

FY2026 H.1 BUDGET BRIEF

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Access to High-Quality Education

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Introduction

Massachusetts has long been and continues to be a national leader in providing accessible, high-quality education, with some of the best public schools and educators in the country. This is the result of sustained, strategic investment in our students, educators and schools. Through state programming and local partnerships, the Healey-Driscoll Administration is committed to maintaining this competitive advantage by making high-quality education available to all Massachusetts residents, regardless of age, zip-code, or socioeconomic status. Within the first two years of this administration, the Executive Office of Education has advanced this commitment to student success by:

- Launching free community college: first through MassReconnect, providing free community college to students ages 25 and older without a prior higher education credential, and then expanding to all students through MassEducate.
- Fully funding the annual rate increase schedule established for implementation of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), delivering historic local school aid to cities and towns throughout Massachusetts.
- Guaranteeing universal free school meals for all public K-12 students in Massachusetts, providing approximately 300 million meals for students in the Commonwealth.
- Awarding Innovation Career Pathway designations to an additional 36 high schools across Massachusetts, growing the program by more than 30 percent.
- Expanding the Early College program to 62 high schools, allowing more than 8,200 students to attend a college course for free while still in high school.
- Maintaining \$84 million for a historic expansion of financial aid, making public higher education more affordable for 25,000 students, in addition to providing tuition and fee-free higher education to all Pell Grant recipients.
- Sustaining \$475 million for the Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) Program.
- Under the administration, child care financial assistance provider rates have increased by almost \$90 million. The funding this year sustains the current rates and payment structure that moves closer to the true cost of providing care.

The Healey-Driscoll Administration's FY26 House 1 budget recommendation upholds these commitments to student success, proposing \$12.6 billion across child care, K-12, and higher education segments, an increase of \$818 million (+7%) over FY25 GAA.

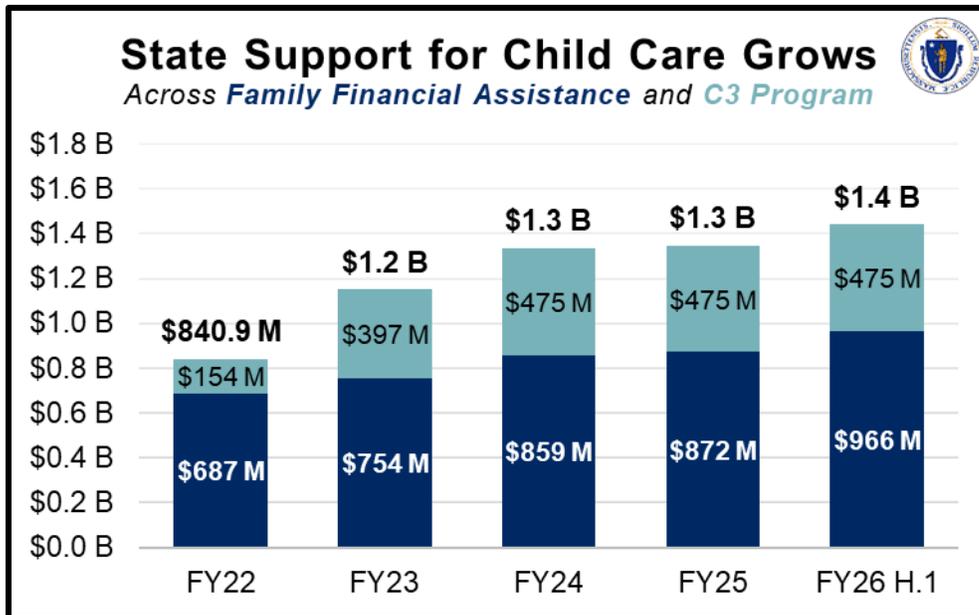
For more details on the Administration's Fair Share investment proposals in FY26, please see the [Fair Share Two Years Later](#) budget brief.

