

Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID FAFSA COMPLETION INITIATIVE STATUS UPDATE REPORT

This report is submitted pursuant to Chapter 28 of the Acts of 2023, line item 7066-0000. The report provides an overview of the communications and outreach strategies designed to increase FAFSA Completion for underrepresented students. It includes information relative to the target student population, the number of schools participating in the project, and their geographical locations. Background information regarding the relevance of this initiative is also provided. This FAFSA Completion initiative runs through the end of the fiscal year, June 30, 2024.

Joint Committee on Higher Education
House Committee on Ways and Means
Senate Committee on Ways and Means

Dear Committee Members:

I am pleased to submit this status report to members of the Legislative Committees on the *FAFSA Completion Initiative for Fiscal Year 2024*. The enclosed report includes: (i) information related to the number of students to be served per high school; (ii) geographical locations of high schools involved in the initiative; and (iii) components of the initiative targeted to facilitate and incentivize FAFSA completion through the end of fiscal year 2024. Data provided in this report and used to design this initiative was compiled in partnership with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, data from the Department of Higher Education's Research and Planning Team and the federally funded GEAR UP program.

Historically, Massachusetts ranks among the top states each year in FAFSA completion, usually between 5th – 7th annually. The state though still has persistent gaps in FAFSA completion among first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students of color when compared to other students. For first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students, being accepted into a college is a major accomplishment that will open many doors of opportunities and possibilities, such as increased earnings and an increase in quality of life. Research shows that students who complete the FAFSA are more likely to enroll in college than non-FAFSA filers. However, inspiring students to consider college as an option requires that they have knowledge and support that begins with FAFSA completion. Helping students to understand their possibilities and potential is a major goal of this FAFSA Completion initiative, which is focused on incentivizing students, with family engagement. The overarching goal is to increase the number of students from the targeted populations who successfully complete the FAFSA, gain admission to college and earn a college degree. We view FAFSA completion as a critical first step in this process.

Questions about this report may be directed to Alex Demou, Director of Legislative and Trustee Relations via email at: ademou@dhe.mass.edu.

Sincerely,

Noe Ortega
Commissioner of Higher Education

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Background

The fiscal year 2024 state budget allocated resources to the Department of Higher Education (DHE) to facilitate improvement of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates among underrepresented student demographics within Massachusetts. Those allocations enabled collaborative initiatives with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to develop strategies, such as public awareness campaigns, FAFSA workshops, and clinics, specifically addressing the needs of underrepresented student populations. The DHE defines “underrepresented” to be inclusive of students who identified as first-generation, low-income, or students of color.

Through the Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) and in collaboration with DESE, DHE launched the 2024 FAFSA Completion Initiative that was designed to increase Federal Student Aid (FSA) ID and FAFSA completion rates for students participating in the state’s Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and students attending public high schools in Gateway Cities across the state. This initiative also focused on completion of the Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA), the state’s alternative application for students who are unable to complete the federal FAFSA, as a condition of the Tuition Equity Law.

GEAR UP Massachusetts

GEAR UP is a [national initiative](#) designed to encourage more young people to have high expectations, stay in school, study hard, and take the right courses to go to college. In Massachusetts, GEAR UP is managed by the DHE, which has been successfully funded for three multi-year grants.

GEAR UP Massachusetts was a natural partner for the FAFSA Completion initiative. The program already serves low-income students in five cohorts across seven of the Commonwealth’s most impoverished areas: Boston, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Springfield, and Worcester. Over the past 24 years, GEAR UP Massachusetts has helped thousands of students chart a path toward high school graduation and college success.

More information on GEAR UP Massachusetts can be found at www.mass.edu/gearup.

Project Overview

The FAFSA Completion Initiative was implemented in two phases. In Phase I, we focused on supporting GEAR UP seniors in select districts with the goal of increasing FSA ID, FAFSA and MASFA completion rates. During the second phase, grants were given to schools in gateway cities to help seniors engage with the FAFSA and MASFA process.

In both phases of this program, schools were awarded grant funds on a per student basis. DESE partnered with the DHE to facilitate grant payments to schools. These grants were accompanied by a toolkit to provide schools with some guidance for how to create and implement activities that incentivize students to submit a FAFSA and work towards achieving a goal of 100% success rates at each participating school. The toolkit included recommendations for incentives to reward student behavior, such as “school swag” items included, hats, t-shirts, backpacks, water bottles, stickers, pens, etc.

DHE financial aid staff, including GEAR UP, college and university financial aid administrators, and partners at DESE, MEFA, and other college access groups were recruited to assist schools with FAFSA completion activities, such as training and informational workshops for school counselors and support staff, FAFSA Nights, and college application process.

