



MASSACHUSETTS OFFICE OF EARLY COLLEGE

Designation Orientation Information for New Programs

February 2026

A Partnership Between
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Office of Early College
and
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

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Early College Information for New Programs

Welcome to all prospective new Early College programs!

Definition of New Programs include:

- All prospective partnerships with a new, non-Designated K12 school, including IHEs with Designated programs adding a new K12 partner.
- Non-Designated high schools within a district that has existing Designated programs.

This resource is a companion document to the 2026 Designation Orientation presentation for New Programs. It includes all of the information covered during that session and has the information needed for MA K12 districts and schools, as well as MA institutions of higher education (IHEs), to build understanding of the updated, streamlined Designation process as well as determine if MA EC is right for your partnership.

Starting with the Designation cohort of Fall 2027, all Designation applicants will follow an updated Designation process which includes a ten-month planning phase, a five-year initial Designation phase and a permanent Full Designation status as long as programs meet their goals. In addition, all existing programs that were Designated prior to 2027 will transition to the same Full Designation criteria according to an established schedule.

Please note that this guidance is specifically designed for new programs as defined above. Guidance will be coming soon to address adding partners to existing Designated EC partnerships, as well as guidance for programs transitioning to Full Designation status and/or needing to make any major changes to their current programs.

About Early College in Massachusetts

MA Designated Early College programs blend elements of high school and college to provide students with the opportunity to experience and complete college level academic coursework as part of a clearly articulated program of study and simultaneously gain exposure to a variety of career opportunities while in high school. The Office of Early College supports currently Designated EC programs as well as those interested in designing a new EC program within a MA public school high school.

The Massachusetts Early College (EC) statewide Designation initiative was established by the MA Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the MA Board of Higher Education in 2017. From its inception, the Massachusetts EC initiative has been rooted in a deep commitment to support more students, particularly those from populations historically underrepresented in higher education, in accessing and completing postsecondary educational opportunities. EC programs that adhere to the statewide Designation requirements are structured programs of study and supports that increase college success and career readiness, prioritizing student populations who are underrepresented in higher education.

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EC students take strategically sequenced college classes during their regular high school day, at no cost to themselves or their families. They receive enhanced academic and advising support prior to and during college coursework to ensure successful completion of rigorous college courses and the development of skills to thrive in the unfamiliar, sometimes daunting, college environment. They graduate from high school with a significant number of college credits and skills needed to be successful in college and career, reducing the cost and time to degree completion.

Since the Commonwealth launched the EC Designation initiative in 2017, EC has successfully expanded college access for students, particularly those least likely to pursue higher education. To learn more about our results, see the following Early College data story: [Early College creates pathways to higher education | E2C Hub.](#)

Definition of an MA EC Student

As the Commonwealth invests in Designated EC, it is critical that clear definitions of who the program serves exist so that outcomes can be tracked and best practices identified. For this purpose, the following definitions are used:

An EC Participant is a student who

- Is in grade level 9, 10, 11, or 12
- Is enrolled in a high school that has a Designated EC partnership
- Is identified as participating in EC by the district in October and/or June SIMS
- Signed a program commitment form

An EC Program Completer is a student who

- Graduated from a high school with a designated early college partnership
- Was identified as participating in early college by the district in October SIMS in 11th and 12th grade (at a minimum)
- Earned 12 or more transferable college credits
- Completed 100% of MassCore block

Note: Updated Designation criteria may add to this definition in the future, such as the completion of FAFSA, MASFA, or a waiver as well as completion of one or more college applications.

Statewide Goals & Priorities

The MA Early College Initiative continues to be identified as a priority for the Commonwealth. As the Designation process has matured, the goal to grow the initiative has strengthened.

MA EC is growing rapidly, with a commitment to continued expansion of high-quality programming, particularly for students underrepresented in higher education.

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- As of September 2025, there are 73 Designated Early College partnerships.
- These partnerships are comprised of 69 high schools and 32 higher education partners.
- Approximately 10,000 Massachusetts high school students are currently participating in Early College programs.

In January, Governor Healey set a goal for 100,000 EC students to be enrolled in Designated programs by 2036, proposing \$15 million from the state budget in FY27 for support.

Additionally, the Commissioners of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Higher Education (DHE) have set a specific goal to double EC enrollment by 2028.