Gateway to PreK: Early Education Access and Affordability

Ensuring the stability and affordability of the early education and child care sector is critical for the development of the state’s youngest learners and the state of the economy. When families can afford to enroll their children in child care and pre-k programs that provide high-quality care, parents are able to get to work, and their children gain the skills they need to succeed in and out of school.

With child care costs in Massachusetts among the highest in the country, many families struggle to afford the full cost of high-quality early education. To improve family access to care, House 1 funds the Department of Early Education and Care’s Child Care Financial Assistance programs at \$1.1 billion to help families pay for care, including families working with the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Transitional Assistance.

House 1 also recommends sustaining \$475 million of state investment in the C3 program, continuing critical operational supports to early education and child care programs. The C3 program represents a paradigm shift in the way in which child care providers are supported, basing monthly payments on current program, enrollment, and operating costs. In doing so, the C3 program has helped to mitigate challenges that early education and child care programs have long faced—even before the pandemic—in balancing high operating costs with the competing goals of fair workforce compensation and affordability for families.



Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI)

House 1, together with the Fair Share supplemental budget, recommends a combined \$67.7 million for the CPPI, a targeted effort to expand access to high-quality preschool for four-year-olds across the state, with a focus on Gateway Cities. This represents a commitment of \$45 million of Fair Share Funding to CPPI, allowing additional districts to participate in the program and expanding preschool access through the mixed public and private delivery system. CPPI focuses on building equal access to high quality preschool for all 4-year-olds, while ensuring multiple provider options exist to meet the needs of working families. This additional multi-year funding will help advance that mission.

Literacy Launch: Reading Success from Age 3 through Grade 3

House 1 proposes funding to ramp up the Healey-Driscoll Administration's Literacy Launch program to improve early literacy rates among the state's youngest learners. This strategic investment of \$25 million represents year two of the multi-year initiative to improve how our youngest students learn to read. Literacy Launch builds off of demonstrated best practices to support districts with professional development, technical assistance, assessment and screening, and the adoption of evidence-based, high-quality materials. This support through best practices ensure that all school districts and community-based preschools have the knowledge and materials they need for successful literacy education.

High Dosage Tutoring

In coordination with the goals of Literacy Launch, the Fair Share supplemental budget proposes \$25 M for a new High Dosage Tutoring initiative. This funding will create opportunities for high dosage literacy tutoring for 10,000 students in grades K-3, with priority given to students in grade 1, resulting in a decrease in students categorized as "significantly below benchmark", as measured by the early literacy screener, at the end of the school year, as compared to the number of participating students identified within that category at the beginning of the year. This initiative offers schools financial support and assistance to work with approved tutoring providers to provide high dosage tutoring for students, and to support acceleration academies to accelerate student learning through engaging, standards-aligned lessons that meet specific academic needs of participating students.

Career Technical Education School Capital Grants

The Fair Share supplemental budget includes \$75 million to support grants for planning, start up, and expansion of instructional capacity of high school and public school career and technical education programs. The grants may support capital improvement projects such as:

- The purchase and installation of equipment

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- Improvements and renovations to facilities necessary for the installation and use of such equipment; and
 - Facility modernization improvements to increase capacity.
- Preference in distributing funds may be given to applicants with demonstrable waiting lists for admission and to districts and municipalities with limited access to career and technical education programs.

Adult Basic Ed/ESOL

The Fair Share supplemental budget proposes \$30 million for an Adult Basic Education English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) initiative. This funding will expand capacity across the public education system allowing Massachusetts to serve an additional 10,000 learners as well as reduce the growing waitlist for ESOL literacy services. The Executive Office of Education, in partnership with the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, will use this investment to fund programs supporting traditional literacy services, workforce readiness, workplace training, and industry credential training.

A Promise to Massachusetts's Learners: The Student Opportunity Act

The Student Opportunity Act (SOA), enacted in 2019, has supported historic investments to advance high-quality K-12 education across the state. House 1, along with the Fair Share supplemental budget, fully funds the fifth year of a six-year implementation strategy for this landmark legislation by recommending \$8.2 billion to ensure that a high-quality education is available to all learners in Massachusetts, regardless of zip code or socio-economic status.