Phase I – GEAR UP Federal Student Aid (FSA) ID

Phase I of the FAFSA Completion Initiative included the GEAR UP FSA ID project that involved both students and parents setting up accounts to access the FAFSA. Families must create an FSA ID, which is a username and password that allows access to the U.S. Department of Education's online systems, before they can complete the FAFSA. After creating an FSA ID, it can take one to three business days for the Social Security Administration to verify the information. Helping families do this in advance makes completing the FAFSA quicker and more streamlined.

The GEAR UP FSA ID project was conducted across seven GEARUP school districts with 11 high schools:

1. East Boston High School
2. Dean High School (Holyoke)
3. North High School (Holyoke)
4. J.J. Duggan High School (Springfield)
5. Lawrence High School Campus
6. Lowell High School
7. New Bedford High School
8. North High School (Worcester)
9. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy (Springfield)
10. Springfield Central High School
11. Springfield Conservatory of the Arts High School

Phase II: 2024 FAFSA Completion Initiative for Gateway City Schools

Phase II of the FAFSA Completion Initiative kicked off in February 2024, providing grants to more than 100 Massachusetts public schools serving Gateway Cities to help high school seniors complete the FAFSA. These grants, totaling more than \$550,000, followed an announcement that the state’s priority deadline to apply for Massachusetts financial aid via MASSGrant had

been extended from May 1 to July 1, 2024 amid unique nationwide challenges with that year’s FAFSA.

The FAFSA completion grants were issued to public high schools at which 70 percent or more of the students served are from Gateway Cities. High schools received grant amounts equal to \$30 per 12th grader. School leaders and counselors could dedicate grant money to FAFSA completion events or celebrations, and they could purchase prizes such as gifts cards and school-branded merchandise for students who complete the FAFSA or MASFA.



Focusing the program on Gateway Cities allows the Department to leverage the rich diversity, economic potential, and regional importance of these urban areas. Gateway Cities serve as vibrant hubs with unique cultural assets and opportunities for growth. By directing these critical resources to Gateway Cities, the FAFSA Completion Initiative aimed to empower all learners within these communities. It seeks to harness the existing strengths and resilience of Gateway City residents, creating opportunities for increased FAFSA completion rates and expanding equitable access to high-quality postsecondary opportunities. This intentional and approach recognizes and builds upon the inherent assets and potential of the Commonwealth’s Gateway Cities to promote educational equity and economic advancement.

“An [financial aid] event like this showed us that our students and families care a lot about this topic, want this information, and are happy to have the forum to do this. We were so happy to see seniors leaving with a completed FAFSA, and juniors and their families coming out to learn more. Many of them on the way out thanked us for offering food, and there were many smiles. We saw families sit down after completing a FAFSA to enjoy some time together and have something to eat. We were so happy to be able to do this for them, in a fun, casual way. Based on the comments on the way out, they are already looking forward to Financial Aid Night!” - Attleboro High School Grant Recipient

The FAFSA Completion Initiative grant awardees were:

School District	Total Award*
Fall River: Argosy Collegiate Charter School (District): Argosy Collegiate Charter School	\$1,560
Attleboro: Attleboro Community Academy	\$570
Attleboro: Attleboro Virtual Academy	\$390
Brockton: Brockton Virtual Learning Academy	\$450
Brockton: Edison Day Academy	\$600

Brockton: Edison Evening Academy	\$1,680
Brockton: Huntington Therapeutic Day School	\$300
Chelsea: Chelsea High	\$10,320
Chelsea: Chelsea Opportunity Academy	\$2,250
Chelsea: Chelsea Virtual Learning Academy	\$510
Chicopee: Chicopee Academy	\$300
Chicopee: Chicopee Comprehensive High School	\$8,490
Chicopee: Chicopee High	\$6,480
Everett: Devens School	\$150
Fall River: Stone PK-12 School	\$240
Haverhill: Gateway Academy	\$300
Lawrence: High School Learning Center	\$4,350
Lawrence: Lawrence High School	\$21,630
Lawrence: RISE Academy	\$840
Lawrence: School for Exceptional Studies	\$330
Leominster: Leominster Personalized Virtual Learning Academy (LPVLA)	\$120
Lowell: Dr. Janice Adie Day School	\$120
Lowell: Leblanc Therapeutic Day School	\$270
Lowell: Lowell High	\$22,890
Lowell: The Career Academy	\$960
Lynn: Classical High	\$10,590
Lynn: Fecteau-Leary Junior/Senior High School	\$750
Lynn: Lynn English High	\$14,520
Lynn: Lynn Vocational Technical Institute	\$7,920
New Bedford: Whaling City Junior/Senior High School	\$1,260
Peabody: Peabody Personalized Remote Education Program (Peabody P.R.E.P.)	\$570
Lawrence: Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence (District): Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Lawrence	\$180
Springfield: Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Springfield (District): Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School, Springfield	\$300
Pittsfield: Eagle Education Academy	\$30
Quincy: North Quincy High	\$10,980
Revere: CityLab Innovation High School	\$540
Revere: Revere High	\$12,270
Salem: Salem Prep High School	\$30
Springfield: Conservatory of the Arts	\$1,290
Springfield: Gateway to College at Holyoke Community College	\$420
Springfield: Gateway to College at Springfield Technical Community College	\$330

