

Illustration by Jameson Diggs-burks

Higher Education Application

District introduces controversial graduation requirement

Faith Garcia and Jade Griffin |
Co-Editors-in-Chief

A portion of Texas House Bill 3, which was signed into law last June, requires all Texas public high school seniors to fill out an application for federal or state financial aid for college beginning with the 2021-22 school year.

Pflugerville ISD is one of the earliest adopters of this new law. Beginning this school year, the district has made it a graduation requirement that all seniors complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA), as well as the ApplyTexas One Application.

“Research indicates two-thirds of almost all living wage jobs will require a postsecondary credential,” PflISD Communications Officer Tamra Spence said. “However, high education and training for credentials can be expensive. The completion of the FAFSA/TASFA will provide critical information regarding the educational and career options available to students after high school.”

Teachers, students and legal experts have expressed concern about the way this new policy is being communicated and implemented.

Out of 141 PHS seniors surveyed in December and January, 94 percent were aware that FAFSA completion is now a graduation requirement, 14 percent were aware that they can opt out of this requirement and 18 percent knew that opting out makes them ineligible for final exam exemptions.

“Their communication has been lackluster,” senior Calanee O’Dell said. “Ultimately, it puts both the district and the student body in a position that makes the policy hard to enforce and hard to understand and implement. I think that they genuinely need to rethink how they are communicating information.”

Associate Principal Emily Delgado said the policy is intended to make students more college/career ready, which aligns with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s 60x30 strategic plan. The strategic plan’s primary goal is that at least 60 percent of 25-to-34-year-olds in Texas will hold a certificate or degree by 2030. Only 43.5 percent of young Texans between the ages of 25 and 34 have an associate degree or higher according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Delgado said college readiness is defined primarily as whether you are academically

ready to take college-level courses. Completion of the FAFSA, Delgado said, is a small piece of college readiness.

“[FAFSA] doesn’t mean you’re college ready,” said a PHS teacher who asked to remain anonymous. “It’s not one size fits all, it means that you have completed a form.”

FAFSA determines a student’s eligibility for need-based federal financial aid for college, which may include grants, scholarships, work-study and loans.

In Louisiana, the first state to require students to submit a FAFSA application, the graduation rate has increased by 9.1 percentage points since 2012 compared to a national growth rate of 4.6 percent.

“We encourage students to fill out either the [FAFSA or TASFA] because it gives them opportunities and options,” college and career counselor Nicholas Howell said. “It allows them to see [financial] aid that they may not know that they qualify for.”

Senior James Shaw plans to join the Navy right after high school. Shaw called the new policy “unfair” to seniors who plan to join the workforce rather than attend college.

“Forcing students to abide by college rules, or making kids ‘college ready’ is harder on the students that are planning to work or to do a different post-high school career,” Shaw said.

O’Dell agrees.

“If they really want to encourage students to have an after high school plan, then add more trade classes,” O’Dell said. “Make it easier to go into blue collar jobs and stop demonizing pathways that don’t take you to college because college is not the right place for everyone.”

Spence said it is the charge of Pflugerville ISD to provide relevant education and empower students to reach their full potential and prepare all students for the transition from high school to multiple pathways after graduation – both career and college. As part of that commitment, the district requires completion of Higher Education Applications.

Because FAFSA and TASFA applications require personally identifiable information, there is also concern regarding how this new policy will impact students who are undocumented or who have undocumented family members.

None of the data collected in the TASFA and FAFSA applications is kept by the district, Spence said. It is housed by the state and federal government.

The website for the American Civil Liberties Union of California states that there is some risk involved in submitting a FAFSA form that

reveals an undocumented parent because the U.S. Department of Education can share FAFSA application information with law enforcement agencies.

“Immigration enforcement authorities have never requested student FAFSA information in the past, but that could change in the future,” the website states.

Senior Dante Harrison’s* status as an undocumented immigrant brings challenges that documented students don’t have to face.

“The amount of scholarships I could apply to is very small,” Harrison said. “[My only option] is to do TASFA. [Being undocumented] really limits you on what you can do.”

TASFA applications are available for Texas residents who are not FAFSA-eligible because they don’t have a social security number. The

TASFA application asks students to reveal personal information to the state government.

“I have students who don’t want to give their [personal] information to the College Board because they’ve been instructed by their families not to give their [home] address,” the anonymous teacher said.

Former college and career counselor Chris Haywood also expressed concerns about this aspect of the district’s new

graduation policy prior to leaving PHS last August.

“I no longer feel safe saying [that] I know for sure this information won’t be used against you,” Haywood said. “If I don’t feel a hundred percent certain with this, I don’t want to put a student in jeopardy.”