The cornerstone of state funding for K-12 education is the aid formula set forth in Chapter 70 of the General Laws, generally referred to as Chapter 70. Chapter 70 establishes a foundation budget representing the total base-line cost of a high-quality education for all students within a school district through a combination of municipal and state funding. State funding aid is then provided to meet that foundation budget amount based on each district's need and the municipal aid contribution amounts. House 1 recommends funding Chapter 70 school aid at \$7.3 billion, a \$420 million (+6%) increase over FY25 GAA. This increase builds upon a \$263 million increase in FY25 and is the largest nominal increase in the history of the program since FY24.

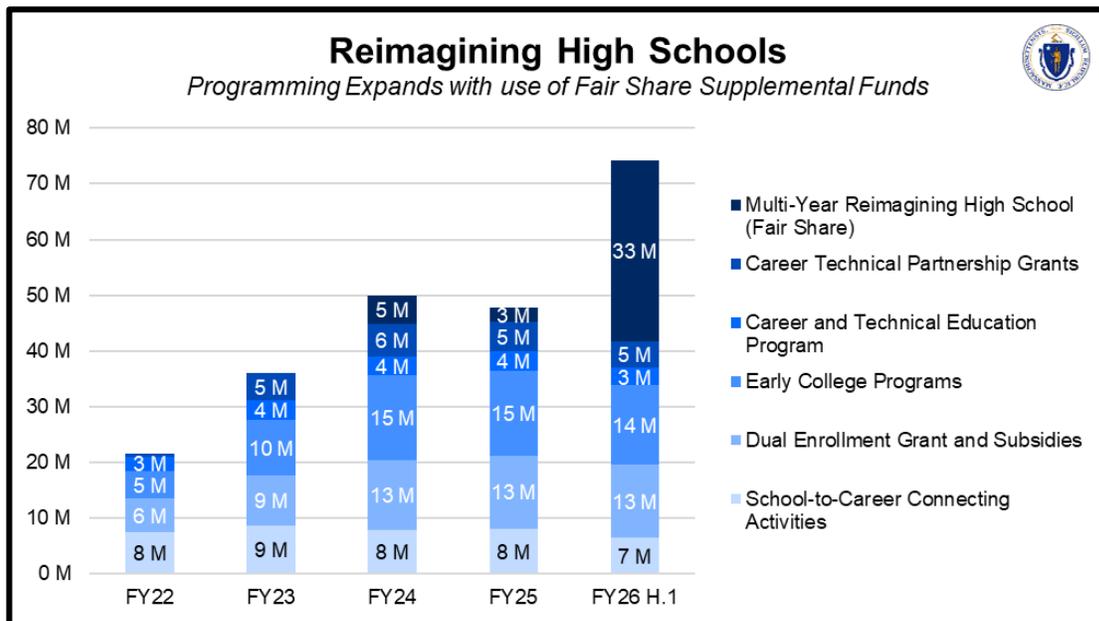
Additionally, the House 1 and Fair Share supplemental budget package recommends \$682 million to fully fund Special Education Circuit Breaker through \$532 million in operational funds and another \$150 million of Fair Share supplemental budget funding. The Special Education Circuit Breaker program reimburses school districts for out-of-district special education costs, ensuring that all students can attend a school that is able to accommodate their needs. This funding level will ensure that the Commonwealth can meet its obligation for both instructional and transportation reimbursements for this program.

For more information on how House 1 recommends supporting school districts and municipalities, please see the **Local Aid Budget Brief**.



Reimagining High Schools

To expand student access to career and college readiness programming, House 1, along with the Fair Share supplemental budget, recommends a total of \$74.6 million for high school pathways programs such as Early College, Innovation Career Pathways and Career Technical Education. This investment will expand opportunities for high school students across the state to explore college and career opportunities before graduating high school.



