



# Bulletin

Parents Learning About Children's Education

The Massachusetts Statewide Parent Information & Resource Center (PIRC)

Available online in English, Spanish, and Portuguese at [www.pplace.org](http://www.pplace.org)



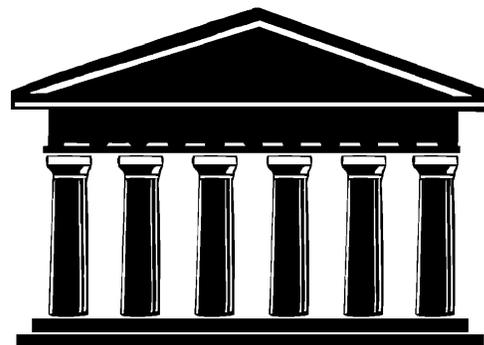
## Looking Ahead to College

Parents<sup>1</sup> know that a good education is the key to their child's successful future. At **Parents' PLACE**, our guiding truth is "**Parents Are Powerful.**" We know that parents' love for their children is one of the greatest powers on earth. If parents get the right information and the support they need, they will work to overcome even the most difficult barriers for their children.

Many parents find it difficult to get the information they need about college. Some parents face language barriers. Families with no tradition of going to college lack personal experiences to pass on.

Families with low incomes and those raising children with special needs may assume college is not within their reach. For many reasons, families may not know how to help a student get on the road to college.

Yet, today there are many more opportunities for more students to go on to higher education. Low-income students, students who speak English as a second language, and students with disabilities—including students with intellectual disabilities—are finding their way to college and having success. This issue of the *Bulletin* can help parents and families get children a good start toward college.



### PARENTS REALLY ARE POWERFUL!

Research tells us that family encouragement is a top reason why students aspire to go to college and why they stay in college. Researchers have also found that all students do better after high school if there is a strong connection to a caring adult, whether or not that adult is a family member.

To begin with, from the earliest ages, your belief in a child is essential. But you will need many helpers along the way. Talking about your high expectations with teachers and counselors helps make sure the student you care about gets support and guidance all along the road to college.

## EDUCATION PAYS

A two-year or four-year college degree is an investment that pays back over a lifetime. One advantage is greater earning power. Today, almost every well-paying job calls for some higher education. The chart shows the average weekly earnings of 25-year-old full-time workers in 2003:

A typical college graduate earns about 75% more than a high school graduate. That difference can total a million dollars over a lifetime! (CNNmoney.com, 1/20/06). College has other benefits, too. It opens the door to more and better jobs. And students gain skills and knowledge that they will use their entire lives. Students learn to read, write, and speak critically. These are valued qualities in any career.

### MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS IN 2003

High School Dropout	\$396
High School Diploma	\$554
Associate Degree (two-year degree)	\$672
Bachelor's Degree (four-year degree)	\$900
Master's Degree	\$1,064
Doctorate Degree	\$1,349

<sup>1</sup> Today, many other adults, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, stepparents, guardians and other caring adults, may carry the primary responsibility for a child's education. We use the word "parent" here to mean all those involved in a child's education.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, retrieved May 2006 from [www.bls.gov/emp/emptab7.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/emptab7.htm).

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## The Road to Higher Education

In this *Bulletin*, “higher education” means formal programs of study that lead to a certificate or a two- or four-year degree from a community college, college, or university.

At a two-year **community college**, students can gain skills for today’s job market. A student can earn:

- Associate of Arts degree (A.A.),
- Associate of Science degree (A.S.), or
- A certificate or license in a program to prepare for a specific job.

These jobs might include physical therapy assistant, computer technician, or dental assistant, for example. Many high schools and some local employers offer career programs linked to community and technical colleges. Later on, some credits from the community college can be transferred to a four-year college.

At a **four-year university or college**, students earn either a:

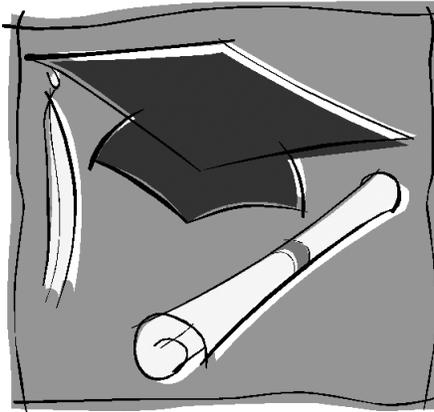
- Bachelor of Arts degree (B.A.) which is needed to become a teacher, for example, or a
- Bachelor of Science degree (B.S.), which is needed to become an engineer or accountant, for example.

