

# Memo to the Massachusetts Statewide Graduation Council

## Introduction

Dear Honorable Members of the K–12 Statewide Graduation Council,

As you continue your efforts to craft a new statewide graduation standard for Massachusetts, we—the undersigned civil rights, social justice, and educational equity organizations from across the Commonwealth—write to express our appreciation for your commitment to developing the [preliminary graduation framework](#). We are encouraged by the direction you have taken and the opportunities it presents. We also write to offer our feedback, identify critical gaps, and highlight areas requiring further attention. As organizations deeply engaged with students, families, educators, and communities across Massachusetts, we feel a responsibility to share our perspectives, knowing that the decisions made through this framework will shape educational opportunity, access, and outcomes for generations to come.

Massachusetts has a critical opportunity to redefine what it means to graduate prepared for college, career, and civic life—while ensuring high expectations, fairness, and meaningful preparation for every learner. For many students—particularly Black and Latino students, multilingual learners, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities—graduation requirements can either expand opportunity or deepen existing inequities. Too often, unequal access to rigorous coursework, high-quality instruction, and essential supports has limited students’ ability to demonstrate their full potential. A strong statewide framework can help close these gaps and ensure that every diploma reflects true readiness.

Importantly, **no element of the graduation framework should be developed without a meaningful, sustained partnership with the students and families most affected.** This engagement must be broad and inclusive—not limited to a select few—and ensure that all families have a genuine seat at the table, along with clear, timely information about new requirements and their implications for students’ pathways and opportunities. Their lived experiences must directly shape both the design and implementation of any changes, especially given how often public narratives about what families want often fail to reflect the realities we hear in communities, and can lead to harmful misconceptions. Without transparent communication and wide-reaching outreach, policies risk deepening inequities or creating unintended barriers. Grounding this work in authentic, ongoing engagement with families and students will help ensure the framework reflects community priorities, responds to diverse needs, and is implemented in ways that are transparent, inclusive, and just.

We believe the proposed framework—centered on the key themes of Foundations of Learning, Demonstrating Mastery, and Preparation for What’s Next—offers a promising path forward. With intentional implementation, coupled with deep collaboration with students and families and robust equity safeguards, it can establish consistent expectations and ensure meaningful preparation for all students, regardless of background or zip code.

**To ensure the core elements of the proposed framework deliver on the promise of rigor and equity for all students, we respectfully offer the following recommendations for implementation and the establishment of clear equity guardrails for each element.**

# I. Foundation of Learning (Coursework)

**Element 1:** Students will complete a rigorous program of study aligned with admissions requirements for higher education.

*We agree that MassCore provides a strong foundation for a statewide coursework requirement. Guaranteeing that all students have access to the same rigorous, college-aligned courses - regardless of zip code or background - has the potential to significantly improve postsecondary readiness and long-term success. However, adopting MassCore statewide will only be effective if the state addresses the structural barriers that have historically led to uneven and inconsistent implementation. Without intentional planning and support, the students who already face the greatest opportunity gaps are the ones most likely to be left behind.*



## **Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:**

- **Prioritize District Support:** Nearly [half of districts](#) do not currently require MassCore, and many will need substantial support to adopt and implement the full framework. The state must prioritize these districts—particularly those with limited staffing capacity, such as rural districts, districts with high student needs, or those with a history of uneven course offerings. Recent headlines illustrate the stakes: in Boston Public Schools, despite a formal commitment to MassCore, [implementation has been inconsistent across schools](#), leaving many students without access to the full set of required courses. These implementation gaps disproportionately harm students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students of color. To prevent this pattern from recurring statewide, the state must provide targeted technical assistance, funding for course expansion, scheduling support, and clear guidance to ensure that every district can offer the full MassCore sequence—with fidelity—to every student.
- **Quality Assurance & Data Collection:** Statewide requirements are only meaningful if the courses students take are rigorous, well-aligned, and consistently delivered. To ensure MassCore is implemented equitably, the state must expand its existing audit and oversight system to include a comprehensive review of implementation and coursework across all districts. This should include:
  - **Verification of course availability:** Ensure every student can enroll in the full MassCore sequence.
  - **Analysis of enrollment patterns:** Identify any student groups—particularly low-income students, multilingual learners, and students of color—who are being excluded or tracked out of MassCore-aligned courses.
  - **Ongoing monitoring of course quality and alignment:** Guarantee that all MassCore courses meet consistent statewide standards for rigor and relevance.
  - **Transparent public reporting:** Provide families, educators, and policymakers with clear data to identify persistent gaps and opportunities for improvement.

