# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Russell Johnston, Acting Commissioner |
| **Date:** | March 18, 2025 |
| **Subject:** | College Access: Update on ACARE and Increasing FAFSA and MASFA Completion |

At the March 25, 2025 meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board), staff from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) including Associate Commissioner of College, Career, and Technical Education Elizabeth Bennett, Nyal Fuentes, Coordinator of College and Career Readiness, and Lisa Harney, Coordinator of Secondary Supports, and Department of Higher Education (DHE) GEAR UP Director Robert Dais will present an update on progress related to goals and activities to increase college access and affordability for Massachusetts public school students. The update builds upon the Governor’s[*Advisory Council for the Advancement of Representation in Education (ACARE) Report*](https://www.mass.gov/doc/read-the-acare-report/download) and the *Increasing FAFSA and MASFA Completion* report issued jointly by DESE and DHE in February 2025.

**Background**

Board members previously received the Governor’s *Advisory Council for the Advancement of Representation in Education (ACARE) Report*. A brief overview of the report and progress are provided below to inform the discussion. The Healey-Driscoll Administration established ACARE in June 2023, ahead of the Supreme Court decision on race-based admissions. The ACARE recommendations describe commitments of the Executive Office of Education (EOE) and DHE to enhance access to the state’s higher education system and provide a high-quality experience to all students regardless of background.  In January 2025, Secretary Tutwiler and DHE Commissioner Noe Ortega issued the first implementation plan relating to the ACARE recommendations, tied to the Commonwealth’s FY25 budget.

*Increasing FAFSA and MASFA Completion report*

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Board of Higher Education (collectively “Boards”) held a joint meeting on June 20, 2024. Higher Education Commissioner Noe Ortega and I prepared for the Boards a joint memorandum highlighting the critical importance of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA) completion. A joint resolution that the Boards approved unanimously at their June 2024 joint meeting affirms that completing the FAFSA or MASFA is a key pathway to higher education enrollment. An excerpt from the joint resolution reads:

*The Boards therefore direct their commissioners to continue their ongoing interagency collaboration and coordination to develop recommendations aimed at increasing awareness for students and their families on college affordability, including new state financial aid availability. The proximate goals should include increased FAFSA and MASFA completion rates, with the ultimate goal of increasing college-going rates. The scope should include examination of innovative, technology-enabled student engagement strategies, and separately, examination of policies such as mandatory FAFSA completion. The Boards encourage the commissioners to use existing infrastructure to pilot promising approaches to effectively communicate financial aid availability to students transitioning to postsecondary education. The Boards further request that the commissioners produce a joint annual report that includes FAFSA and MASFA completion rates by student groups and a summary of the interagency work on this topic.*

In furtherance of the Boards’ directive, this first annual report reviews the current state of FAFSA and MASFA completion in Massachusetts, as well as policies and strategies in other states and makes recommendations for increasing future financial aid applications and, by extension, college enrollment in Massachusetts.

As part of achieving the recommendations, the Secretary of Education and the Commissioner of Higher Education commit to certain implementation and accountability actions that include submission of periodic implementation plans to the Governor and Lieutenant Governor. The first of those implementation plans was [issued in January 2025](https://www.mass.gov/doc/january-2025-acare-implementation-report/download) tied to the Commonwealth’s FY25 budget.

The ACARE report and recommendations align with DESE’s educational vision that reimagines the high school experience so that all students are engaged and prepared for postsecondary success and DHE’s vision of ensuring that public higher education opens doors of opportunity and fulfillment for traditionally underserved populations, and significantly raises the enrollment, attainment and long-term success outcomes among under-represented student populations.