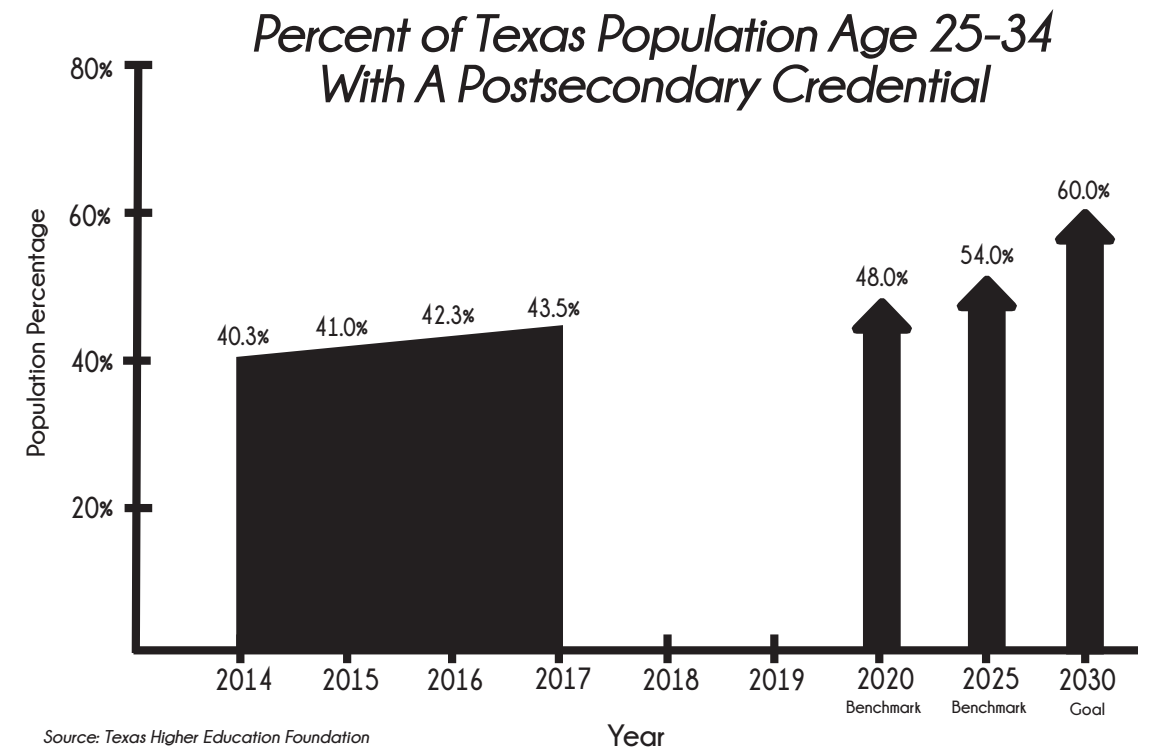
The anonymous teacher believes that Pflugerville ISD teachers and staff work to accommodate and support undocumented students, but that the district’s new graduation requirement is misguided.

“I think our schools are welcoming, and I think they’re safe,” the anonymous teacher said. “I just think on this issue, [the district] got it wrong.”

Students who do not wish to complete the FAFSA/TAFSA or Apply Texas application can complete an opt-out form. The opt-out form states that in addition to completing the form the parent/legal guardian and student must have a phone conference or meeting with their school counselor. Students who opt out will still graduate but, according to the form, will not be eligible for final exam exemptions.

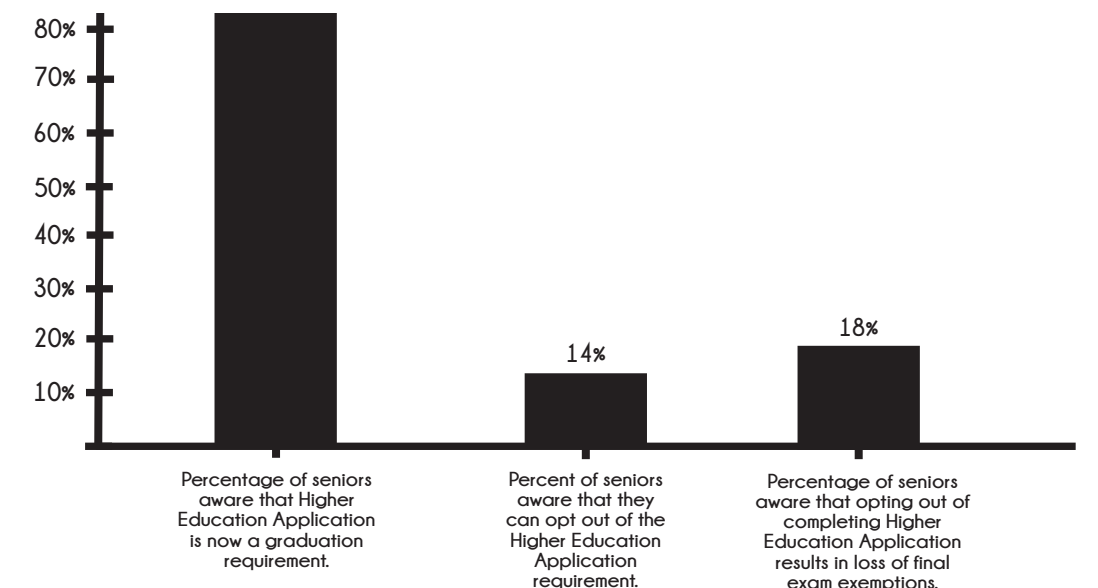
“[If a family decides to opt-out], I would be very worried for them, because I wouldn’t know

“It puts both the district and the student body in a position that makes the policy hard to enforce and hard to understand and implement.”
-senior Calanee O’Dell



Source: Texas Higher Education Foundation

Survey Results — PflISD Higher Education Application



Source: 141 seniors surveyed by Panther Prowler Newspaper

Charts created by Jameson Diggs-burks