These steps are critical to prevent MassCore from becoming a paper requirement that conceals inequitable access to rigorous coursework and limits opportunity for students who need it most.



- **Modernize MassCore:** MassCore requirements should be updated to reflect the skills and competencies students need to thrive in today's rapidly changing world. This includes aligning the framework with the state's "[vision of a graduate](#)," and ensuring that MassCore-aligned courses intentionally integrate opportunities for students to cultivate key skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and more. We also **strongly recommend integrating both financial and digital/AI literacy into MassCore requirements**, embedding them into existing coursework where possible, rather than creating standalone course requirements. With generative AI and other emerging technologies rapidly reshaping how students learn, communicate, and work, digital literacy is no longer optional—it is foundational. Ensuring that all students develop the skills to use digital tools responsibly, evaluate online information, and understand the implications of AI will better prepare them for both postsecondary education and the modern workforce. Massachusetts parents agree: a [recent parent poll conducted by EdTrust in MA](#) and the MassINC Polling Group found that **two-thirds of parents believe digital literacy should be a high school graduation requirement**.

Together, these updates will ensure that MassCore reflects the realities students face today and equips them with the competencies they need to succeed beyond high school.

- **Expanded Flexibility & Alternatives for student populations:** We support offering multiple pathways for students to fulfill MassCore requirements, including options tailored for Career and Technical Education (CTE) students and those in alternative programs like Early college. We also recognize that some students—such as those with significant disabilities, newcomers with interrupted education, or overage/under-credited youth—may legitimately require a pathway other than the traditional MassCore sequence. However, flexibility must never come at the expense of equity. Without strong guardrails, alternative pathways can quickly become less rigorous tracks that disproportionately enroll students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students of color. This risks unintentionally recreating a “two-track system” with fundamentally different expectations for different student groups.

To prevent this, the state must:

- Establish clear equity protections to ensure all pathways maintain comparable rigor, align with the state's “vision of a graduate,” and lead to meaningful postsecondary opportunities.
- Ensure pathway decisions are based on individualized student needs—not assumptions about ability or background.
- Require transparent reporting on student placement into alternative MassCore pathways, along with clear statewide definitions of who is eligible for these options.



## II. Demonstration of Mastery (Hybrid Assessment Model)

**Element 2:** Students will participate in End-of-Course (EOC) assessments aligned with selected courses and that are designed, administered, and scored by the state.

*We support the use of EOCs as a consistent, statewide measure of mastery that provides meaningful insight into student learning, course quality, and school performance. When directly tied to MassCore courses, these assessments are more relevant to students and ensure that high expectations apply to all—regardless of zip code, background, or school resources. At the same time, a strong statewide assessment system should balance rigor and accountability with robust supports for students, including providing meaningful assistance for students who do not meet expectations on the assessments and multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning so that no single measure unfairly limits a student’s path to graduation.*



### Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:

