



HOW'D THEY DO IT?

The NC school district that beat a tough FAFSA year

NC FAFSA Research Findings and Implications
December 2024



PRESENTERS



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QUIZ:

**What are the top two barriers
to attending college?**

THE BIGGEST BARRIERS: FEAR OF STUDENT LOAN DEBT & COST

Taking on **student loan debt** (strongly / somewhat agree)

45%

High school students and families

59%

Adult learners

Cost of getting a degree (strongly / somewhat agree)

33%

High school students and families

52%

Adult learners

BUT ACCESSING FINANCIAL AID IS A BARRIER TOO:

Getting financial aid is **too complicated** (strongly / somewhat agree)

37%

High school students and families

44%

Adult learners

Don't know **how to access financial aid** (strongly / somewhat agree)

33%

High school students and families

38%

Adult learners

BARRIERS TO COMPLETING A FAFSA:

Don't know enough about FAFSA (strongly / somewhat agree)

39%

High school students and families

28%

Adult learners

The process of filling out a FAFSA is confusing (strongly / somewhat agree)

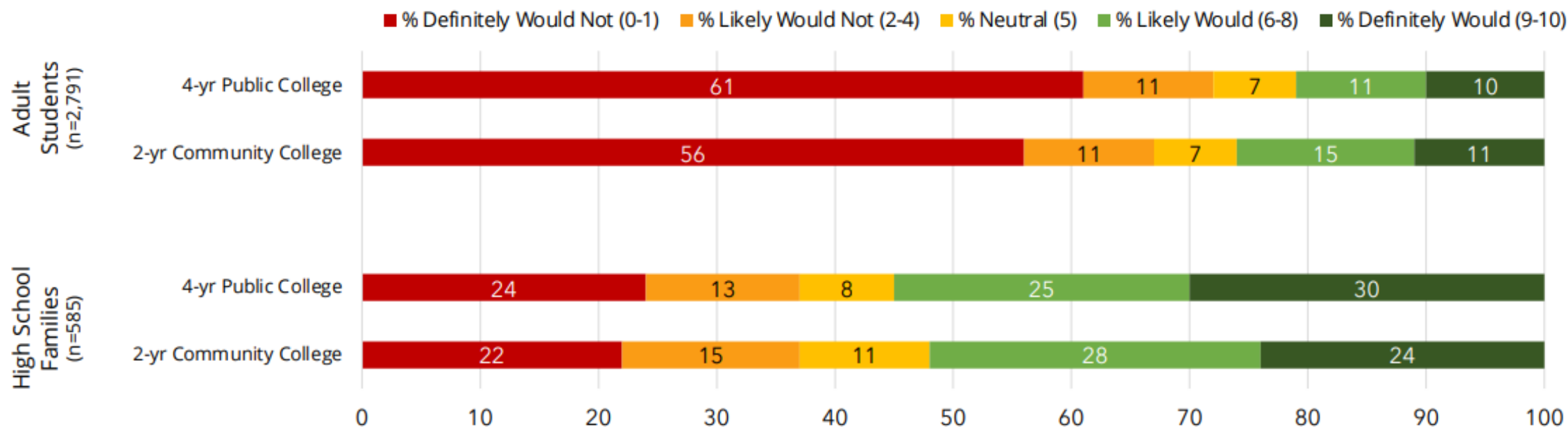
23%

High school students and families

28%

Adult learners

Likelihood of Attending College in the Next Five Years



FAFSA INSIGHTS

In the next five years, to what extent would you/your family consider attending any of the following schools? Please answer on a scale where 0 you/your family would NOT consider it and 10 means you/your family would strongly consider it.