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Early College programs combine high school and college programming, providing students with opportunities to complete college-level coursework for free while exploring potential future career paths. By reducing the time and expense of earning college credentials, and by demystifying the experience, early college programs increase the likelihood that students will complete their college degree or certificate programs. As of FY25, 62 Massachusetts high schools are participating in more than 50 partnerships with institutions of higher education across the state.

The Innovation Career Pathways program connects high school students with applied, hands-on coursework and work opportunities in high-demand industries, such as clean energy, manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology. As of FY25, 99 high schools in Massachusetts have Innovation Career Pathways programs, allowing over 6,500 students to enroll in the program.

The funding recommended for the Early College program in this budget would provide over 75 high schools students the opportunity to participate in pathways programs for the 2024-2025 school year, allowing them to earn up to 12 college credits before graduating from high school. House 1 also recommends adding funding for this program, giving 100 new high schools, approximately 7,000 new students, the opportunity to enroll in Innovation Career Pathways coursework across priority industries.

Supporting Mental and Behavioral Health

Schools serve as not only a place for students to learn, but also a support system for children from birth through adolescence. While the significance of schools providing mental health supports predates the pandemic, the challenges of recent years have underscored the importance of strengthening these programs. In recognition of this importance, House 1 proposes \$24.9 million for mental and social-emotional health supports, including funds to continue the development and implementation of a statewide birth-through-higher-education framework for mental and behavioral health.

Account	FY26 H.1
Social Emotional Learning Grants	6.0 M
Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Services	5.0 M
Mental Health Systems and Wrap-around Supports (Fair Share)	5.0 M
State University & Community College Mental Health	4.2 M
UMass Student Behavioral Health Services	4.0 M
Safe and Supportive Schools	0.7 M
Total	24.9 M

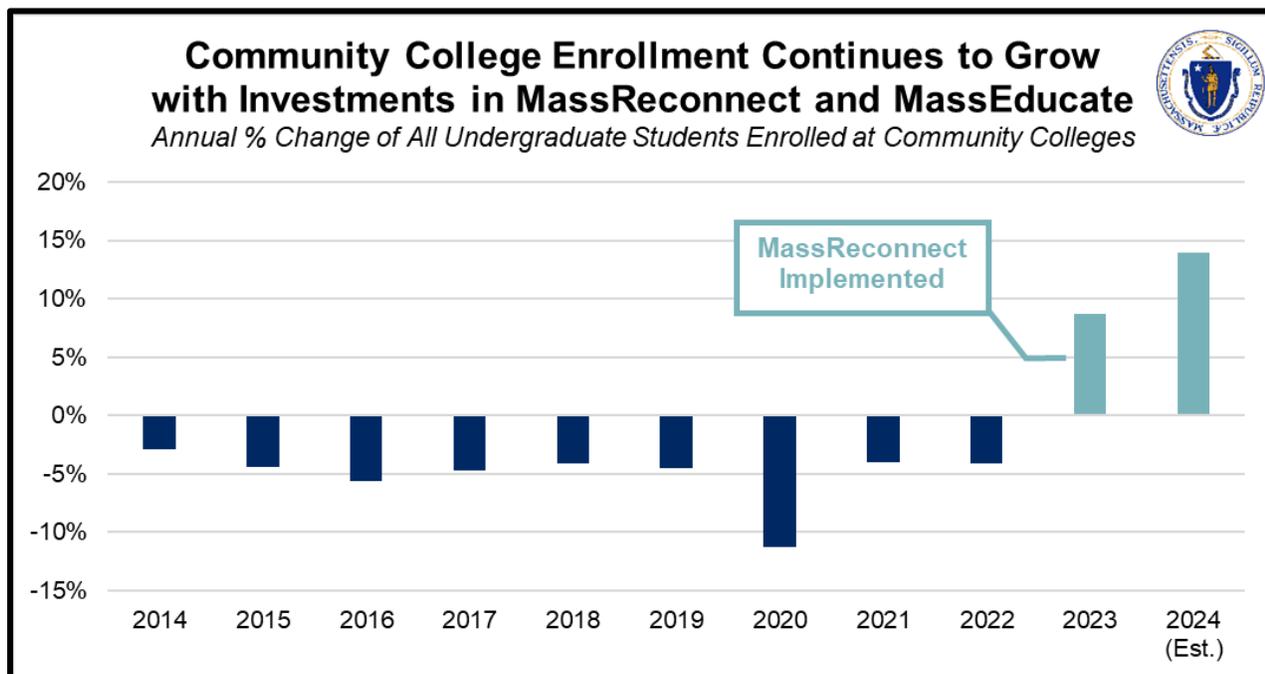
Affordable Higher Education and Strategic Investments

