

# Issue in Brief: Building Multiple Pathways to a Massachusetts High School Diploma



## Overview

In an era of growing diversity and technological innovation, we must consider the limitations of the traditional K-12 school structure. An increased emphasis on high standards and achievement demands that students demonstrate competency with new skills and knowledge. Students who struggle in traditional classroom settings need options that better suit their academic, and often social and economic, needs. This is especially true when considering students at risk of failing to graduate from high school. The factors influencing students' decisions to drop out are varied and diverse, and districts can benefit from creating multiple strategies to help students earn a high school diploma. In this policy brief, the Rennie Center for Education Policy & Research aims to expand the conversation among policymakers and educators about offering multiple pathways to graduation by:

- Identifying research-based, effective practices;
- Describing the structure of four different district-level programs; and
- Compiling cost estimates for replicating program strategies across the Commonwealth.

## The Massachusetts Context

Featuring flexible scheduling, multiple means to earn credit, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning, alternative education programming can offer districts a model for multiple pathways. Alternative education typically is offered to students who have struggled in traditional educational environments and are at-risk of dropping out. Across the Commonwealth, examples can be found of districts that provide students multiple pathways for attaining a high school diploma. Many districts have expanded these academic options beyond at-risk student populations. For example, some districts offer accelerated access to college and careers, such as dual enrollment and Early College High Schools. Others offer career/vocational technical education and work-based learning. When taken together, implementing a menu of non-traditional academic options can help districts meet diverse student learning styles and academic needs, and offer all students supportive routes to high school graduation and postsecondary success.

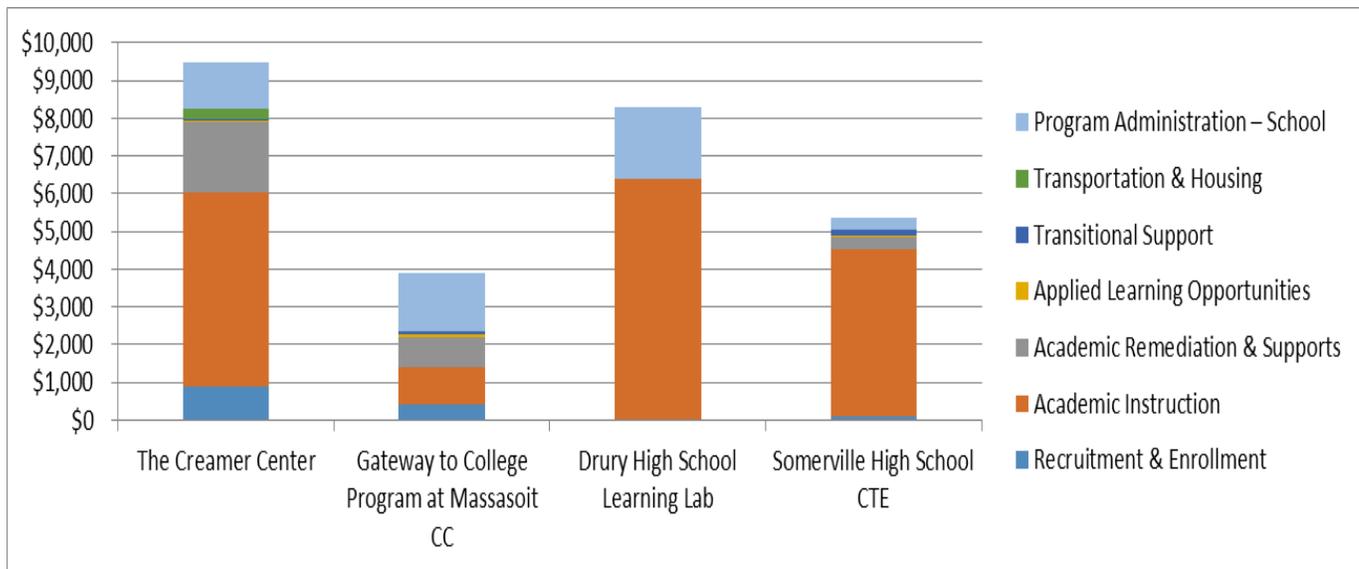
## The Evidence: Promising Practices in Building Multiple Pathways

This document presents findings from the research study *Building Multiple Pathways toward a High School Diploma: A Cost Study of Non-Traditional Academic Options* featured as part of the project *Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity: Evidence on What Works in Education*. Findings present the cost of promising practices based on a review of the literature base and original research into the characteristics of alternative education models offered in four selected districts (Drury High School's Learning Lab; Somerville High School's Career and Technical Education Program; Gateway to College Program at Massasoit Community College; Gerald M. Creamer Center). Common program elements include:

- Referral and enrollment processes use student data to personalize student supports.
- Core academic instruction accommodates student learning needs without compromising rigor.
- Applied learning opportunities include practical workplace experience.
- Academic remediation features multiple opportunities for intensive, personalized support.
- Programs offer services to help students transition to college and/or career.
- Programs supplement academic instruction with socio-emotional intervention.

The cost analysis focused on the program components common across the four models. For the 2013-14 academic year, total per pupil costs for the four selected programs ranged from \$3,904 to \$9,469. These programs have different programmatic goals in response to the students they serve; as such, costs are driven primarily by the resources used to deliver varied academic services. The following graph shows the costs for each program component.

**Table 1. Per Pupil Costs**



## Policy Considerations

### For State Policymakers

***Serve as a knowledge broker to continue to improve learning among districts.*** The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) can support the expansion of multiple pathways by continuing to disseminate information about relevant programs and practices.

***Explore funding opportunities that incentivize districts to develop multiple academic options.*** Highlighting which existing funding sources can be used to develop and implement multiple pathways will help districts identify available resources. Also, new grant programs could prioritize efficiency through regional collaborations.

***Support collaborations between districts and community colleges.*** Many of Massachusetts’ community colleges have begun robust partnerships with districts to develop multiple pathways to a diploma. An increase of state funding for the Commonwealth Dual Enrollment Partnership (CDEP) would expand opportunities for collaboration.

### For Districts

***Map out all of learning options available to students in your district.*** Districts should take inventory of all existing pathways to a diploma and/or other credential, and list all requirements, prerequisites, and/or referral and enrollment practices associated with each program. This exercise will broaden awareness of students’ options.

***Make information about pathways to a diploma easily accessible.*** Information should be publicly available and easy to find for students and their families. In addition, districts that have cultivated exemplary non-traditional academic programs should seek to share their knowledge and experience.

***Partner with other districts, institutions of higher education, and non-profit organizations.*** Coordinating work across multiple organizations may provide a more comprehensive set of options, as well as help share costs. In addition, the use of data across districts can improve possibilities for regionalization of services.

**For the full report, *Building Multiple Pathways* and other research, visit the Roadmap to Expanding Opportunity website at:**

**ExpandingOpportunity.org**