

March 25, 2022

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Ann-Margaret Ferrante
Vice Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 42
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Todd Smola
Ranking Minority, House Committee on Ways and Means
24 Beacon Street, Room 124
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chair Michlewitz, Vice Chair Ferrante, Representative Smola, and Committee Staff:

As organizations committed to education equity and justice, we are writing to request that the House Committee on Ways and Means support necessary investments in higher education in the fiscal 2023 state budget to meet the needs of students that have long been underserved in the Commonwealth. We are deeply grateful for your leadership in putting together budgets that have increased those investments in the past and for all you have accomplished.

Many of us work directly with students and families – including students transitioning to higher education and those currently enrolled in college. We have seen first-hand the devastating impacts of COVID-19, which have forced too many students to put their education on hold as they navigate increased personal and financial pressures. What we have heard from students is also evident in state data: according to the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, fall 2020 enrollment in Massachusetts state universities and community colleges plummeted by 7.7% and 11.3%, respectively, and has continued to decline this year.

Left unreversed, these trends may prove devastating for individual students and families, as well as for our state's knowledge-based economy, which relies on employees with advanced skills and increasing education levels. Supporting students' journeys to and through college has always been important, but has never been more critical than it is today.

Our recommendations are based on the experiences of the students and families we serve, data, and research on best practices. We respectfully request the following:

1. Fund the Massachusetts State Scholarship Program (line item 7070-0065) at \$161, 893,300.

Today, enrollment in most Massachusetts community colleges and state universities is lower than it has been in the past 20 years. This trend is worrisome for multiple reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it is [graduates of Massachusetts public institutions who are more likely to live and work in Massachusetts after graduation](#), contributing to our communities and economy.

In these challenging times, the Commonwealth needs to make significant investments in public higher education so that all students who wish to pursue higher education can do so.

We urge you to build on recent momentum to invest in the State Scholarship Program at \$161,893,300, including an increase of \$ 25,200,000 for MassGrant Plus, to align to align with the [Board of Higher Education's](#)

[recommendations](#). The State Scholarship Program funds grants for college students with the highest financial need, who are disproportionately students of color. Despite some increases in recent years, many of our state's highest need students continue to face prohibitive tuition and other costs. The requested increases will help offset these expenses, making it easier for more students to pursue higher education. In particular, more significant investments in MassGrant Plus, the state's need-based grant program supporting students in the public system, should be made to increase award sizes and expand the program to students at all public colleges and universities.

This level of funding for the Massachusetts State Scholarship program would also allow for a sizable increase for the Paraprofessional Teacher Preparation Grant Program, including a reassessment of award sizes and summer grants. With many districts across the Commonwealth already experiencing teacher shortages and national and state data indicating a looming exodus of teachers, which will result in more widespread staffing shortages, increasing investment in high retention pathways into teaching is critical. Paraprofessionals are particularly well-positioned as local resources to address teacher shortages. However, the cost of college and time to degree completion remain barriers. Increased investment in this grant program would reduce financial barriers for many paraprofessionals, and may serve as a key strategy to increase racial and cultural diversity and retention in our teacher workforce, as our paraprofessional workforce is markedly more diverse.

2. Fund the Community College SUCCESS Fund (line item 7100-4002) at \$14 million.

Massachusetts Community Colleges are more likely to serve older, part-time, parenting, or full-time employed college students, who are often balancing school, work, and family pressures. COVID has made this balance that much harder to navigate. [Evidence](#) shows that colleges can significantly increase students' ability to stay in school and complete their coursework by investing in culturally sustainable wraparound support services, such as peer mentoring, academic skills workshops, transportation stipends, dependent care support, and targeted academic, career, transfer, and scholarship advising.

In Massachusetts, we have made headway to ensure higher education is more inclusive by creating the Community College SUCCESS Fund, a newer line item established through the FY21 budget. This fund is critical to providing access to wraparound services and support essential for community college students across the state. However, as of fall 2021, the SUCCESS fund only served approximately 4,000 community college students out of 65,536 and projected spending for this fiscal year already exceeds the proposed funding of \$10.5 million.

We are grateful to the Houses' leadership for driving previous increases in the SUCCESS Fund. This year, we urge you to increase investment in the Community College SUCCESS Fund to the level recommended by the Board of Higher Education, or \$14 million, to expand student access to necessary supports that are essential to increasing college completion rates.

Increasing resources for the Community College SUCCESS Fund is both an equity and an economic issue. Massachusetts community colleges overwhelmingly serve our state's Black, Latinx, and economically disadvantaged students and are a pivotal pathway to economic security for many families. Community colleges provide a bridge to higher education through remedial coursework or associate degree programs that allow students to make a seamless transfer to completion of a baccalaureate degree at a public university.

In addition, community colleges have traditionally been responsive to trends in industry and employment through development of programs to provide an educated workforce in targeted areas. In today's economic climate, providing affordable career development in emerging fields is critical.

3. Increase funding for Early College to \$19 million across two line items.

National studies have shown that participation in Early College programs significantly increases college enrollment, completion, and affordability among students of color and students from low-income families. [Early evidence shows that, for Massachusetts students, Early College is producing similar outcomes.](#)

According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, students taking part in our state's Early College programs complete MassCORE and FAFSA, and enroll in college at significantly higher rates than their counterparts. In addition, because most Early College students in Massachusetts are Black and Latinx, the program has made a sizable impact on improving achievement and equitable outcomes. Early College students graduate from high school with a considerable number of college credits, as well as habits and skills needed to be successful in college, all while experiencing a reduction in the financial burden of paying for college and time to degree completion.

To seize the opportunity to build on these early successes and meet the rising demand for Early College, we request that the House Ways and Means FY23 budget include a sizable investment for Early College Programs. To support the Board of Higher Education's goal of growing the program to serve 5,500-7,000 students this coming fiscal year, we urge you to invest \$10 million for the Early College Program (line item 7009-6600). Additionally, we urge members of the House Committee on Ways and Means to increase funding for Dual Enrollment Grant Subsidies (line item 7066-0019) at \$9 million, in alignment with the Board of Higher Education's recommendation. These additional funds will ensure Early College remains cost-free to participating students, while also expanding the number of programs and participating students across our state.

We urge you to make investments for our students, especially those with the highest needs. Next year's budget is an opportunity to help students recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and build upon the Commonwealth's commitment to equity. State budgets reflect our commitments and values. The next fiscal year's budget should reflect our dedication to educational equity and our citizenry, and take steps to provide Massachusetts employers with the educated workforce that they need.

Thank you for your attention to this letter. Please reach out to Natasha Ushomirsky at nushomirsky@edtrust.org if we can share more information about how these investments would support the success of the students and families we represent.

Respectfully submitted,

