EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Delivering Career-Connected Early College in Massachusetts

LESSONS FROM INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

In an age of economic turbulence, high schools are increasingly focused on advancing economic mobility through integrated pathways that prepare students for postsecondary education and in-demand careers. In Massachusetts, Early College partnerships are a primary driver of this strategy, promoting close collaboration between high schools and higher education institutions that enables students to enroll in structured college course sequences and earn at least 12 credits (often more) with robust support.

Massachusetts Early College Quick Facts

GROWING REACH

Across the Commonwealth, 102 partnerships serve more than 12,000 students per year, representing an eight-fold increase in student participation from 2018 to 2026.[1]

STRONG OUTCOMES

Among Massachusetts Early College students, 69% enrolled in higher education after graduating high school, compared to 54% of matched peers.[2]

ECONOMIC RETURNS

In Massachusetts, for an adult with no children, 68% of living-wage jobs require at least an associate degree. For two adults with two children, that figure is 82%.[3]

As Early College expands across Massachusetts, K–12 and higher education partnerships increasingly employ intentional, career-connected Early College approaches. In doing so, they embrace the notion that college preparation and career preparation are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Both are needed to help students identify their aspirations, make informed decisions about future plans, apply their academic learning, and gain the skills, knowledge, and experience to succeed in their postsecondary endeavors.

Career-connected Early College partnerships integrate college- and career-oriented experiences, enabling students to:

- **Earn transferable college credit**, often through coursework within sector-focused pathways;
- **Engage in career-connected learning** that ranges from career awareness (e.g., career fairs) to career exploration (e.g., site visits) to deep career preparation (e.g., internships);
- **Potentially earn industry-recognized certifications** that carry demonstrated value with employers and may stack toward a degree; and
- **Receive extensive advising** that helps students make sense of their interests, skills, and experiences and set goals that span both college and career aspirations.

Through these experiences, students **explore and reflect** on their future goals and take steps to meaningfully **advance** along a postsecondary pathway toward a degree and eventual career, all while developing a sense of agency and purpose.

A new report, *Delivering Career-Connected Early College in Massachusetts: Lessons from Innovative Partnerships*, developed by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy in partnership with the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College, spotlights emerging practices that Early College partnerships use to integrate college and career preparation. The report highlights five approaches across the Commonwealth, along with *key considerations* and *enabling conditions* for the effective design and delivery of these programs—offering actionable insights for the broader field. This Executive Summary provides overarching findings, which are explored in detail in the full report.

Approaches to Career-Connected Early College

The structure and delivery of career-connected Early College vary by school. Partnerships implement one or more of three common methods for incorporating a career focus into Early College programs, while embedding a broader ethos of college and career readiness into their language, routines, and structures.

METHOD 1 Accommodate complementary career pathways	METHOD 2 Offer complementary career-connected learning	METHOD 3 Design career-aligned Early College coursework and sequences
• Innovation Career Pathways • Career Technical Education (CTE) programs • Vocational technical high schools	• Career awareness • Career exploration • Career preparation, including work-based learning such as internships and co-ops	• Career-themed course sequences • Courses that confer industry-recognized certifications • Industry-designed curricula

Career-connected Early College partnerships propel students toward a college major and career while preserving flexibility to adjust course as student interests evolve. Students build momentum through two overlapping and interrelated goals: earning degree credits and preparing for a career. The balance between these two goals varies by program. In support of these goals, partnerships offer structured exploration and reflection—through campus and employer visits, hands-on learning, exploratory courses, and advising—to help students make intentional choices about their futures and draw meaningful connections between their experiences.

Attaining credits toward a postsecondary degree. Career-connected Early College enables students to complete general education and major-aligned coursework in career-themed pathways. All general education and many major-aligned courses are part of the MassTransfer Block. To maximize credit attainment, programs may offer accelerated early high school coursework, summer classes, or intersession courses. Ultimately, all career-connected Early College pathways enable students to earn between 12 and 60 college credits.

Preparing for a career. Career-connected Early College partnerships offer career preparation along a continuum: building career awareness through guest speakers and career fairs; deepening career exploration through site visits, industry-designed challenges and project-based learning; and providing intensive career preparation through internships and opportunities to earn industry-recognized certifications. Partnerships offer these experiences to varying degrees, with both high schools and colleges involved in delivery.