8.15.23

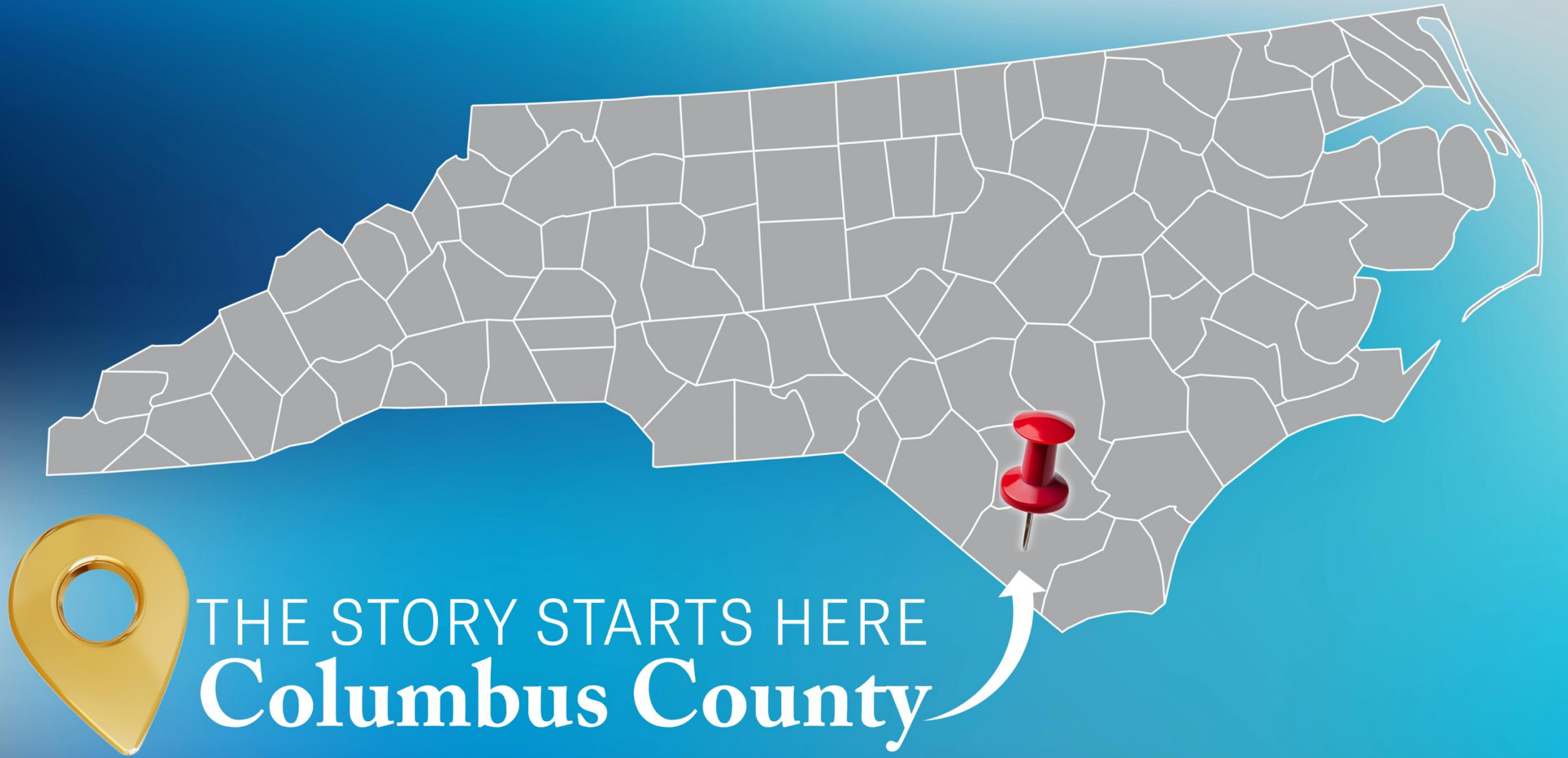
BREAKING BARRIERS

The NC district that beat a tough FAFSA year



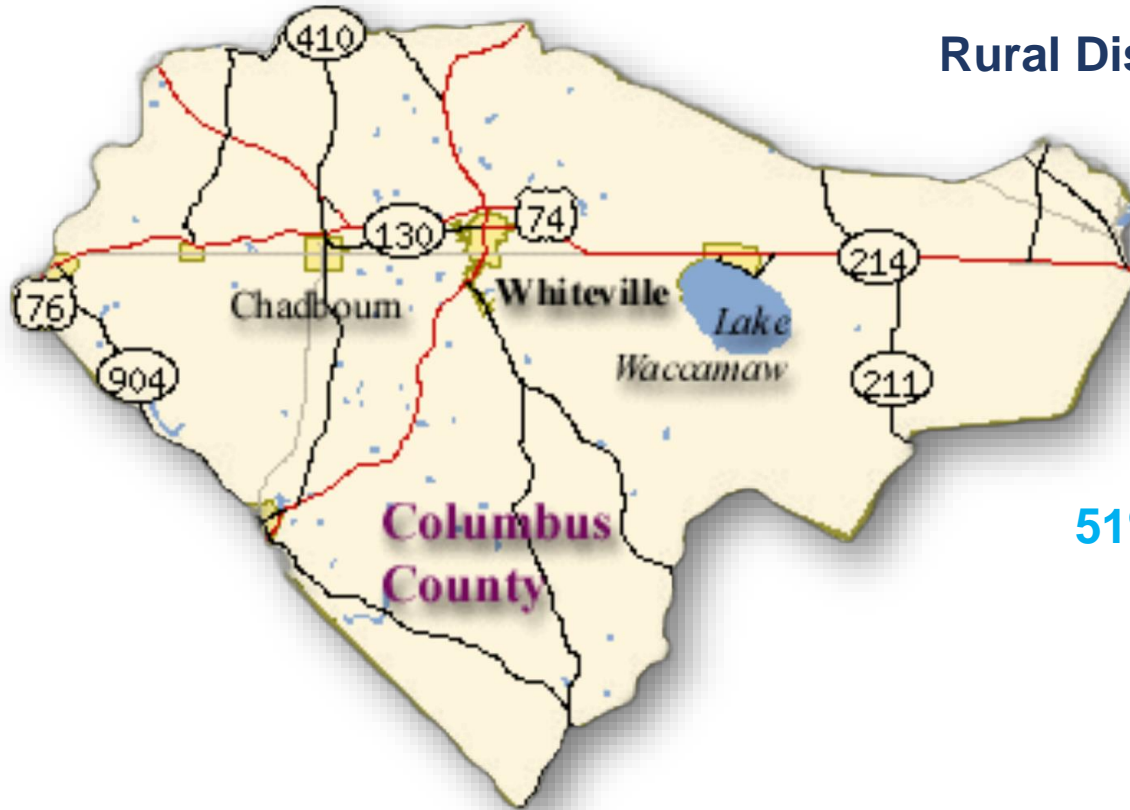
Laura Hunter
Chief Academic Officer and
Director of Curriculum and Instruction





THE STORY STARTS HERE
Columbus County

SETTING THE SCENE



Rural District in Southeastern NC - on the edge of the Sandhills

5,300 Students and **4** High Schools

Educational Attainment: **70%** of the district has no credential or degree beyond high school

51% of high school students participate in **CCP** programs

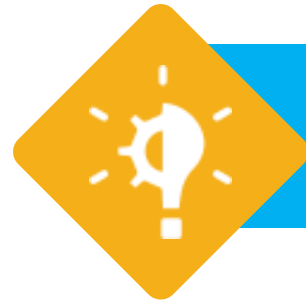
Less than 5% of students participate in AP coursework

Student to Counselor ratio: **391 :1**

Map source: [The North Carolina Office of Archives & History](https://www.ncarchives.org/)

RAISING THE BAR

Columbus County School takes on FAFSA Completion



2023 (State FAFSA - 62%)

- **59%** of our CCS students completed FAFSA in 2023*
- **70%** of CCS graduates reported intentions to enroll in postsecondary institution*
- **55%** of CCS graduates actually enrolled in a postsecondary institution*

*According to [myFutureNC Attainment Profiles by County](#)



Our 2024 Goals

1. Outpace the statewide FAFSA average from last year (**62%**)
2. District goal: **65%** completion
3. Increase FAFSA completion... Increase Postsecondary Enrollment by **10%**

MAPPING OUT A GAMEPLAN





4/7 (Spring Break)

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 1**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was **62%**. The state FAFSA tracker does not currently have data for completed FAFSA forms because of the delay in the FAFSA rollout this year.

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	8	29%	0%
ECJSHS	80	27	34%	0%
SCHS	159	116	73%	0%
WCHS	112	31	28%	0%
Our District	379	182	48%	0%
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	65%

 4/21
Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 2**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%.

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: This week we want to increase our completion rate by at least **5 points**. That means we **need at least 25 students across the district to move from SUBMITTED to COMPLETED**.

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	8	29%	6	21%
ECJSHS	80	28	35%	18	23%
SCHS	159	117	74%	60	38%
WCHS	112	32	29%	27	24%
Columbus County Schools	379	183	48%	110	29%
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%



District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completion Rate
Whiteville City Schools	129	53	41%	33%
Bladen County	287	144	50%	26% ✕
Brunswick County	925	271	29%	23% ✕
Pender County	751	244	32%	25% ✕
Robeson County	1,241	359	29%	19% ✕



4/28

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 3**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%.

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: This week we want to increase our completion rate by at least **5 points**. That means we need at least **25 students across the district to move from SUBMITTED to COMPLETED**.