Master’s and Doctorate degrees are advanced degrees needed to become a physical therapist, doctor, social worker, or lawyer, for example.

### THINK COLLEGE EARLY

Preparing for college begins even before a student first sets foot in school. In the earliest years, let your child know how much you value learning. Show an interest in your child’s school day. Ask specific questions. For example, ask to see something they wrote at school, or ask about something they learned that day. Encourage your child to ask

questions at school. Enthusiasm is important—a student’s attitude is one key to academic success.



### ON TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

The most important thing a student can do to prepare for college is to sign up for the right courses and work hard to pass them. Experts suggest that college-bound middle and junior high school students should take:

- **Algebra I** (in eighth grade)<sup>2</sup> and **Geometry** (in ninth grade). These courses prepare students for advanced math and science courses.
- **English, Science, and History or Geography.** With math, these are the basic (or “core”) academic classes students should take every year through middle and high school.
- **Foreign Language.** Many colleges require students to have studied a foreign language for two years.
- **Computer Science.** Basic computer skills are now essential for college.
- **The Arts.** The arts can broaden your child’s understanding. Colleges value the experience students gain from them.

<sup>2</sup> Algebra I may not be available until ninth grade for students in middle schools using the Connected Math Curriculum.

### ON TO HIGH SCHOOL

Your child should take a college preparation, or “college prep,” curriculum, including:

- **Four years of English**, including composition, speech, and literature.
- **Three to four year of Mathematics** to build on the algebra and geometry classes from middle school, including Algebra II, Pre-calculus, Trigonometry, and Calculus.
- **Two to three years of Science**, including biology, chemistry or physics, and earth science, advanced biology or advanced chemistry.
- **Two to three years of Social Studies**, including one year of U.S. History and classes in geography, world history, and economics.
- **Two to three years of a Foreign Language.**
- **One to three years of challenging electives.** “Electives” are classes that are not required for graduation. Students can learn about something they are interested in, such as psychology, computer science, or communications.

High school students can also take courses for college credit while in high school. These courses can save time and money in college:

- **Advanced Placement (AP) Program.** Advanced Placement courses are college-level classes that give a preview of college work. Students may get college credit for passing AP exams.
- **International Baccalaureate (IB) Program.** The IB program prepares students for college at select universities. Students can get college credit for passing IB exams.
- **Getting ready for college admissions exams.** Most colleges require students to take either the SAT I or ACT in their junior or senior year of high school. Ask your guidance counselor how your child can best prepare for these exams.

## DON'T GO IT ALONE

You don't need to have gone to college yourself to help someone else get ready for college. Most parents need support and guidance when it comes to college. The more the school personnel know about your child's goals, the better able they are to help. Communicate often with the teachers and counselors. Ask for their help and guidance. When everyone knows what you are aiming for, they can give you the help you need.

Good teachers are also of top importance. *The No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) requires that teachers of all the core academic subjects listed in this *Bulletin* be highly qualified.<sup>3</sup> Special education teachers must be highly qualified in each core subject they teach. The law says schools must tell you about teacher qualifications *if you ask*.

Since 1997, federal law has required that students with disabilities have full access to the general curriculum. This means they have a right to learn all the same subjects that other students learn. It is important for parents to make sure

**Under NCLB, parents may request and receive information about the professional and educational background of their children's teachers.** Districts that receive Title I, Part A, funds must give parents the following information, *if they request it*:

- Whether the teacher is licensed by the state to teach the grade levels and subject areas in which the teacher provides instruction.
- Whether the teacher is teaching under an emergency license or waiver.
- The degree major of the teacher and the field or discipline of the degree and/or graduate certification.
- Whether the child is being taught by paraprofessionals and their qualifications.

In addition, *whether or not you ask*, a Title I school must tell you if your child has been taught for four or more weeks in a row by a teacher who is not highly qualified.

their children's Individualized Educational Program (IEP) lists the supports and strategies the student needs to be successful in the general education subjects.

Many schools have formed partnerships with institutions of higher education to help students prepare for college. For example, all five campuses of the University of Massachusetts and other colleges and universities in this state have before- and after-school college prep programs. GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) Massachusetts is another important resource. Its mission is to help prepare students from low-income backgrounds for college entry. These programs work with middle and high schools to inform, encourage, and support students to prepare for higher education.<sup>4</sup>

It is the school counselor's job to help you and your child plan classes, and to let you know of these opportunities.

