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I. **Introduction**

Professional Pathways is a partnership between Neighborhood Villages, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), and Massachusetts community colleges. The program builds upon the Commonwealth’s Career Pathways, a public grant initiative aimed at promoting Massachusetts community colleges’ ability to offer quality, affordable, early childhood education certifications and degrees to students around the state, debt-free. The initiative allows participating community colleges to offer free academic programming dedicated to helping students and launch and advance careers in early education and care.

In the fall of 2021, Neighborhood Villages and the Massachusetts Department of EEC announced the creation of the Professional Pathways program and the establishment of a state-wide infrastructure designed to connect the EEC workforce with institutions of higher education that meet their specific needs. Utilizing a non-traditional approach to higher education with accessibility at its core, Professional Pathways is intended to serve as a central navigation resource for providers, to assist them with accessing higher education pathways in ways that work for them, including course modalities, language, location, stackable credits and degrees, wraparound support, and more.

Since November 2021, the Professional Pathways team has made incredible progress in launching an educator-focused resource and support system that meets the needs of individual educators as well the field of early education at large. Highlights from the work of the past seven months include the following accomplishments:

- Created and refined an easy-to-access online portal where educators and providers can submit requests for courses, information, and support and receive quick follow-up from the Professional Pathways team – [eecprofessionalpathways.com](http://eecprofessionalpathways.com)

- Managed inquiries from 389 early educators and 32 early education providers from all EEC regions across the state

- Connected 154 educators with college pathways, with over 35% being referred to the Child Growth and Development course required for new teachers

- Established and enhanced relationships with 15 colleges throughout the Commonwealth, building trust and opportunities for collaboration

- Rapidly developed and deployed new systems, processes, and communications to meet emerging needs from educators, efficiently and effectively

- Guided educators and providers through changes in the EEC Minimum Hiring Requirements and the certification process, providing direct support and serving as a liaison between educators and the Department of Early Education and Care
For the first time, early education students, educators, program administrators, workforce agencies, and higher education providers have a central online location to make requests and get instantly connected with a support team dedicated to helping them access the right coursework, certification, degree, or resources to advance their careers.

Predominantly, the team receives two types of inquiries: “Educator Inquiries” from students looking to take a college course or learn additional information in how to advance their career and “Program Inquiries” from administrators hoping to create a cohort of a group of educators who all want/need the same course. The graphic below highlights the process from inquiry form to college connection for both educators and programs. For more detailed information about this process please see Appendices A and B.
II. Professional Pathways by the Numbers

Educator Inquiries

The intent of the inquiry process for Educators is to connect users with an early childhood education course or ongoing pathway at one of the participating community colleges or Urban College of Boston. The process is designed to be simple and easy to connect with a member of the Professional Pathways team. Educators complete an inquiry form on the website and are contacted by an SSA (Student Support Associate) within 24-48 hours.

Additionally, the team regularly receives requests for other types of services such as: support finding non-credit bearing professional development, help understanding the Minimum Hiring Requirements or advice about opening a child care center. This direct contact with educators provides SSAs the opportunity to collect first-hand information about the needs and unmet gaps in the field. The team has begun to collect qualitative and quantitative data about these requests and is developing processes for supporting such inquiries. (Please see the "Systems/Process Improvement " section for more details about how this experience is helping us improve our support.)

Individual Requests

Since the Professional Pathways website and inquiry form went live in November of 2021, 389 individual case inquiries have been submitted. The PP team has successfully handed over 40% of those cases to community colleges for enrollment in a specific class. This chart summarizes the variety of outcomes from the initial inquiries:
The most common requests from educators are for courses that can be used to qualify for Lead Teacher and Child Growth and Development. The administration course that is needed to qualify to be a center director is the next most popular request. Additionally, educators have requested help with advising support, CDA courses, understanding EEC credentials, advanced degrees and beginning a career in early childhood education. Almost 9% of educators request “other” types of support which are further broken down below.