- **Define “Meaningful Weight”:** To uphold high standards and mitigate the effects of grade inflation or uneven grading practices across districts, EOC assessments must carry meaningful weight in the graduation framework. One approach is to require that EOC scores account for a significant portion of a student’s final course grade. The state should set a minimum percentage for this weight in order to establish a consistent statewide baseline for all students. Importantly, capstones should not carry more weight than EOCs within the overall framework.
- **Mandatory Intervention & Re-take Opportunities:** Students who do not meet statewide expectations on an EOC assessment should automatically receive targeted academic support, like high-dosage tutoring or other types of supports, aligned to the specific skills or sections of the exam where they struggled. Supports may include placement on an Educational Proficiency Plan—similar to the approach used for students who did not pass the 10th Grade MCAS—or a comparable structured intervention process. This safeguard is essential for advancing equity by ensuring that students who need additional assistance receive timely, individualized support. Students should also have multiple opportunities to retake EOCs and demonstrate proficiency. If a student does not pass an EOC, they should only be required to retake the portion of the assessment they did not pass, rather than the entire exam. This approach maintains rigor while reducing unnecessary barriers and ensuring that retesting is focused, fair, and instructionally meaningful.
- **Timing:** To ensure students have access to timely interventions and multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery, EOC assessments should be administered early in high school (e.g., 9th or 10th grade). To avoid overwhelming students, teachers, and schools with a heavy concentration of exams at the end of the year, the state could consider aligning EOCs with existing course final exams, allowing one assessment to serve both purposes.
- **School Accountability:** EOC results must be meaningfully incorporated into the state’s accountability framework so that schools and districts are both incentivized and held accountable for delivering high-quality instruction. Importantly, if the goal is to phase out the 10th-grade MCAS, EOCs will need to serve as its replacement. Therefore, EOCs should carry similar weight in the accountability system as MCAS does now, reflecting both overall performance and student growth. Significant disparities in EOC performance within a district and/or across student demographic groups—especially when course passing rates remain high—should trigger state review and, when necessary, intervention. This approach protects students from inequitable learning experiences and ensures that schools cannot mask weak instructional outcomes behind inflated course grades.
- **Meaningful Accommodations for Students with Disabilities (SWDs) and Multilingual Learners:** To ensure equitable access to EOCs, the state must provide accommodations for students with disabilities and multilingual learners that are at least as robust as those offered under the current MCAS system. This includes appropriate linguistic supports—such as translated test forms, glossaries, or the option for eligible students to take the assessment in their primary language when appropriate—as well as disability-related accommodations aligned with students’ IEPs or 504 plans.

**Element 3:** Students will complete a capstone or portfolio that is defined by the state and designed, administered, and scored locally.

*Capstones and portfolios can provide a valuable, performance-based option for students to demonstrate mastery through personalized, deeper work. However, strong guardrails are essential to ensure equity and consistency in how these options will be implemented and measured across districts:*



**Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:**

- **Clear Guidance and Rubrics:** The state must issue detailed guidance, high-quality rubrics, and exemplars to define statewide expectations and uphold consistent academic standards for locally-designed capstones/portfolios across all pathways. Resources—such as professional development and training for educators — must also be provided to ensure equitable access and consistent expectations across schools and districts.
- **Equitable Use and Oversight:** A system of state oversight should be established to ensure alignment with statewide expectations and prevent capstones/portfolios from disproportionately being used to “get students across the finish line” or mask gaps in high-quality instruction. This oversight should also ensure that any capstone or portfolio models that are used across districts are grounded in research-backed approaches to ensure quality.

## III. Preparation for What’s Next: College, Career, and Civic Readiness

**Element 4:** Students will develop and maintain an individual career and academic plan (MyCAP).

*We strongly support establishing MyCAP as a statewide requirement to ensure every student has a personalized, developmentally appropriate plan that guides their postsecondary goals. When implemented well, MyCAP can anchor a coherent, student-centered approach to college and career readiness.*



**Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:**

- **Define Clarity and Scope:** The state must clearly define the statewide MyCAP requirement—including core components, timelines for creation, expectations for annual updates, and the elements of a high-quality final plan. This should go beyond simply documenting activities to ensure that students develop and take necessary steps towards executing meaningful, well-supported postsecondary plans that reflect at least one high-quality option or pathway that is a strong match for their postsecondary goals. Without clear guidance, implementation will vary widely across districts, with the greatest inconsistencies likely to fall on students in under-resourced schools.
- **Full Pathway Support:** MyCAP must support the full range of postsecondary options, including four-year and two-year colleges, trades, military, apprenticeships, and direct workforce entry. Plans should remain flexible enough to evolve as students’ interests and goals change, ensuring that all students are in pathways that don’t limit their options post-graduation. As part of this comprehensive support, the MyCAP process should also integrate FAFSA/MASFA completion so that financial aid steps are paired with meaningful college and career planning, ensuring students have access to the resources and information needed to pursue the pathways they choose.