Advising is foundational. To explore intentionally and maximize the value of their coursework and career experiences, students need support interpreting what they learn and how it shapes their postsecondary decisions. Advising makes this reflection possible. Career-connected Early College partnerships provide dedicated advising through one-on-one meetings, advisory periods, or support courses. Partnerships also use My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP), a requirement of Massachusetts Early College designation, to help students reflect on their interests, skills, and goals.

Key Considerations for Career-Connected Early College

Partnership approaches reveal several shared considerations for designing effective programs:

- **Design Early College pathways to be permeable.** As high school students refine their future plans, their focus within Early College may shift. Pathways should offer enough permeability for students to change focus, while safeguarding against excessive switching that leads to exploration without meaningful advancement.
- **Balance structure and flexibility.** Building a career-connected Early College pathway requires balancing two priorities: offering fixed pathways that build momentum toward a clear destination and customizing college and career experiences to fit students' individual aspirations. Programs should strive to provide clear structure while tailoring each student's journey to match their goals.
- **Emphasize transferable skills.** Even with permeable, flexible Early College pathways, a student's college and career preparation may not always align with their interests and aspirations. As students complete courses and career-connected learning, educators should help them identify transferable skills so they see the relevance to their future plans and learn how to showcase their experiences.

Two program elements support all three considerations: **high-touch advising**, ensuring students have a trusted adult to help guide pathways choices, and **continuous improvement methods**, embedding a willingness to test new approaches and pivot as needed, emphasizing student-centered design.

Enabling Conditions for Career-Connected Early College

Trials and triumphs across partnerships reveal enabling conditions for meaningfully integrating college and career preparation through Early College. Policymakers and education leaders should cultivate these conditions as they expand access to Early College programming.

PEOPLE

- **Higher education faculty with availability to teach Early College courses:** When professors can't fit Early College sections into their schedules, partnerships may not be able to offer their desired courses, making it difficult to plan intentional, career-themed course sequences.
- **Dedicated Early College high school staff:** Employing dedicated staff within the high school or district ensures sufficient bandwidth to manage the many components of career-connected Early College, especially building workforce partnerships and providing high-touch student advising. These staff may also oversee programs like Innovation Career Pathways, promoting integration.
- **Employer buy-in:** Many employers have limited capacity for delivering career-connected learning experiences to high school students, especially internships that may require a high degree of scaffolding and support. For Early College partnerships, employer engagement must be proactive and mindful of employers' bandwidth. A menu of engagement options is a useful planning tool.

TIME

- **Strategic scheduling:** Fitting college courses, career-connected learning, and support into a school week requires close collaboration and creative solutions, such as using college course "off days" for advising, support sessions, internships, and capstone projects.
- **High school programs of study that support Early College depth:** Some partnerships offer accelerated learning opportunities early in high school or in middle school so students are able to move beyond general education courses to major- and industry-aligned courses. Ensuring general education courses count toward graduation requirements also frees up time for advanced courses.

OPERATIONS

- **Sufficient seats in college and career pathway programs:** When Early College, Innovation Career Pathways, and Career Technical Education programs have limited space, it can prevent students from participating in their first-choice career-themed pathway or multiple pathways that offer robust college and career preparation.
- **Funding for career-connected learning experiences:** Piecemeal financing and funding constraints limit career-connected learning, particularly internships and industry-recognized certification opportunities. Further research is needed to explore how local, state, and federal funding sources can best support career-connected learning for Early College students.

Typology of the Five Profiled Early College Partnerships

Abbreviations: **CTE:** Career Technical Education, **EC:** Early College, **ICP:** Innovation Career Pathways

	Built to 12+ Credits	Built to ~30 Credits	Built to 60 Credits
Vocational-technical school with EC designation EC complements vocational-technical training	Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School (Haverhill) General education EC courses in partnership with Northern Essex Community College. *Number of EC students, spring 2025: 162*		
High school with CTE programs and EC designation offers CTE, possibly ICP, alongside EC		B.M.C. Durfee High School (Fall River) Six career-themed EC pathways across three higher ed partners: Bristol Community College, Bridgewater State University, and University of Massachusetts Dartmouth; 25% of EC students also participate in CTE. *Number of EC students, spring 2025: 377*	
High school with both ICP and EC designations students participate in both ICP and EC		Mount Everett Regional School (Sheffield) Wall-to-wall EC with University of Massachusetts Amherst; shares a director with ICP for strong integration. *Number of EC students, spring 2025: 154*	Dearborn STEM Academy (Boston) EC implemented with Franklin Cummings Tech and Wentworth Institute of Technology alongside STEM-themed ICP. *Number of EC students, spring 2025: 169*
High school with career-themed EC pathways career connection built into EC pathways			Gardner High School (Gardner) Five career-themed EC pathways via a regional consortium with Mount Wachusett Community College and Fitchburg State University. *Number of EC students, spring 2025: 133*

Some partnerships have elements that fit more than one cell. The goal of this typology is to highlight varying structures in Massachusetts career-connected Early College programs.