Breakdown of “other” requests:

- Info on graduate programs: 1
- Info on PhD programs: 1
- Info on public school certification: 1
- Student needs to complete additional courses in addition to Director courses: 1
- Student wanted to be on a pathway towards Director certification - needed advising: 1
- Financial aid options for bachelor’s degree program: 2
- Non-ECE course: 2
- Professional development options (CEUs): 2
- Financial aid options for graduate school: 3
- Open a childcare center: 5
- Requested courses but educator already met requirements: 5
**Geographic Requests**
The PP team received inquiries from educators in all 5 of the EEC regions across the state. The largest number, 120, came from the Region 6 Metro Boston area. The fewest number, 20, came from Region 1 Western Mass area.

**College Connections**
The PP team has referred a total of 154 students to 14 of our 15 community college partners and Urban College of Boston. The list below outlines the number of students referred to each college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Connections</th>
<th>154</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bristol Community College</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunker Hill Community College</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cod Community College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holyoke Community College</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Bay Community College</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massasoit Community College</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlesex Community College</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Wachusett Community College</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Shore Community College</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Essex Community College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinsigamond Community College</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springfield Technical Community College</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban College of Boston</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pending</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language Requests (other than English)
The majority of educators request courses in English, with Spanish as the second most requested language.

Note: Language need is likely higher than indicated here. Numbers include only educators who connected with the PP team and made a specific course language request. Educators who selected a preferred contact language on the online inquiry form but did not request a course — e.g. educators who never replied to the PP team — are not counted.
**Program / Provider Inquiries**

The intent of the inquiry process for Programs is to work with early childhood administrators to create cohorts for a specific group of educators who all need/want the same course. Per our process, the Program Manager reaches out to all early childhood administrators who submit the Program Inquiry form to gather more information about their request. After the Program Manager has all of the details of the request, she finds a college partner who can meet the administrator’s needs and connects them. To date, PP has successfully created 6 cohorts of educators.

We quickly learned that many administrators were completing the “Program Inquiry” form on behalf of a single educator. Whenever this happened, the administrator was encouraged to support the educator in submitting an Educator Inquiry form so that they could be contacted by an SSA who would support them through the process. (Please see the “Systems/Process Improvement” section for more details about how this experience helped us improve our inquiry form process.)

### Program Inquiries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requests</th>
<th>32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on behalf of educators</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort requests</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD request (not college)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In process or no response</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cohort Requests**

The team received 6 cohort requests from staff, all of which have been established with community colleges and are underway or are completed. An inquiry from a child care center in Burlington has led to a successful cohort that has taken multiple courses together.

### Cohort Requests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requests</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohorts established</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohorts in process</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Program Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Requests</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center based</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Childcare</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Course Request

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Requests</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Growth and Development</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant/Toddler Curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs in ECE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other Inquiries**

The PP website was originally designed to accept inquiries from higher education providers and workforce development specialists looking for resources and support. To date, the team has not received any inquiries of this nature. We hope to build out this aspect of the project in the next year.
III. Feedback on Professional Pathways: Qualitative Data

The Professional Pathways team has been instrumental in connecting over 150 educators/students with community college classes. The process is “human centered” and each individual who reaches out for support gets personalized attention relating to their specific needs. In addition to communicating in the educator’s preferred mode (email, text or phone), the PP team provides individual follow-up to make sure that the hand-off process to the college was successful. Many of the educators are grateful for the personalized attention and follow-up and have provided positive feedback.

Quotes from participants

“Thank you for checking on me… I had my first class today. I really appreciate your help and support throughout the process. Thank you!!”

“Thank you so much for all of your support and follow up! You’re great at your job. I hope your bosses know :)

“I am successfully enrolled in the program with Middlesex Community College. I appreciate all your help, support and guidance. Thanks a ton.”

“Thank you for your help!!! Appreciate it! Class actually started today!”

“I cannot thank you enough for all of your help. You have been very helpful with this stressful situation. I hope you have a great summer!”