- **Resources, Staffing, and Structural Changes:** Additional school counselors and college & career advisors will be essential to implementing MyCAP and other elements of the broader graduation framework. These staff provide the navigational support students need to understand their options, complete planning tasks, and make informed decisions. However, implementing MyCAP with fidelity requires more than additional staffing. Schools need support to rethink the structure of the middle- and high-school experience so that college and career planning is embedded throughout a student’s journey. This includes:

- Redesigning schedules to include dedicated advising time.
- Providing robust training and technical assistance so that school leaders, staff, educators, counselors, and advisors understand how to use MyCAP as a meaningful planning tool rather than a compliance exercise. Ensuring MyCAP is a whole-school endeavor is essential to ensuring every student receives consistent, high-quality guidance and support.
- Developing state guidance outlining the structural, staffing, and scheduling shifts needed to fully integrate MyCAP from day one.

- **Additional Equity Guardrails:** MyCAP will only advance equity if the state ensures that every student—regardless of school, background, or circumstance—has the time, guidance, support, and structured opportunities to explore pathways and plan for their future. To achieve this goal, the state must:
  - Prioritize implementation support for high-need districts, including those with high student-to-counselor ratios, high mobility, historically low college-going rates, or schools identified for improvement.
  - Monitor access and participation data to ensure equitable support for students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, students of color, and students with disabilities.
  - Provide consistent training for those delivering MyCAP support so students receive accurate, high-quality, and unbiased guidance.
  - Connect MyCAP to real opportunities, including early college, CTE pathways, internships, and work-based learning, so that students can act on their plans.

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**Element 5: Students will complete the FAFSA, with an option to complete the MASFA instead, or to opt out of the requirement.**

*We support establishing a financial aid completion requirement—with a clear opt-out—as a strategy to increase postsecondary enrollment and ensure students do not leave money on the table. Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is one of the strongest predictors of college enrollment: students who complete it are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in college. Yet many students—especially those from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, first-generation college-goers, and students of color—face barriers due to limited information, guidance, or support needed to navigate the FAFSA and/or MASFA process.*

*A statewide requirement can help close these gaps, but only if it is designed and implemented with strong equity guardrails and paired with meaningful support for students and families.*



### Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:

- **Simple, Stigma-Free Opt-Out:** The state must ensure a simple, confidential, and stigma-free opt-out process for students and families who cannot or choose not to complete the FAFSA or MASFA. This protects student autonomy and prevents unintended barriers for undocumented students, families with privacy concerns, or those facing complex financial circumstances. Equally important, districts must provide clear, accessible, and multilingual communication that helps students and families understand both the benefits and potential risks of opting out so they can make fully informed decisions.
- **Robust and Accurate Data Tracking:** To ensure the requirement is implemented fairly and without imposing administrative burdens on students, the state must establish a clear, integrated data-tracking system that reliably records FAFSA/MASFA completions and opt-outs. This system should accurately capture both paper and electronic opt-outs and allow school staff to verify and update student status in real time. The state should ensure that any data collected is handled with sensitivity and care, and used only for its intended purpose. Critically, this system must also enable the state and districts to identify equity gaps—such as lower completion or higher opt-out rates among specific student groups or communities—and respond with targeted supports to ensure the requirement does not exacerbate existing disparities.
- **Equitable Implementation Support:** Districts will need meaningful support to implement this requirement effectively and equitably. This includes: (1) statewide training for educators, counselors, and advisors; (2) multilingual, accessible resources for students and families; and (3) targeted assistance for districts with historically low completion rates. Training should also include guidance on effective strategies for integrating FAFSA/MASFA completion into MyCAP process so that financial aid steps are paired with college and career planning. Additional supports—such as in-school FAFSA workshops, one-on-one advising, family engagement events, and partnerships with community-based organizations—can help families navigate language barriers, technology challenges, and privacy concerns while building trust and ensuring all students can access available aid.

## Element 6: Students will develop knowledge and skills in financial literacy.

*We strongly support the goal of ensuring all students graduate with essential financial literacy skills. Students should leave high school prepared to manage personal finances, understand credit and debt—including student loans and repayment options—and make informed economic decisions that reflect the realities they and their families face. However, financial literacy is a broad domain, and its impact depends heavily on what is taught, who is teaching it, and how it connects to students' lived experiences. To ensure high-quality, relevant, and culturally responsive implementation, we recommend the following:*



### Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:

- **Establish clear, focused learning outcomes:** Financial literacy covers a wide range of topics. The state should define a clear, manageable set of competencies—prioritizing those most relevant to students' lives, such as budgeting, credit, student loans, avoiding predatory financial products, and understanding the long-term implications of higher education financing.
- **Integrate financial literacy across MassCore and MyCAP:** Financial literacy should be treated as a cross-disciplinary competency, not as optional or isolated coursework. As such, financial literacy should be integrated across existing MassCore subjects and embedded into the MyCAP process to ensure all students receive instruction without creating new scheduling burdens. This also allows students to connect financial concepts to academic content and postsecondary planning.