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	8	29%	6	21%
ECJSHS	80	30	38%	22	28%
SCHS	159	126	79%	63	40%
WCHS	112	34	30%	29	26%
Columbus County Schools	379	199	53%	120 (Up 10 from last week)	32% (up by 3% from last week)
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%

District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completion Rate
Whiteville City Schools	129	54	42%	35%
Bladen County	287	70	24%	18%
Brunswick County	925	276	30%	24%
Pender County	751	249	33%	26%
Robeson County	1,241	367	30%	20%



5/5

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 4**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%.

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: We met our goal last week! AND... we are starting to outpace our district neighbors (including Whiteville City Schools) in FAFSA Submission rate and FAFSA Completion rate! Let's keep it up this week by continuing to push our completion rate up by **5 points!** That means we need **25 more students** across the district to move from "submitted" to "completed."

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	10	36%	6	21%
ECJSHS	80	30	38%	22	28%
SCHS	159	126	79%	82	52%
WCHS	112	35	31%	30	27%
Columbus County Schools	379	201	53%	140 +20 from last week	37%
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%

+5 points
from last
week)

District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completion Rate
Whiteville City Schools	129	54	42%	37%
Bladen County	287	74	26%	23%
Brunswick County	925	289	31%	26%
Pender County	751	257	34%	29%
Robeson County	1,241	381	31%	23%



5/12

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 5**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%.

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: Last week we moved up **7 points** from **37%** to **44%** FAFSA Completion.

This rank us 8th of our 115 School Districts in North Carolina! **WOW!**

We are only 11 points away from #1... Let's Do It!!!

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	12	43%	10	36%
ECJSHS	80	32	40%	26	33%
SCHS	159	127	80%	96	60%
WCHS	112	39	35%	35	31%
Columbus County Schools	379	210	55%	167 +20 from last week	44% +7 points from Last week)
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%

District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completion Rate
Whiteville City Schools	129	57	44%	42% ✕
Bladen County	287	74	26%	24% ✕
Brunswick County	925	296	32%	28% ✕
Pender County	751	270	36%	33% ✕
Robeson County	1,241	399	32%	26% ✕



5/19

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 6**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%.

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: Last week we moved up **2 points** from **44%** to **46%** FAFSA Completion.

This **ranks us 7th** of our 115 School Districts in North Carolina!

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	12	43%	10	36%
ECJSHS	80	35	44%	30	38%
SCHS	159	129	81%	98	62%
WCHS	112	38	34%	36	32%
Columbus County Schools	379	214	56%	174 +7 from last week	46% +2 points from last week
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%

District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completion Rate
Whiteville City Schools	129	58	44%	43% ✕
Bladen County	287	78	27%	27% ✕
Brunswick County	925	309	33%	30% ✕
Pender County	751	280	37%	35% ✕
Robeson County	1,241	418	34%	28% ✕



5/27

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 7**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%.

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: Last week we moved up **9 points** from **46%** to **55%** FAFSA Completion!

This **rank us 3rd** of our 115 School Districts in North Carolina! We can be #1... Let's Go!

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	13	46%	11	39%
ECJSHS	80	38	48%	35	44%
SCHS	159	130	82%	102	64%
WCHS	112	64	57%	57	51%
Columbus County Schools	379	245	65%	205 +31 from last week	55% +9 points from last week
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%

We are just two points behind Elkin City Schools and one point behind Asheville City Schools!

District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Completion Rate
Elkin City Schools 1 high school	97	55	57%
Asheville City Schools 1 high school	162	91	56%



6/2

Subject: **FAFSA Competition Week 8**

Our district goal is to outpace the statewide FAFSA completion average. Last year that average was 62%. This year the statewide FAFSA completion rate is 40.3%, which means that we are outpacing the FAFSA completion rate by **17 points!**

OUR GOAL THIS WEEK: Last week we moved up **2 points** from **55%** to **57%** FAFSA Completion! This ranks us **4th** of our 115 School Districts in North Carolina! We are 3 points behind Allegheny County (they came out of nowhere!) and one point behind Asheville City Schools and Elkin City Schools!