MA Early College as a priority is also closely linked to [the Educational Vision at DESE](#), [the strategic initiatives at DHE](#), as well as [the Vision of a High School Graduate](#) recently released by the Healey-Driscoll administration.

Priorities to Advance Statewide Goals

The Office of Early College has identified three priorities to enable Early College to double its population served by 2028 and continue to grow to 100,000 students, while maintaining high quality and intentional programming, transforming student postsecondary outcomes across the state.

ACCESS:

- Expand access to designated Early College programs.
- Increase EC participants across the state, particularly for students who might not otherwise pursue postsecondary education.

QUALITY PROGRAMS:

- Promote high quality programs with supports to close disparities and ensure more EC participants are able to complete the outcomes associated with Designation, becoming program completers.
- Support high rates of EC completers who earn at least 12 college credits to jumpstart their transition to postsecondary degrees.

DEGREE ATTAINMENT:

- Increase college matriculation, persistence, and attainment to expand degree completion.
- Support high rates of MA EC degree earners.

Theory of Action

These priorities are interdependent: to increase attainment we must increase access to high quality programs.

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- *If we expand access to Early College*
- *And we promote high quality programs with supports to close disparities and ensure EC completers*
- ★ ***Then we will increase matriculation, persistence and attainment to expand degree completion rates.***

MA EC Designation Guiding Principles & Phases

Guiding Principles

EC is rooted in the Five Guiding Principles that underpin all DESE designated pathway programs. These Guiding Principles are the foundation for the specific criteria required for Full Designation status.

Summary of 2026 Guiding Principles and how they apply to Early College

Principle 1: Equitable Access - Designated Early College programs are designed to increase college participation, persistence, and degree attainment among high school students in Massachusetts. They prioritize student groups underrepresented in higher education through intentional outreach and recruitment and are structured to minimize or eliminate as many barriers as possible to enrollment and participation. All aspects of these programs are free to participants and take place within the regularly scheduled school day.

Principle 2: Guided Academic Programs - Designated programs are structured around programs of study that support students progressing from secondary to postsecondary education through multiple years of strategic course sequencing and aligned programming. Programs of study enable students to attain at least twelve credits and prioritize general education courses that meet [MassCore](#) and are part of the [MassTransfer](#) general education foundation. Programs include critical gateway math and English courses, and all courses should be part of an associates to Bachelor's MassTransfer pathway.

Principle 3: Enhanced Student Supports - Designated EC programs incorporate intentional and enhanced wraparound academic and nonacademic supports to promote success. These are designed for the specific needs of diverse student populations served in each program. EC has a holistic program design that considers the lived experience of the target student population and is aligned to each student's [MyCAP](#) plan. Supports promote the development of academic proficiency and reduce barriers to access and success in postsecondary education.