- **Create a rigorous vetting process for curriculum materials:** The state should establish a process to review and approve financial literacy resources that are evidence-based, culturally relevant, reflective of the diverse experiences of Massachusetts students, and aligned with state-defined learning outcomes.
- **Provide consistent training for educators:** High-quality implementation also depends on who delivers the content. The state should offer professional development that prepares educators to teach financial literacy with fidelity, cultural responsiveness, and real-world relevance.
- **Leverage community partnerships:** Community organizations, workforce programs, and internship providers can play a meaningful role in helping students apply financial literacy skills in authentic settings. The state should, where possible, encourage and support these partnerships.

### Element 7: Students will have the option to earn state-designated seals of distinction.

*We support the inclusion of optional seals as a means for students to showcase their strengths, demonstrate readiness for college and career pathways, and receive recognition for advanced skills. When implemented well, seals can motivate students, strengthen transcripts, and forge clearer bridges to postsecondary opportunities. However, it is essential that these opportunities are equitably accessible to all students and that students and families are clearly informed about their availability and requirements.*



#### Recommended Implementation & Equity Guardrails:

- **Equitable Access & Outcome tracking:** The state must monitor participation and outcomes across student groups to ensure that seals do not become another marker of inequity. Historically marginalized students—including students from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and students of color—must have the same access to the coursework, advising, and enrichment opportunities needed to earn seals. The state should monitor student participation in these seals across districts and regularly publicly report disaggregated data. Where disparities emerge, the state should intervene and provide targeted support to districts.
- **Clear Communication:** Students and families must receive timely, accessible information about the availability, requirements, and benefits of seals. The MyCAP process should incorporate structured guidance and regular updates to ensure all stakeholders understand these opportunities.
- **Consistent Criteria:** The state must establish clear, consistent criteria for earning each seal. Uniform statewide standards are essential to preserve the credibility and value of seals for students and postsecondary institutions, and to prevent uneven implementation across districts.
- **Meaningful Incentives for Students:** To ensure seals are more than symbolic, the state should connect them to tangible benefits that motivate students to pursue them. Examples could include:
  - Guaranteed placement into credit-bearing coursework at public colleges for students earning seals tied to academic readiness.
  - Priority access to internships, early college seats, or work-based learning opportunities for students earning career-aligned seals.
  - Recognition at graduation and on transcripts, ensuring seals are visible to colleges, employers, and training programs.
  - Eligibility for scholarships or application fee waivers for students who earn certain seals.

# Conclusion

At the heart of our recommendations is a simple principle: every student deserves a diploma that reflects real skills, real opportunity, and real readiness for life after high school. Each element of the proposed framework is essential to that promise, and overlooking or weakening any part—especially the equity safeguards—risks leaving students unprepared and the Commonwealth’s commitment to opportunity unfulfilled. At the same time, we recognize that these components are being introduced simultaneously at a moment when schools are navigating staffing shortages, budget pressures, and competing state and federal demands. **Successful implementation will require time, clear guidance, new resource commitments, and ongoing collaboration among districts, families, and the state.**

As this work unfolds, it is critical that students are not disadvantaged by capacity gaps or early implementation hurdles. **A phased rollout, supported by transparent statewide goals, measurable progress indicators, and regular communication with families, can help ensure that all students continue to receive high-quality learning experiences while the system builds toward full implementation.** The stakes are too high to get this wrong: if we fall short, opportunity gaps will widen, inequities will deepen, and too many graduates will enter college or the workforce without the preparation they need to thrive in today’s economy. A Massachusetts diploma must remain a meaningful guarantee of readiness—not a hollow milestone—and we urge the state to adopt a framework that upholds that promise for every student.

Sincerely,

