

## **Worcester students, superintendent seek state budget boost for early college programs**

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BOSTON - Ziray De Jesus Pacheco walks through Worcester State University's campus on Monday evenings, his college ID hanging from a rainbow lanyard and bouncing against his chest as he makes his way to his Latin sociology class.

Pacheco, 18, is not a typical college student. He's still a senior at Worcester North High School, but an early college program at his school allows him to take college courses for free before he graduates.

"A couple months ago, I was approached about taking college classes," Pacheco said. "And I was like, 'Yes, I would love to do it!'"

Worcester Public Schools Superintendent Maureen Binienda, representatives from Worcester State University and Pacheco lobbied for more funding for early college programs across the state at the Statehouse Wednesday. They cited the success of these programs in Worcester as an example for its potential across Massachusetts.

Early college programs allow students to take classes on college campuses during their regular school day, in the evening, on weekends and over the summer, helping them to get acquainted with the college experience, get ahead in their college credits and facilitate their timely graduation.

Binienda, who has over 40 years of experience in education, shared why she is an advocate for early college.

"This has made a tremendous difference for our students," Binienda said. "They are going to college, they are feeling differently about themselves, and they are having success."

Advocates called for an additional \$2.25 million for concurrent and dual enrollment programs and \$500,000 for early college programs in the fiscal 2021 budget. Gov. Charlie Baker's fiscal 2021 budget proposal already allots \$4.25 million for concurrent and dual enrollment programs and \$3 million for early college programs.

Juana Matias, chief operating officer at MassINC, shared data showing the effects of early college on the state and national level, and said the additional funding is needed to sustain and grow the project. The Student Opportunity Act provides "significant new state funding" for high schools, but higher education institutions are "struggling to assume their share of costs," she said.

"In order to make sure that all students have an opportunity to enter higher ed, we need to make sure that we're taking the steps that are creating sustainable growth of early college programs across our commonwealth," Matias said.

Binienda said after the meeting that early college offerings in Worcester for the past two years have been funded with grants. This year, Worcester schools received a \$180,000 grant from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to pay for early college.

"However, if we are growing at the amount we are, we're going to need a lot more funding," Binienda said.

Matias said that more than 70% of Massachusetts jobs require a college degree or career certificate, but only 45% of the class of 2012 earned a certificate or degree within six years of graduating high school. Low-income students were three times less likely to complete a post-secondary degree or credential.

"For the first time in our state's history, a state that is built in a knowledge-based economy, we are poised to see a decline in our projected college education population," Matias said.

Matias also stated that a 2019 MassINC study, "Investing in Early College Education," shows that early college doubles college completion rates, and leading states have seen a 15-to-1 return on their investment.

She said that in Massachusetts over the past two years, 2,300 students from 34 high schools have enrolled in early college programs at 16 participating higher education institutions. Twenty-two new applications for early college are awaiting designation.

In Worcester, all seven high schools participate in the early college program, offering 27 unique courses in 58 sections. There were 83 students when the program began in Worcester in September 2018. Now, 474 students are enrolled in early college classes, and that number increases to 747 students when including students who are enrolled in the early college program but not currently taking a course. Binienda said the number of students involved in early college represents 10.1% of the Worcester high school population.

This school year, Worcester early college students have earned 1,011 college credits at no cost to them, and including classes in progress, they are slated to earn 10,074 more.

Breaking down the current Worcester early college population further, 324 students are English language learners, 13.3% of students are black, 9.5% are Hispanic, 6.9% are white, 8% are homeless students, and 489 students identify as low-income.

Mary Jo Marión of the Latino Education Institute at Worcester State University said early college can help close the gap for minority and low-income students by addressing some of the main deterrents these students face when thinking about college: the affordability, the lack of exposure to the college experience from family and the fear of the unknown that can arise from being a first-generation college student.

“I’ve never been so excited about how to close the equity gap,” Marión said. “This takes away all the barriers, it brings the students right to higher ed, and they skip those things that normally block them.”

Matias confirmed that taking on early college has not hurt the overall academic performance of Massachusetts students; rather, the students are earning higher grade-point averages than fully matriculated college students.

“Early college students are going directly on to college after graduation at double the rates of their non-early college peers,” Matias added.

Binienda said that in Worcester, 72% of early college students have received A's and B's this academic year, with 22% getting B's and 50% getting A's.

Binienda noted that other aspects of the college experience, such as where the registrar is located and how to get on Blackboard, an online portal used in many college courses, are small details of the college experience that early college students are exposed to in addition to their classes, making them all the more prepared for college.

Binienda also said that through "true partnerships" with Quinsigamond Community College and Worcester State University, students receive official college IDs and have access to the university libraries and other facilities.

"That makes kids think college," Binienda said. "They think, 'I belong here, I have an ID, I know who to go to if I need help,' and there is a support system."

Binienda stressed that her schools work closely with the colleges through regular meetings to bridge the gap between the high school and college curriculums and make sure that the students are getting the most out of the program.

Worcester schools have students thinking about early college early in high school, with all ninth-graders taking a course in college and career readiness.

"With early college, we really try to focus on kids that are in the middle of the road, that really don't see themselves yet as college bound, and help them see what college can offer," Binienda said.

She said Worcester schools looked at Massachusetts core curriculum requirements for high school students and merged them with partner college curriculums to fulfill both the high school English requirement and to allow students to complete what is equivalent to one full year of college English while still in high school.

She said Worcester schools are offering similar supplemental courses in math, and students also can take elective courses in subjects like sociology.

Binienda said all Worcester public high schools have adjusted their schedules to accommodate the early college program, busing participants to the colleges for classes in the first two and last two periods of the school day. She said they also

offer evening, weekend and online classes for courses that cannot be fit into the daily schedule to help “all students get involved.”

Pacheco said taking an early college course while still in high school has been challenging, but he is glad that he decided to take on the more difficult work. He said that after taking classes at Worcester State through early college, he now wants to attend the university as a fully matriculated student in the fall.

“It’s about time management and balancing my homework in my classes,” Pacheco said. “My professor and teachers have been very helpful. I’m excited for the future.”