“My classes start next week and I’m super excited! I’m extremely grateful for your hard work”
IV. **Ongoing Improvement and Planning for FY23**

**Strategies for success**

The key to the success of the Professional Pathways program is the ability of Student Support Associates to listen to educators, understand their needs, take into consideration barriers to entry, and offer an accessible and attainable college pathway for each student. Neighborhood Villages’ SSAs are able to connect with students in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic. SSAs communicate with educators in whatever way works best for them, through email, phone, or text. They also ensure that once they have found a pathway that works, they are connected directly to a live person at a college that will assist them in the remainder of the process. The Neighborhood Villages Professional Pathways team collectively brings experience from the field as educators and even community college students themselves. SSAs and the Program Manager maintain a deep knowledge of college pathways through monthly meetings with each community college partner to best serve the needs of each student. SSAs provide educators with a warm hand off, so that these students can continue in their journey towards successful degree and credential attainment.

**Continuous Quality Improvement**

As part of our general operating procedures, the Professional Pathways team reflects on all aspects of our project to determine key elements that can be revised and improved. Improvements in FY22 have included:

- **Analysis of email elements that commonly get flagged as SPAM:** In an effort to ensure that educators were receiving PP communication, the team researched elements of email communications that commonly get flagged as SPAM (e.g. subject lines) and created alternatives to improve deliverability.

- **Streamlined and efficient inquiry process:** An easy and efficient inquiry process is key to the mission of the Professional Pathways user centered approach. In the first phase, the team carefully analyzed the questions on the initial inquiry form and eliminated all those that were not required for supporting students. In the second phase, the Program Manager collected the questions that community colleges ask on their enrollment forms and carefully recrafted our form to remove as many duplicates as possible. In the third phase, the team worked with our Salesforce development partners to combine the initial inquiry form with the Professional Development Intake form to eliminate an additional step from the enrollment process, in order to improve response and retention of students. The final result was one single intake process with only those questions required for data collection and successful placement of the student. This new process was launched in June, and the team will continue to evaluate its effectiveness and any ongoing adjustments that need to be made.

- **Increasing student response rates:** The Professional Pathways team continues to review their communication processes and email templates in an ongoing basis to analyze response rates and effectiveness. The team will continue to iterate and implement new and innovative ways to increase student response rates to both initial and ongoing communication.
• **Targeted outreach:** Multiple outreach methods and partnerships were pursued in the field to explain and clarify the role of the Professional Pathways team. Connections with FCC systems, PDCs, CPPI grantees, Directors groups, and MassHire boards have already begun in FY22. Ongoing connections with these groups, as well as additional networks within the field, will be pursued in FY23.

• **Aligning PP referral process with college intake process:** SSAs have started to include links to colleges' Career Pathways intake forms in referral emails connecting educators to college staff. This enables educators to begin the college enrollment process more quickly. This process will become standard for the PP team in FY23.

• **Reconfiguration and widespread use of Salesforce database:** The PP team made a big effort to make data collection and reporting more efficient and accurate throughout FY22. They identified key metrics for supporting students' and the project's success, and built database fields and functions to easily capture necessary data.

**Planning for FY23**

The Professional Pathways team is committed to supporting early childhood educators in pursuing pathways as well as meeting gaps within the field. In collaboration with EEC and within the scope of the FY23 project description, the PP team plans for the following initiatives in FY23:

• Continued expanded outreach both within and outside the field;
• Additional support for educators and administrators to understand and operationalize the Minimum Hiring Requirements;
• Conversations and partnership with 4-year colleges and universities to enable hand-off for those interested in BA/MA programs;
• Connections and programs with Mass Hiring boards to increase the early educator pipeline;
• Support for students with financial aid resources including where to find technical assistance and/or training NV staff to provide technical assistance;
• Streamline data collection in a way that eases the burden on students and staff and makes it easier for NV staff and college partners to share information;
• Continue providing services in a way that strengthens the connection between educators and staff at the colleges in which they enroll (many educators reach out to NV staff for advising when they are already enrolled at a college);
• Connections with professional development providers to support educators who are not interested in college coursework;
• Explore options for supporting colleges with course waitlists, referring waitlisted students to open courses across the state.
Appendix A

Professional Pathways Process for Educator Inquiries

➢ Educators (and prospective educators) submit an Educator Inquiry Form through the Professional Pathways website, indicating the type of course or information they are seeking.
➢ Once an educator submits the Inquiry Form, a new Case is created in the Professional Pathways Salesforce database.
➢ The Program Manager reviews new Cases in the database each weekday morning and assigns Cases to Student Support Associates (SSA), based on SSA caseloads and educators’ language preferences.