Springfield: John J Duggan Academy	\$1,950
Springfield: Liberty Preparatory Academy	\$30
Springfield: Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy	\$9,330
Springfield: Springfield Central High	\$16,050
Springfield: Springfield High School	\$2,880
Springfield: Springfield High School of Science and Technology	\$5,730
Springfield: Springfield International Academy at Sci-Tech	\$30
Springfield: Springfield Public Day High School	\$180
Springfield: The Springfield Renaissance School an Expeditionary Learning School	\$1,860
Springfield: The Springfield Virtual School	\$630
Taunton: Taunton Public Virtual Academy (TPVA)	\$180
Westfield: Westfield Virtual School	\$450
Worcester: University Pk Campus School	\$1,350
Everett: Everett High	\$14,940
Malden: Malden High	\$13,170
Methuen: Methuen High	\$13,830
Quincy: Quincy High	\$10,740
Haverhill: Haverhill High	\$13,980
Springfield: High School Of Commerce	\$7,020
Attleboro: Attleboro High	\$12,690
Holyoke: Holyoke High	\$12,210
Brockton: Brockton High	\$19,980
Worcester: North High	\$9,930
Taunton: Taunton High	\$13,680
Worcester: Burncoat Senior High	\$8,970
Worcester: Doherty Memorial High	\$9,270
Salem: Salem High	\$6,360
Worcester: Claremont Academy	\$2,070
New Bedford: New Bedford High	\$18,120
Worcester: Worcester Technical High	\$9,780
Worcester: South High Community	\$12,960
Peabody: Peabody Veterans Memorial High	\$8,820
Fall River: Resiliency Preparatory Academy	\$1,680
Springfield: Baystate Academy Charter Public School (District): Baystate Academy Charter Public School	\$1,530
Fall River: B M C Durfee High	\$14,700
Springfield: Springfield International Charter (District): Springfield International Charter School	\$2,700
Fitchburg: Fitchburg High	\$7,770
Leominster: Leominster High School	\$8,880

Pittsfield: Pittsfield High	\$5,400
Pittsfield: Taconic High	\$5,670
Salem: Salem Academy Charter (District): Salem Academy Charter School	\$1,890
Westfield: Westfield High	\$7,470
Lynn: KIPP Academy Lynn Charter (District): KIPP Academy Lynn Charter School	\$3,570
Chicopee: Hampden Charter School of Science East (District): Hampden Charter School of Science East	\$1,650
Taunton: Taunton Alternative High School	\$2,310
New Bedford: Global Learning Charter Public (District): Global Learning Charter Public School	\$750
Barnstable: Barnstable High	\$9,660
Lawrence: Greater Lawrence Regional Vocational Technical: Gr Lawrence Regional Vocational Technical	\$11,400
Leominster: Leominster Center for Excellence	\$840
Lowell: Collegiate Charter School of Lowell (District): Collegiate Charter School of Lowell	\$750
New Bedford: Trinity Day Academy	\$300
Salem: New Liberty Innovation School	\$600
Leominster: Center For Technical Education Innovation	\$3,660
Westfield: Westfield Technical Academy	\$3,300
Worcester: Abby Kelley Foster Charter Public (District): Abby Kelley Foster Charter Public School	\$2,340
Everett: Pioneer Charter School of Science (District): Pioneer Charter School of Science	\$1,140
Fall River: Atlantis Charter (District): Atlantis Charter School	\$1,560
Chelsea: Phoenix Academy Charter Public High School, Chelsea (District): Phoenix Academy Charter Public High School, Chelsea	\$390
Fitchburg: Goodrich Academy	\$2,610
Lowell: Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter (District): Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School	\$870
Brockton: New Heights Charter School of Brockton (District): New Heights Charter School of Brockton	\$2,190
Lowell: Greater Lowell Regional Vocational Technical: Gr Lowell Regional Vocational Technical	\$13,380
Haverhill: Greenleaf Academy	\$90
West Springfield: Hampden Charter School of Science West (District): Hampden Charter School of Science West	\$1,020
Fall River: Greater Fall River Regional Vocational Technical: Diman Regional Vocational Technical High	\$7,440

New Bedford: Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical: Gr New Bedford Vocational Technical	\$10,980
Fitchburg: Sizer School: A North Central Charter Essential (District): Sizer School: A North Central Charter Essential School	\$990
East Boston: East Boston HS- GEAR UP students only	\$5,130
TOTAL	\$553,860

*Awarded based on number of eligible resident students.

Note: Remaining funds from the line item were used for administrative costs, to communicate about financial aid programs and to provide technical assistance on launching the incentive program.