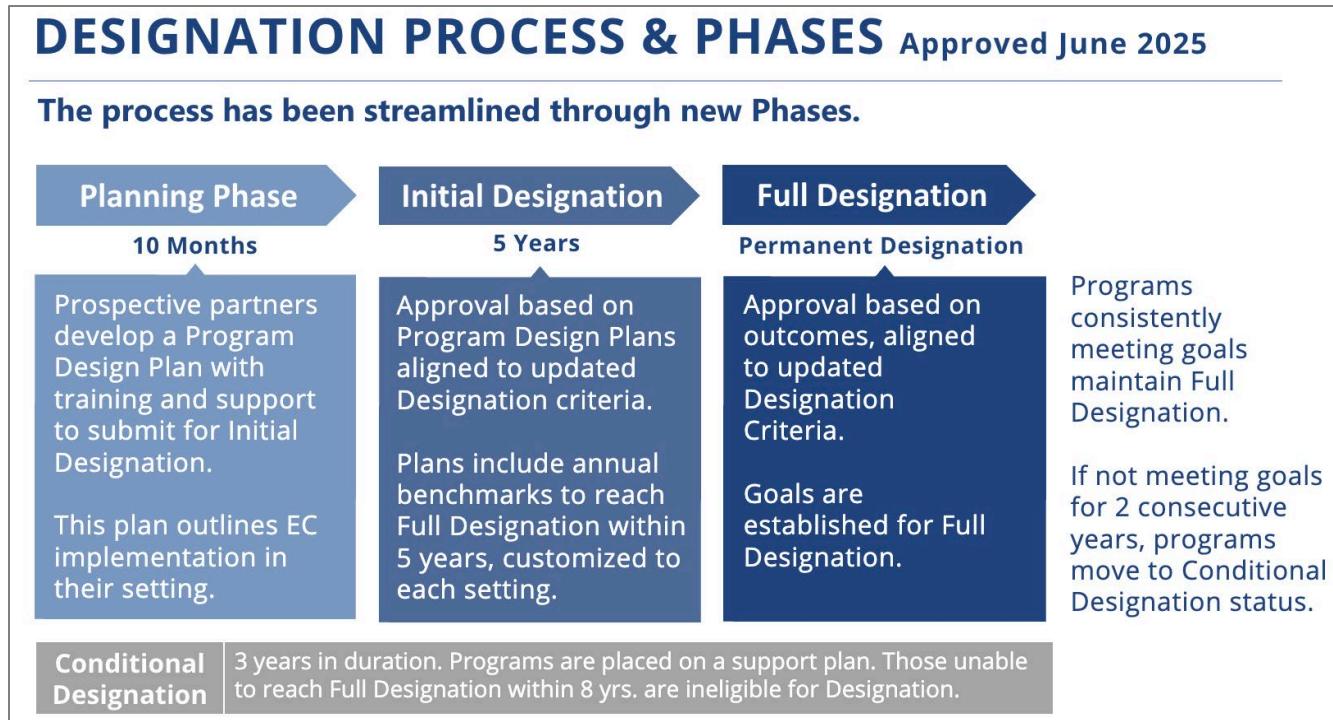
Principle 4: Connection to Career - College course completion and preparing for postsecondary education are the primary goals of EC partnerships. Therefore, programs assist students in bridging college to career connections by providing opportunities for career exposure, career skills development, career counseling, and elements of experiential and workplace learning. Programs ensure students utilize MyCAP to make deeper connections between potential career choices and college courses.

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Principle 5: Effective Partnerships: Designated EC programs are strong, balanced, and active partnerships between Massachusetts (MA) public secondary schools and districts and MA institutions of higher education with a physical presence and degree granting authority in MA. EC partners have a shared vision and rationale for the need for their Designated EC program to address disparities in college enrollments, persistence, and degree attainment. The partnership has determined respective responsibilities, including those that are shared, in a memorandum of understanding outlining EC governance, budget, sustainability, logistics, and a plan to track performance measures.

Designation Process: Phases to Support Implementation

The Office of Early College (OEC) recently streamlined the Designation process into phases that build on each other and support educators to develop their program, ensuring they launch with the components in place that will enable them to successfully and consistently meet program and statewide goals. The phases are outlined below.



Each phase includes criteria for programs that scaffold over time to prepare them to reach the goals for Full Designation.

The high-level steps in the process include

1. **Demonstrate Commitment:** Development and submission of the required [Early College Program Commitment Form](#) (EC Commitment Form) to indicate prospective partners' intent to participate in the Planning Phase
2. **Planning Phase participation** with development and submission of a Program Design Plan

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3. **Initial Designation** for five years
4. **Full Designation**, a permanent status as long as goals are consistently met.

If goals are not met for 2 consecutive years, programs will move to Conditional Designation status. More information about this will be available soon.

Coming soon: Criteria and guidance for programs at each phase of the Designation process.

Planning Phase

For quick navigation, select the links that follow:

Planning Phase Description
Program Design Plan
Timeline & Milestones
Benefits of Early College Participation
Funding
Participating in the Planning Phase
Are You Ready for MA Early College Designation?

Planning Phase Description

For programs with K12 and IHE partners who are brand new to EC Designation, including previously Designated IHEs adding new K12 partners, the Planning Phase timeline is roughly 6-10 months. The timeline aligns with essential milestones for developing an effective Program Design Plan to submit for Initial Designation. The complexity of EC generally requires redesign of key elements of high school programming, and places significant demands on IHEs. The timeline enables the stakeholder engagement, complex decision-making, and detailed planning necessary to develop a high-quality Program Design Plan. Programs enter the planning phase by completing a commitment form which is described under [Participating in the Planning Phase](#).

Program Design Plan

The **Program Design Plan** is a comprehensive blueprint and operational toolkit for the EC program, designed over the planning period to achieve Initial Designation status. The plan maps out the detailed elements to be implemented to support launching and scaling high-quality EC programming. The plan establishes the steps necessary to reach full enrollment and achieve Full Designation Status by the end of the five-year Initial Designation phase. It articulates both the program's long-term vision and the concrete structures, policies, and practices that ensure high-quality implementation at scale.