## FINANCIAL AID IS AVAILABLE

Money alone should not keep anyone from going to college. Each year, the U.S. Department of Education gives more than \$40 billion to help students pay for higher education. Most aid is based on students' or families' need for money, not on grades. A 2006 study found that 1.5 million low-income students who could have received aid did not. The reason they did not receive aid is that *they did not ask for it*. Often, students did not know about aid or they believed they were not eligible.

Federal student aid is financial help for students enrolled in an eligible four-year or two-year public or private college, career school, or a trade school. The aid covers tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, and transportation. There are several types of aid:

- **Grants** (such as Pell Grants or Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, or FSEOG): Money you don't have to repay.

- **Federal Work-Study Program:** A job during college to help you pay for educational expenses. Colleges help find jobs for students, and the federal government helps pay the salary.
- **Loans:** Borrowed money for college expenses that you must repay, generally at a lower interest rate.

When your child is ready to apply for college as a senior in high school, have him or her fill out an application. The application is called the **Free Application for Federal Student Aid**, or **FAFSA**. This one application is for *all federal and state* financial aid. You only send one application no matter how many schools you wish to apply to. You must submit the FAFSA every year that you want aid. You can apply each year beginning January 1 up until June 30. ***But the sooner you apply after January 1, the better.*** Otherwise you might miss some deadlines for aid set by schools or the state. For example, the deadline for state aid is May 1 every year. The school counselor or your public library can give you the application. Information about FAFSA is online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov). And you can call the U.S. Department of Education at 1-800-433-3243 for a copy.

Other ways to pay for all or part of a college education include opportunities for serving our country, such as AmeriCorps, Military Academies, and Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Also, many colleges offer financial assistance directly to individual students based on need or merit. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts offers many aid programs based on need as well as merit. Call the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, Office of Student Financial Assistance, at 617-727-9420 or go to their Web site at [www.mass.edu](http://www.mass.edu) for more information about these opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> NCLB deems teachers "highly qualified if they: 1) have a bachelor's degree; 2) have a Massachusetts teaching license at any level; and 3) have shown that they are competent *in the subject matter* of the core subjects they teach.

<sup>4</sup> For information on any of these programs, please contact Parents' PLACE.

### TAKE ACTION

Learning begins at home. Valuing higher education begins with parents, families, and friends encouraging education from the child's earliest years on through high school and beyond. Here are some practical tips to help you get started:

- Even infants and toddlers get a head start when parents read to them and encourage them to explore books.
- Encourage your elementary school child to develop good study habits. Ask teachers to help you set quality standards for homework.
- Talk about career interests and college options. Encourage your child's aspirations.
- Parents of students with disabilities must be vigilant from the earliest years to be sure that your children have access to the same curriculum that all students have access to. Make certain that each year's IEP builds on previous skills and knowledge as the child progresses through the grades.

- Talk with your children's teachers about your and your child's aspirations. Let them know that you expect your child to go to college.
- Work with other parents to help ensure that schools are doing all they can to prepare students for college success. Find out if your children's teachers are "Highly Qualified" as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act*.
- Encourage math study! A 2006 U.S. Department of Education study found that all students who take more math are more likely to graduate.
- Take advantage of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) options for parents whose children are in Title I schools deemed to be "in need of improvement." These children are entitled to transfer to another school, or may be eligible for free tutoring called "Supplemental Educational Services." (Parents' PLACE has special publications on these options for parents. Call Parents' PLACE for your free copy.)
- Make sure your child starts on a college preparation course in middle school or junior high, and keeps on that track all through high school.
- By the Junior year in high school, visit prospective schools.
- Each year, work with your child to set the schedule of classes for the next year.
- Ask your child's teachers, guidance counselor, or principal how your child can take AP courses or be in an IB program.
- Ask the guidance counselor if the school has college preparatory programs set up with state or private colleges and/or if it has a GEAR UP program. Many of these programs are free to students. Some even offer small stipends to offset the cost of participating in them.

For more information about any of the information contained in this *Bulletin*, please call Parents' PLACE at 1-877-471-0980.

### ONLINE RESOURCES

The U.S. Department of Education has information on higher education online at [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) or call 1-800-USA-LEARN.

GEAR UP Massachusetts has a wealth of resources for parents online at [www.gearup.mass.edu/parents](http://www.gearup.mass.edu/parents). Click

on Get Ready for College for specific tips for grades 7 through 12.

HEATH Resource Center has information on all aspects of post-secondary options, useful for students with and without disabilities. Their financial aid resource is updated yearly.

Online at [www.heath.gwu.edu](http://www.heath.gwu.edu), or call 1-800-544-3284.

ThinkCollege.net is a resource for youth with intellectual disabilities at [www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net).

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