School	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Submission Rate	FAFSA Completions	FAFSA Completion Rate
CCCA	28	13	46%	11	39%
ECJSHS	80	43	54%	40	50%
SCHS	159	130	82%	102	64%
WCHS	112	65	58%	58	52%
Columbus County Schools	379	251	66%	211 +6 from last week)	57% +2 points from last week
2024 GOAL	379	300	79%	250	65%

District	Senior Count	FAFSA Submitted	FAFSA Completion Rate
Allegheny County 1 high school	65	39	60%
Elkin City Schools 1 high school	97	56	58%
Asheville City Schools 1 high school	162	94	58%



6/2

Subject: **FINAL FAFSA UPDATE: WE WON!**

As of May 31st, 2024 Columbus County Schools has achieved at **65.5% FAFSA** Completion Rate making us **the first district in NC to achieve the statewide FAFSA Goal** AND ranking us as the **#1 District in NC for FAFSA Completion!**

NCSEAA

FAFSA Tracker Overview



Completion Rate as of 6/7/2024

43.6%

▼ 14.8% vs PY

School Count

635

Senior Count

102.6K

▲ 1.6% vs PY

Submissions

47,816

▼ 13.7% vs PY

Completions

44,714

▼ 13.4% vs PY

Students of Color

53.7%

Econ. Disadv.

46.7%

Est. Pell Grants

\$85.5M

Geo Density

City	19,302	45.6%
Suburb	3,371	43.0%
Town	2,812	40.7%
Rural	19,229	42.2%

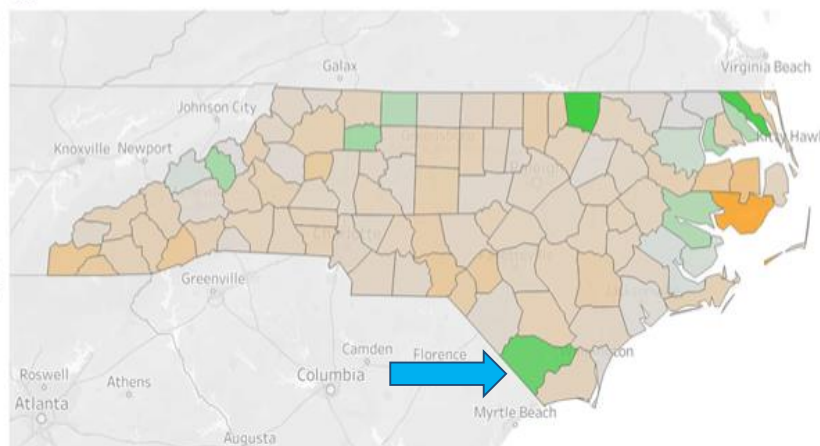
School Type

Traditional P...	38,678	42.4%
Charter	2,747	49.4%
Cooperative...	3,289	55.4%

Class Size

Large	21,863	45.1%
Medium	10,872	39.6%
Small	7,294	43.2%

Geo



Districts (Click to view details)

Catawba County...	420	39.2%
Chapel Hill-Carr...	511	54.3%
Charlotte-Meckl...	3,973	43.1%
Chatham County...	363	57.3%
Cherokee County...	52	27.7%
Clay County Scho...	34	41.0%
Cleveland Count...	314	36.6%
Clinton City Scho...	58	35.2%
Columbus Count...	243	69.2%
Craven County B...	271	39.8%
Cumberland Cou...	1,194	41.1%
Currituck County...	59	27.2%

79.2%
End of June

What We Learned Along the Way...

MYTH BUSTING



Everyone doesn't have to Complete FAFSA



Parents Won't Cooperate



High School Counselors Know all the Things!



FAFSA cannot be OUTSOURCED

THAT'S WHERE THE STATE COMES IN...