Building on the Designation principles and criteria, this plan provides a complete and coherent description of how the EC program will function, clarifying how students are recruited and supported, how coursework and pathways are structured, how secondary and postsecondary partners collaborate,

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and how resources are allocated and sustained over time. It is intended to guide program leadership, staff, and partners while also serving as a clear record of design commitments for the Office of Early College (OEC).

The Program Design Plan will include:

- Program vision and purpose
- Rationale for program and articulation of student populations in need of program.
- Enrollment targets and five-year scale-up plan to reach full enrollment by Full Designation.
- Program policies and procedures
- Academic programs of study, courses, and learning experiences
- General and targeted wrap-around academic and non-academic student supports
- Advising, MyCAP, and career-connected learning integration
- Schedules and calendars
- 5-year program goals and annual benchmarks
- Joint budgets, resources, and sustainability planning
- Partnership roles and responsibilities, collaboration structures, and a detailed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

The Program Design Plan will be submitted through a survey link and programs will be allowed to continue to iterate on their plan throughout the ten months. It includes narrative responses and relevant attachments that together provide a complete picture of both the program design and the initial five-year plan for implementation of the initial Designation phase to reach Full Designation.

Planning Phase Timeline and Milestones

Below is the timeline for the Planning Phase. Please note that it includes requirements for professional learning and informational sessions, as well as key submission deadlines. Specific dates will be provided by the time that EC Commitment forms are due so programs can plan accordingly.

ITEM/SESSION	TIMELINE
Orientation	February
Info Session: Are You Ready for EC?	March
EC Commitment Form Due (Required)	April
Planning Phase Invitations/Welcome Letters	May
Program Design Development & Support	Summer/Fall
Program Design Plans Due	December
Initial Designation Approvals	March
<i>Approved Programs Launch</i>	August/September

Benefits of Early College Participation

MA EC Designation requires a significant commitment from partners that includes elements of redesign, committed funding through staffing and resources, as well as submission of statewide data. However, there are several benefits to undergoing this formalized process through the Commonwealth. These include:

A Community of Practice with bi-annual convenings, professional learning, as well as additional opportunities to connect, support, and problem solve.

Technical Assistance, including Office Hours, Coaching, and Professional Development Opportunities through the OEC and its contracted partners

Funding, including Planning Grants, Support Grants, Tuition Reimbursements as well as additional potential specialized grants

Funding For EC Planning

Programs in the EC planning phase are eligible to apply for the [Early College Planning Grant](#) (currently known as Fund Code 461). This targeted grant provides funding to support planning and capacity-building activities, including securing planning resources, offering stipends for team members to participate in required trainings, supporting additional professional development, and implementing a limited pilot experience for senior students. Some partnerships also seek out additional institutional or private funding sources as they plan and potentially pilot MA EC programs.

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During the planning phase, partners will establish a comprehensive budget that demonstrates how EC programming will integrate into current institutional and district budgets while supporting implementation. This is critical as all aspects of MA Designated programs are required to be free of charge to EC students and their families by the time of initial Designation. Partners frequently also seek additional external funding opportunities to support their ongoing work.

Participating in the Planning Phase: EC Program Commitment Form & Process

The Early College Commitment form and process (EC Commitment) is new for FY27 programs, or those seeking Initial Designation in the spring of 2027 for implementation in the fall.

The EC Commitment includes a set of minimal informational questions that serve as assurances that projected partners have engaged in preliminary discussions and planning for EC success.

The OEC also uses the EC Commitment to determine projected program numbers to evaluate and refine funding plans, resource allocation, technical assistance, and supports.

The EC Commitment and all other Designation materials for each phase are submitted via Alchemer.

Entering the Planning Phase through the EC Commitment is required for eligibility for any of the other phases. Therefore, no documents can be submitted without the completion of the EC Commitment.

Please be advised that if you do not uphold the assurances made as part of the EC Commitment by the end of the Planning Phase, you may not move forward to Initial Designation.

Are You Ready for a MA EC Designation?

