

Document Rationale

This companion document is designed to provide important information on the Designation process and requirements, as well as context for the criteria to be met under each of the five Guiding Principles. The Designation Criteria that form the basis of the application stem from the original [Massachusetts Early College Designation Criteria \(2017\)](#), approved by both the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, as well as the Board of Higher Education. This companion document is not meant to replace the framework or general scope and sequence of the Guiding Principles, but does provide updated alignment of, and clarification for, the requirements of the most current Designation application, available online (as a survey instrument supported by Alchemer). For a more in-depth history of the development of the Designation and application process, please refer to the 2017 document.

Current Working Definition of Massachusetts Early College (2021)

Massachusetts Early College provides a structured program of study and supports that increases college success and career readiness; prioritizing students historically underserved in higher education.

As part of Early College, cohorts of students:

- Take at least 12 credits of strategically sequenced college courses during their regular (or intentionally redesigned and integrated) high school day, at no cost to themselves or their families
- Receive enhanced academic and non-academic guidance and support prior to the beginning of, and during, college coursework to ensure that they successfully complete rigorous courses and thrive in the college environment
- Learn how their academic pathways are related and connected to career opportunities
- Benefit from being part of an Early College community that eases the transition from high school to college
- Graduate high school with a significant number of college credits, habits, and skills needed to be successful in college and career, increasing the likelihood they will continue with college after high school and reducing the cost and time to degree completion.

The Concept of Early College

The original concept of Early College, developed in the 1960's, was a means to re-engage high-achieving high school students in their learning by challenging them with college coursework. However, it was the "turning inside out" of this model in the early 2000's which truly brought out the transformative power of Early College as a way to rethink high school and college for traditionally underserved students. By restructuring the model, to prioritize students the least prepared for college, Early College became a highly effective method to broadly and deeply impact the trajectories of high school graduates who may not otherwise have successfully completed a college degree.

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Early College High School Initiative, redefining the concept of Early College programs as full high schools situated on college campuses for students who traditionally lacked access to college and were projected to be underprepared to pursue college-level coursework upon graduation of high school. The underlying belief behind the initiative was that if these students were provided access to

rigorous learning experiences similar to those offered in higher education but while still in high school with intentional support and additional preparation, they could successfully complete college coursework and gain the confidence needed to continue the pursuit of higher education after high school. To significantly upend social-economic barriers to postsecondary education, these programs typically covered the cost of the college coursework reducing the overall cost to degree completion. Over time, the success of these programs demonstrated that underserved students were able to thrive in an Early College environment and earn postsecondary degrees at a higher rate than their peers.

In time, Early College has become one of the most successful ways to rethink high school, college, and the pathway through both, facilitating growth and development for tens of thousands of students. According to a report by the American Institutes for Research, students who attended Early College were significantly more likely than a matched control group to enroll in college and earn a college degree within six years after expected high school graduation. In fact, more than 3 out of 5 Early College students enrolled in college by the end of high school.¹

Early College High Schools, and later adaptations of that model which included Early College programs within schools and districts, generally consist of several components considered essential for the success of providing underprepared students the tools they needed to accelerate their learning to include college coursework. These components include:

- Intentional recruitment and enrollment strategies that inform and encourage traditionally underserved students and families to participate
- The development of individualized student plans to outline articulated academic pathways and help students understand the purpose of their coursework and how it connects to future career opportunities.
- Wraparound academic and social supports aimed at providing timely and tiered support to encourage EC students' intrinsic worth and amplify their confidence to succeed at the postsecondary level
- The connection of academic courses to career choice through exploration and immersion opportunities
- Intentional and structured access to partnering college campuses as part of the overall strategy to motivate first-generation to college students.,

For the reasons above, both free-standing "Wall to Wall" Early College high schools in which all students participate, as well as Early College programs built within a high school, demand significant investment in redesign, school programming, and curriculum and support alignment. The investment in reimagining learning models for students is worthwhile and seeks to bridge achievement gaps as well as increase higher education degree attainment for historically underrepresented groups.

¹ American Institute for Research, *Early College, Continued Success: Longer Term Impact of Early College High Schools*, September 2019