Kathy Hastings
Director of Outreach and Communications





NORTH CAROLINA STATE EDUCATION ASSISTANCE AUTHORITY

Helping North Carolina Students Plan and Pay for Their Education



Help with the college-going process



College Applications



FAFSA Resources



Residency Determination Service



Transcripts



Scholarship Portal



State Education Loan Servicing

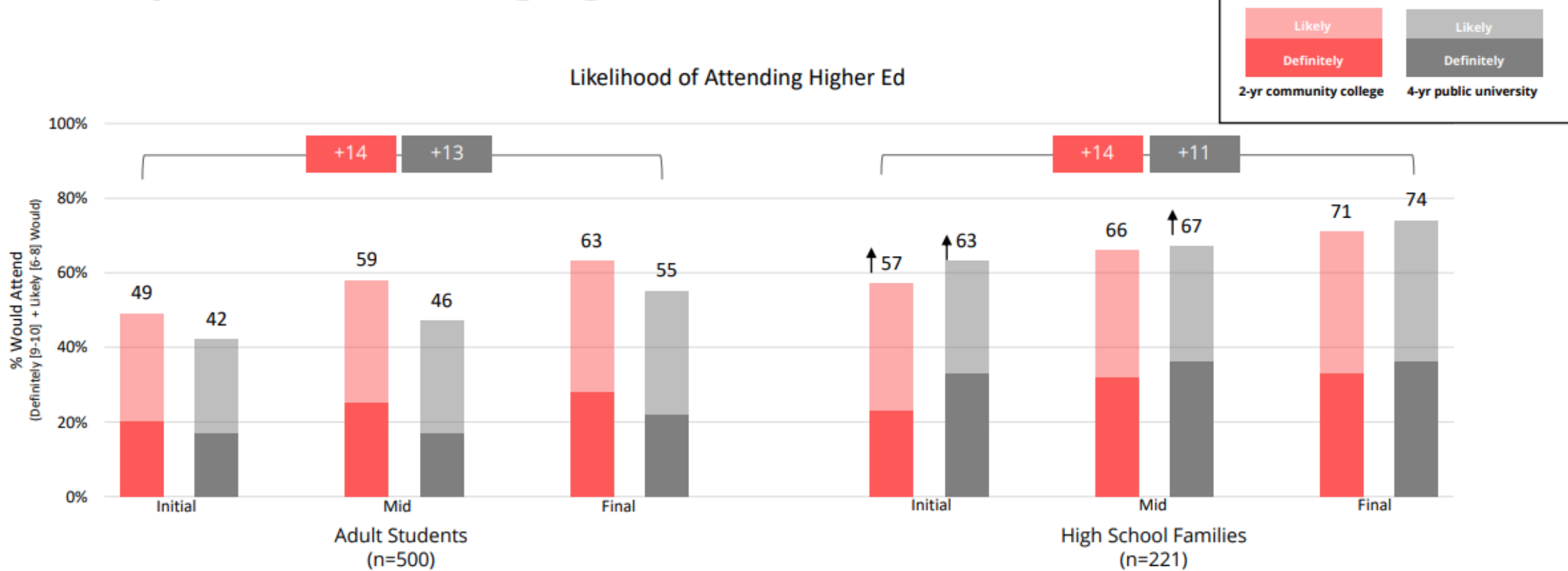


Career exploration



529 Savings Plan

Students are more likely to attend higher education after exposure to messaging



In the next five years, to what extent would you/your family consider attending any of the following schools? Please answer on a scale where 0 you/your family would NOT consider it and 10 means you/your family would strongly consider it.
 Now that you know about this new program, in the next five years, to what extent would you/your family consider attending any of the following schools?
 Now that you've learned even more, in the next five years, to what extent would you/your family consider attending any of the following schools?

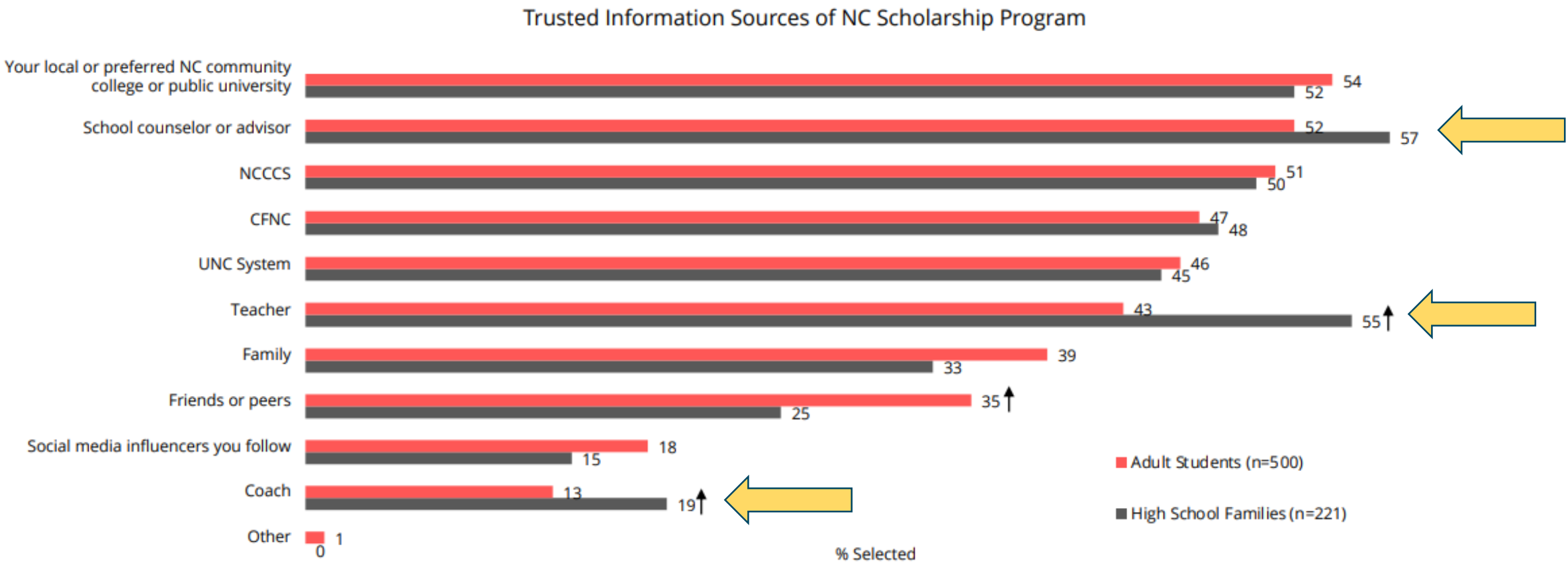
↑↓ Indicates statistically significant difference between audiences