Case Work
Step 1: The Initial Contact
Once the new case is assigned the responsible SSA will review the educator’s profile in the database and to see the preferred method of contact: email, text, or phone.
  ● Email/text: The SSA makes “initial contact” via email or text and provides a short introduction, an explanation of the Professional Pathways process, and a link to the Professional Background Intake form.
  ● Phone: The SSA calls the educator. If the educator does not answer the phone, the SSA will leave a voicemail with a short introduction and a phone number for the educator to call back. If the educator answers the phone, the SSA will ask if it’s a good time to complete the Professional Background Intake form or if the educator would like to schedule another call.
  ● If the SSA is unsuccessful in getting in touch with the educator after their initial contact, the SSA will
Step 2: The Professional Background Intake form
Online intake form:
  ● Once the intake form is submitted the SSA sendS out an email confirmation letting the educator know that responses have been received.
  ● The SSA logs the professional background information into the educator’s account in the database.
  ● The SSA emails or texts if there are any clarifying questions.
Phone intake form:
  ● The SSA completes the Professional Background Intake form over the phone with the educator.
Step 3: The Research
  ● The SSA looks for course offerings based on the educator’s catchment area, course requested (Child Growth, Lead Teacher courses, and Director courses), preferred learning format, and preferred enrollment period.
Step 4: Presenting the College Options
Once the research is done the SSA sends an email or text with a list of colleges that meet the educator’s needs and asks if the educator is interested in any of the options.

When the educator chooses one of the options, the SSA informs the Program Manager.

Step 5: College Referral

- The Program Manager contacts college staff to ask about seat availability in the desired course(s).
- The Program Manager informs the SSA of seat availability (and any additional relevant details).
- The SSA informs the educator of seat availability and connects the educator with the ECE College Coordinator via email.
- The CP Grant Coordinator supports the student with registration and enrollment.

Step 6: Follow-Up

- Two weeks after the college referral and “warm hand-off,” the SSA reaches out to the educator to ask where they are in the process. The SSA asks if the educator enrolled in the course or needs any additional support?
- If the educator is not enrolled, the SSA asks if the educator would like to try another college? The SSA asks about the barriers that prevented enrollment.
Appendix B

Professional Pathways Process for Program Inquiries

Step 1: Intake

- Provider or group interested in enrolling a cohort of educators in an ECE course submits an Inquiry Form through the Professional Pathways website, indicating the course they are seeking and the number of educators in need.
- Once the Inquiry Form is submitted, a new Case is created in the Professional Pathways Salesforce database.
- The Program Manager reviews the request and contacts the provider or group to gather more information.
- The Program Manager collects additional information on the request, including the following: number of educators who would be ready to enroll; modality preferred (e.g. online); scheduling preferences (e.g. synchronous or asynchronous, start date); course language; any additional requests (e.g. extra tutoring support).
- The Program Manager sends a summary of the request to the provider or group, along with a list of potential ways the provider or group can support the cohort of educators (e.g. collecting and submitting enrollment paperwork).

Step 2: Case Work

- The Program Manager sends the details of the cohort request to a college in the educators’ region, asking if the college would be able to fulfill the request.
- Once a college partner is identified, the Program Manager sets up a meeting for relevant college staff, the provider or group who made the request, and the Program Manager to discuss details of the course and any additional support or funding that will be needed.
- College representatives and the provider or group who made the request continue working together in ensuing weeks to discuss details of the course and to enroll students, including the Program Manager in discussions and tasks as needed.

Step 3: Contract Process

- If additional funding is needed – i.e. if the college is developing a new course section for the cohort of educators and does not have funds in its budget to cover some or all of the costs – the Program Manager gathers information to initiate a contract draft and submits the draft to the Director of Workforce Development.
- Neighborhood Villages staff and college representatives finalize and approve a contract for funding the course and any related costs (e.g. textbooks, tutoring).