House 1 advances the Healey-Driscoll Administration's commitment to accessible and high-quality higher education by expanding college and career pathway opportunities for students and sustaining historic financial aid expansion to make public higher education more affordable. Massachusetts has one of the most comprehensive free community

college programs in the country through MassReconnect and MassEducate. The Commonwealth also covers the cost of tuition and fees for Pell Grant-eligible students at public universities through MASSGrant Plus while reducing costs for middle-income students. House 1 also proposes leveraging Fair Share revenues to unlock capital asset transformation across the State’s public higher education campuses.

MassReconnect provides students 25 years of age and older, without a higher education credential, the opportunity to obtain a free associate degree at any public community college in Massachusetts. MassEducate builds on the success of MassReconnect, making public community college free for students of any age and income in Massachusetts who have not yet earned a bachelor’s degree. These programs empower students to reach their education goals and pursue training for in-demand jobs across industries, such as health care, education, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and behavioral health. Since its creation in FY24, more than 8,400 students have received MassReconnect grants, including more than 2,000 new students 25 years and older who enrolled in community colleges in fall 2023, reflecting a 45% increase in new students ages 25+ enrolled in community colleges in fall 2022.

Overall, enrollment across the state’s 15 community colleges grew by 14% in fall 2024, greatly as a result of the success of the MassReconnect and MassEducate programs. FY26 House 1 proposes to maintain this important investment with \$24 million in funding for MassReconnect and \$94 million in funding for MassEducate.



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To improve access to higher education, House 1 proposes \$255.2 million for financial aid and student success. In addition to the investment in MassReconnect and MassEducate, this includes a recommendation for \$80 million in Fair Share funding to sustain the MASSGrant Plus and additional financial aid expansions. MASSGrant Plus covers tuition, fees, books, and supply costs for Pell Grant-eligible students and reduces out-of-pocket expenses for middle-income students by up to half. Additionally, this investment recommends \$175.2 million for the Massachusetts State Scholarship Program, which provides financial assistance to Massachusetts students enrolled in and pursuing a program of higher education in any approved public or independent college, university, school of nursing, or any other approved institution furnishing a program of higher education.

Higher Education Capital Funding

The Healey-Driscoll Administration recognizes the importance of investments in high-quality infrastructure for the Commonwealth's public institutions of higher education. Reflecting the findings of the Higher Education Capital Working Group report that was established in the FY25 budget, House 1 proposes securitizing \$125 million in Fair Share revenues annually to issue high investment-grade credit special obligation bonds over the next 10 years. This utilizes a structure based on the Commonwealth Transportation Fund model. The investment will unlock approximately \$2.5 billion in new resources that will support the study, design, and construction from major capital projects to instructional lab facilities, addressing modernization, decarbonization, and critical repairs, while also helping to address the growing backlog of deferred maintenance across higher education institutions. These new resources will provide the type of transformational change and investment our public higher education campuses need to best serve their students, our workforce, and our state.

Conclusion

Through these strategic and historic education investments, the Healey-Driscoll Administration will continue to make high-quality education more accessible and attainable throughout the state, at every stage of learning and life.