8.15.23

FAFSA INSIGHTS

YOUR WEBSITE IS THE TOP SOURCE FOR INFORMATION ON FINANCIAL AID:

— There is trust in many messengers, primarily schools



WHAT WE CAN DO TO REACH MORE STUDENTS

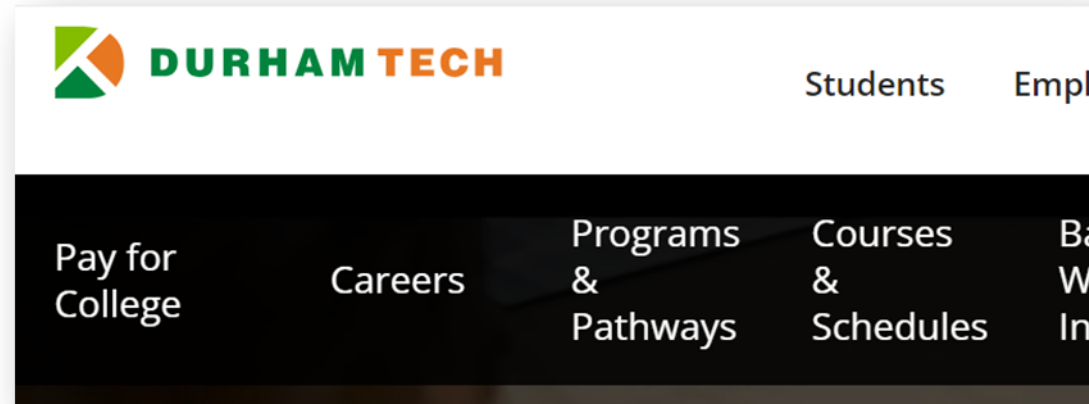
Messaging Key Takeaways



MESSAGING KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Make financial aid information easy to find and understand.

- *Pro-Tip:* use language your students would use.



MESSAGING KEY TAKEAWAYS

2. Help students understand the different types of aid

Pro-Tip: “FAFSA is an informational tool.”

Grants/scholarships

“free money”(no repayment necessary)

Work-study

earn while you learn

Loans

have to be repaid

MESSAGING KEY TAKEAWAYS



**Know what you're getting.
Know where you're going.**

Most students from households making \$80,000 or less will qualify

3. Be Transparent

Pro-Tip: Use monetary values
\$ to capture more interest

Students attending a NC public institution will get at least:

\$3,000 to cover all tuition and fees at a NC community college

\$5,000 to cover more than half, if not all, tuition and fees at a UNC university

Most eligible students qualify for even more

**NOW IT'S
YOUR TURN...**



REFLECTION: rate 1 = not very good, 5 = excellent

On a scale of 1-5, how well does your school:

- Make it easy to **find financial aid** information?
- Use language that's **easy to understand**?
- Explain the **different types of aid**, especially gift aid?
- **Transparently** share aid like Next NC so students can realistically know how much \$ to expect?
- Share information about **sources of aid beyond Pell grants**, especially for middle income families?
- Let students know **how to get help** with FAFSA?

NEXT NC SCHOLARSHIP

Get money for college that you don't have to pay back.