In order to be considered for statewide Designation, EC programs must consist of defined K-12 and IHE partnerships and be able to commit to a 10-month planning process and five years of initial Designation. While the next session offered by OEC in March will provide a copy of the formal commitment form, programs can refer to the Early College Readiness Checklist below to get a sense of the important concepts potential EC partners will need to be prepared to discuss and ultimately implement as part of the planning phase.

Early College Readiness Checklist

Mission and Vision

	Yes	No
Do both partners have the full support and approval of leadership?	[]	[]

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Have the partners identified a clear rationale, mission, and vision for developing an Early College program? What is your “Why?” and what do you hope to achieve?	[]	[]
Do both partners have an understanding of the key differences between Early College (EC) and Dual Enrollment?	[]	[]
Have the partners surveyed students and families to determine interest in an EC program? Is there an identified need in college-going rates or persistence?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed the projected scale and size of the EC program, as well as the size of each EC cohort of students by grade? Do they have a clear rationale for the selected enrollment numbers?	[]	[]

Structure and Operations

Do both partners have the infrastructure and/or finances in place to support an EC program? Are both partners committed to long-term sustainability?	[]	[]
Have both partners considered any union or contractual barriers to implementing an EC program?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed designated staff for the EC program? (This includes staffing at both the high school and the college or university.)	[]	[]
Does the IHE have the physical space available to accommodate EC high school students?	[]	[]
Are both partners prepared to finalize a detailed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) prior to implementation?	[]	[]

Prioritizing Equity

	Yes	No
Have the partners had a preliminary conversation with regard to making the EC program free to all students?	[]	[]
Have partners determined which student populations at the secondary school would most benefit from this EC program? (This includes students who may be first in their family to go to college and/or those who are part of demographic groups historically underrepresented in higher education.)	[]	[]

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<p>Have the partners had a preliminary conversation with regard to an open enrollment process into the EC program, that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promotes equitable access for all students, regardless of prior academic record? - prioritizes the enrollment of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education? - integrates strategies for providing wraparound support, including strategies for specific student populations? <p>*Note: Entry into the EC program should be as open as possible, particularly with regard to prior academic performance. Students then receive relevant academic support to be ready for enrolling, and succeeding, in college courses. The intentional design of the program should prepare students for college coursework.</p>	[]	[]
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High School Redesign: Academic Pathways and Student Supports

	Yes	No
Have the partners discussed how students will be made aware of, and then enroll in, the EC program?	[]	[]
Have the partners had conversations about scheduling, so that coursework and supports for EC students can be offered during the traditional school day? <i>(NOTE: As an initial schedule is required in Part A, it is recommended that you have already started this process as part of determining readiness.)</i>	[]	[]
Have the partners broadly envisioned students' experience in the EC program, from the time of enrollment to graduation?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed which guided academic pathways they would like to offer? Are the proposed courses in these pathways transferable to both other courses of study and other institutions? Does coursework also relate to determined workforce needs for pathways that will translate into careers considered high-need and high-wage?	[]	[]
Have partners discussed alignment between high school graduation requirements and college coursework, so that students can satisfactorily meet graduation requirements while also earning college credits?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed a preliminary plan for wrap around supports for EC students? Do both partners have the infrastructure and/or finances in place to provide supports?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed how individual student progress will be communicated between both institutions, particularly insights into individual student performance throughout a college course (versus only communicating	[]	[]

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final grades)?		
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The College Experience

	Yes	No
Have the partners discussed how this EC program will create a college going identity in student participants?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed a preliminary transportation plan for EC students to attend classes, advising, and other events on the IHE campus?	[]	[]
Have the partners discussed college acculturation, exposure, and orientation activities for EC cohorts?	[]	[]

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Office of Early College Team

Phylitia Jamerson, Executive Director, Phylitia.Jamerson@mass.gov

Dr. Kristin Hunt, Senior Director of Policy and Planning, Kristin.E.Hunt@mass.gov

Danielle Wheeler, Director of Programs, Danielle.Wheeler@mass.gov

Cashay Grant-Wood, Fiscal Manager, Cashay.C.Grant-Woods@mass.gov

Renee Poisson, Program Specialist, Renee.Poisson@mass.gov

China Mapp, Program Manager, China.Mapp2@mass.gov

Michael LaGrone, Data and Research Analyst, Michael.Lagrone@mass.gov

Sri Kumbar, Data Support Specialist, Srivaisnavi.Kumbar@mass.gov