaves South Carolina ranking 15th in the country for the number of students completing the FAFSA.

Louisiana, which requires students to complete the form before they graduate, topped the list with more than 70 percent.

The S.C. districts that saw the biggest increases between this year and last included Aiken, with 118 more applications; Orangeburg, with 97 more filings; and Charleston, with 94.

The Fort Mills school district had one of the highest percentages of completed filings to 12th graders in the district, with 891 applications submitted.

Joe Burke, a spokesperson for Fort Mills schools, said the district works very hard to help students to figure out their next steps.

In addition to college counselors talking to students each year about college funding, he said, the district's Nation Ford High School hosts each year the College and Career Extravaganza, during which students and their families can attend sessions about selecting and affording a college.

Adopting that college-going culture is key to getting more students involved, said Pressey, the Southern Scholars founder, whether that's through hosting college-focused events or posting fliers about scholarship opportunities.

"One of our goals is to really encourage our partner schools to create the college-going culture year-round for students so that it just becomes a part of their thinking as they're entering their senior year," she said.

The FAFSA form for the 2024-25 school year, which will feature fewer questions than previous years' applications, will be available in December. Visit [studentaid.gov](https://studentaid.gov) for more information.

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