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# How one high school is helping students deal with the botched FAFSA rollout

By [Katie Lobosco](#), CNN

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La Follette High School in Madison, Wisconsin. From Madison Metropolitan School District

**Washington (CNN)** — At Robert M. La Follette High School in Madison, Wisconsin, some

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since January to try to submit the FAFSA.

“You just feel terrible,” said Vanessa Hlavacka, a counselor for multilingual students at La Follette High School.

“It was the dad’s only day off, and he spent it in my office trying to figure this out,” she said.



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A botched rollout of an updated version of the FAFSA – which must be submitted if a student wants to qualify for certain loans, grants and scholarships – has resulted in multiple problems and delays this year. Submissions across the country are way down, and many students are stuck in limbo, waiting for financial aid information from schools even after the traditional May 1 college decision deadline has come and gone.

For many students, the problems with this year’s FAFSA have made a previously frustrating process even more stressful. But for some low-income students, who are most reliant on financial aid, the ripple effects could be long-lasting.

Although La Follette has ramped up its support services, roughly half as many of the school’s seniors have been able to successfully submit the FAFSA so far compared with last year’s senior class.

“We are so concerned and worried that these students will not make it to college in the fall,” said Annie Hank Braga, a teacher and co-coordinator of La Follette’s college readiness program.

“I worry about the long-term impact it will have on their ability to make a living,” she said.

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There's a lot on the line, especially for students at La Follette High School where more than half come from low-income families and more than one-third speak something other than English as their first language.

The concern is that some students may give up trying to complete the FAFSA and ultimately skip college altogether because they can't afford it without the help of federal loans and grants. Others may forgo enrolling at their preferred four-year school and instead decide to enroll in a community college with a more flexible enrollment timeline.

Though hundreds of colleges have pushed back their decision deadlines this year, not every college has pushed the date past May 1.

"I think it's inevitable that we will see students' decisions impacted because of this FAFSA rollout," Hank Braga said.

## High school ramps up support

Once the issues with this year's FAFSA became apparent, La Follette High School ramped up support services for families of college-bound seniors.

When the school held its first FAFSA workshop in January, most families walked away without successfully completing the form. At the time, there were several glitches that applicants were experiencing.

"That's when our eyes really opened to the roller coaster we were jumping on," Hank Braga said.

Given the way things went, the school counselors decided to offer a second FAFSA workshop in April – but many families still didn't have success. Plus, students have experienced hourslong wait times when they call the government's FAFSA helpline.

Counselors have been sitting down one-on-one with students and parents to help guide them through the application process. The school has also partnered with outside organizations like

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students are eligible for federal student aid, regardless of their parents' immigration status. But a technical glitch initially prevented students from mixed-status families from submitting the form altogether.

Later, the Department of Education provided some workarounds so that a parent without a Social Security number could enter his or her information, but it wasn't seamless. By the time the department issued a fix to the problem, it was already April 30.

Some La Follette students from mixed-status families have had success since then submitting the FAFSA, but others are still having problems. Now, they're running into issues other students faced months ago and had more time to resolve.

Hank Braga is concerned that some of these families, who tend to already be wary of filling out government forms, will just give up.

"It's hard to try to continue to reassure them that this is safe and this is worth it when it's not working well," she said.

## Tears of frustration and joy

The Department of Education has increased its support for students applying for financial aid this year. It provided \$50 million in grants to organizations that help students file the FAFSA in early May.

The Biden administration has faced criticism for the botched rollout from both Republican and Democratic lawmakers, as well as from college financial aid groups. At the request of some Republican members of Congress, the Government Accountability Office has started an investigation into the new form's implementation. And some lawmakers are concerned about whether the problems with the FAFSA will be fixed in time for next year.

Nationally, the percentage of high school seniors who have filed the FAFSA is down more than 17% compared with last year's class at this point, according to the National College Attainment Network. And there has been a bigger decline at lower-income schools and schools with a

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Suddenly, we were able to submit. It's a problem we can't figure out why," Hlavacka said.

The initial problem had occurred when the student invited his father to fill out part of the form. Despite trying different ways to send the virtual invitation, the father's account wouldn't provide the ability to access the form. It's a glitch that several other La Follette students have experienced.

"When he was able to submit, I started crying. I was just so happy for him," Hlavacka said.

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