That's right. The Next NC Scholarship is a financial aid program that helps most North Carolinians from households making \$80,000 or less pursue a higher education, by fully covering tuition and fees at any community college or more than half of, if not all, tuition and fees to attend any public university in the state. The best part? It's money that doesn't have to be repaid.



Where does the funding come from?

Key players in the state have worked together to consolidate state financial aid for public colleges and universities and combine it with federal financial aid, making it easier for North Carolinians to know how much they can get so they can make the most informed decisions for their future. The State of North Carolina has committed nearly \$180 million of financial aid for residents who qualify.

TOTAL STATE FUNDING
\$148 MILLION



LOTTERY FUNDING
\$34 MILLION / 23%

SO, HOW MUCH IS ON THE LINE?

An estimated \$116M in Pell Grants alone
For the nearly 57K NC HS seniors who completed FAFSA



Overview District School Private Schools

NCSEAA

FAFSA Tracker Overview

641
Schools

53.7%
Students of Color

45.4%
EDS Rate

\$116.0M
Est. Pell Grants

Completion Rate as of 9/27/2024



Geo Density

City	24,169	57.1%
Suburb	4,147	52.7%
Town	3,713	53.7%
Rural	24,686	54.2%

School Type

Traditional P...	49,722	54.6%
Charter	3,289	58.8%
Cooperative ...	3,704	62.1%

Class Size

Large	27,505	56.7%
Medium	14,157	51.6%
Small	9,285	55.4%
Extra Small	5,768	58.1%

Senior Count

102.7K ▲ 1.7% vs PY

Submissions

59,290 ▼ 11.0% vs PY

Completions

56,715 ▼ 9.4% vs PY

End of Month Trend

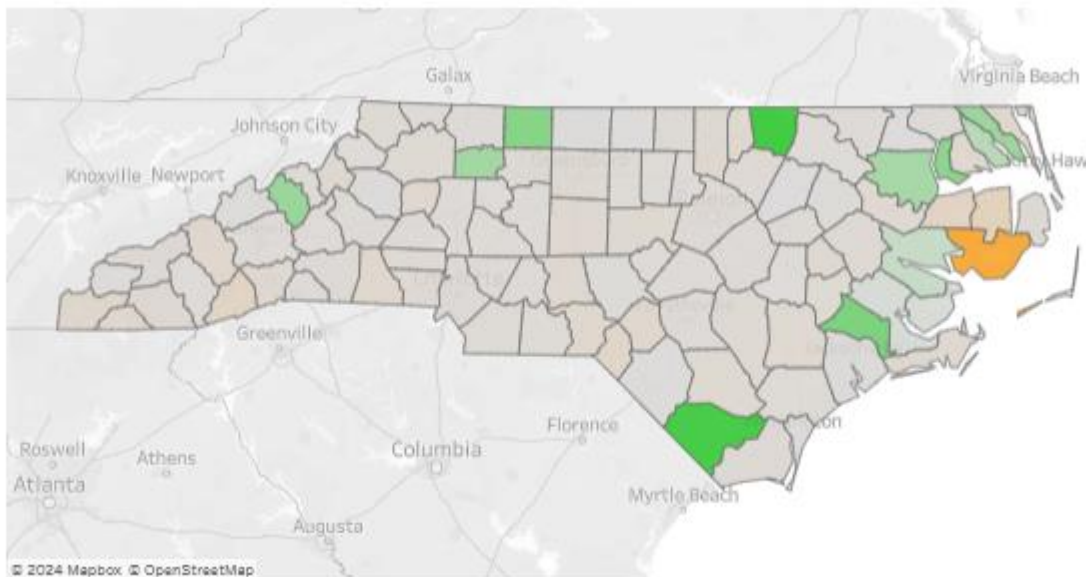
2023
2024

36.7%

0.0%

January February March April May June July August September

Geo



Districts (Click to view details)

Alamance-Burlington Sch...	731	52.9%
Alexander County Schools	114	43.2%
Alleghany County Schools	65	66.3%
Anson County Schools	45	37.8%
Ashe County Schools	96	54.9%
Asheboro City Schools	149	58.9%
Asheville City Schools	162	67.8%
Avery County Schools	70	46.7%
Beaufort County Schools	216	55.7%
Bertie County Schools	59	57.8%
Bladen County Schools	128	50.6%
Brunswick County Schools	426	50.0%

Scholarship



QUESTIONS?



THANK YOU



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