Early College student counts for each school were sourced from the Massachusetts Early College Dashboard maintained by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Spotlights: Career-Connected Early College in Practice

These examples demonstrate key considerations and enabling conditions in practice across the five Early College partnerships.

Exploration in Practice

At the **Dearborn STEM Academy** in Boston, students engage in exploration early and often, including college and workplace visits, job shadowing, and career-focused "lunch and learns." In grades 7–9, all students participate in project-based learning and rotate through the school's three STEM-themed innovation pathways: Health & Life Sciences, Engineering, and Computer Science. Students in the Dearborn Early College Kickoff (DECK) program, which begins in middle school and builds to an Associate's degree, begin taking college courses in grade 10 to explore, culminating in selecting their intended college major.

Reflection in Practice

Through a partnership with OneGoal, Early College students at **B.M.C. Durfee High School** in Fall River attend an advisory/exploratory course three times per week, on days when their college courses do not meet. This course scaffolds deep reflection on their learning experiences and future plans. Advising begins in grade 11 and ends one year after graduation, easing the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

Advancement in Practice

Mount Everett Regional School in the Southern Berkshires offers expansive college- and career-themed pathways: Art, Entrepreneurship, Global Education, Liberal Arts, and three Innovation Career Pathways in Manufacturing, Technology, and Clean Energy. With a wall-to-wall Early College model, all pathways include Early College courses, and most feature experiential learning through internships and capstone projects. Through these offerings, the school has operationalized a polytechnic approach to high school, prioritizing hands-on learning and real-world problem-solving in service of college and career readiness and meaningful progress toward postsecondary goals.

Structure and Flexibility in Practice

Gardner High School designs its Early College pathways and course sequences to align with local labor market needs and student interests. Building on this foundation, students can customize their experience by choosing from a wide range of courses. This diversity is enabled by a regional approach whose economies of scale allow Gardner to fill more Early College sections. Earning 36, 48, or even 60 college credits also enables Gardner's Early College students to advance into specialized, higher-level coursework. Overall, students exercise flexibility within a baseline structure.

Transferable Skills in Practice

Early College courses at **Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School** in Haverhill either directly complement a student's shop (for instance, Introduction to Business may advance a culinary student's journey to open their own restaurant) or provide a chance to explore a new domain. Early College staff work with students to identify the knowledge and skills gained in their college courses and how those relate to their shop or other interests, ensuring students see how their learning prepares them for postsecondary endeavors.

Conclusion

Career-connected Early College approaches have the potential to deliver on the full promise of Massachusetts' Early College initiative, integrating college and career preparation to nurture students' personal development and future success. The findings in the report aim to advance conversations among practitioners, education leaders, and policymakers on expanding such models with proper guidance and resources. In doing so, Massachusetts can continue its leadership in preparing students for family-sustaining careers, and futures of success, prosperity, and purpose.

For full details on partnerships, institutions and regional approaches—including innovations and practices employed by each—read the full report and find partnership-specific case studies linked to each high school in the table above and on the Massachusetts Alliance for Early College website.

ENDNOTES

1 Office of Governor Maura Healey and Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll. (2026, June 3). *Healey-Driscoll administration announces historic Early College expansion, creating nearly 1,700 additional seats for high school students*. Mass.gov.

2 MassINC. (2023, January). *New data shows Early College is delivering as promised for Massachusetts*.

3 Glasmeier, A. K., & Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2026). *Living wage calculation for Massachusetts*. Living Wage Calculator.

Department of Economic Research. (n.d.). *Employment projections*. Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development; Mass.gov.

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ABOUT THE RENNIE CENTER

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

ABOUT MA4EC

The Massachusetts Alliance for Early College (MA4EC) is a coalition of more than 100 school districts, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, philanthropists, and businesses working to break down barriers to college and career success for all students—particularly those who have been historically underserved and underrepresented—by supporting the growth of, and creating conditions for, high-quality, high-impact Early College programs across Massachusetts.

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