Gov. Whitmer launches bipartisan $30M Michigan Reconnect program

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New scholarship initiative offers historic tuition-free opportunity for more than 4.1M Michiganders age 25+ to earn an associate degree or skills certificate

LANSING – Gov. Gretchen Whitmer joined today with Republican and Democratic legislators to announce the launch of the $30 million Michigan Reconnect program, the largest effort in state history to ensure that more than 4.1 million Michiganders who are 25 or older and do not have a college degree will have an opportunity to earn a tuition-free associate degree or skills certificate.

"All Michiganders deserve a pathway to a good-paying job, whether they choose to pursue a college degree, technical certificate, or an apprenticeship," **Gov. Whitmer** said during a virtual news conference. "**Michigan Reconnect** will connect thousands of Michiganders to good-paying jobs and connect businesses with the talent they need to thrive in their communities. I'm proud of the hard work that has gone into creating this historic new opportunity and look forward to continuing bipartisan work with lawmakers toward our goal of ensuring 60% of Michiganders will have a postsecondary degree by 2030."

Michigan Reconnect will pay the cost of tuition for eligible adults who want to pursue an associate degree or skills certificate at their in-district community college. The program also offers skills scholarships to help cover the cost of tuition through more than 70 **private training schools** with 120 programs that offer certificates in high-demand careers in industries such as manufacturing, construction, information technology, healthcare or business management.

Starting today, Michiganders can submit applications at **Michigan.gov/Reconnect**. The application takes less than five minutes to complete and can be done on a mobile device.

Reconnect scholarships are accepted by all Michigan community colleges and are even available to eligible adults who are already enrolled in their local community college. The program pays the remaining balance of tuition and mandatory fees after other state and federal financial aid have been applied. For those who choose to attend an out-of-district community college, Reconnect will pay the in-district portion of tuition.

The Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) is administering Reconnect in partnership with the Michigan Department of Treasury.

“Reconnect offers a path for so many Michiganders hoping to begin – or complete – their education and career journey,” said LEO Acting Director **Susan Corbin**. “This program, like so many others we’re focused on, will help expand opportunity for all Michiganders and make Michigan a better place to live, work and play.”

To be eligible for Michigan Reconnect, you must:

- Be at least 25 years old when you apply
- Have lived in Michigan for a year or more
- Have a high school diploma
- Have not yet completed a college degree (associate or bachelor’s)

Funding for Michigan Reconnect was introduced in Gov. Whitmer’s FY 2020-21 budget proposal. A bipartisan group of legislators – led by state Sen. **Ken Horn**, R-Frankenmuth, state **Sen. Jim Ananich**, D-Flint, state Rep. **Ben Frederick**, R-Owosso, state Rep. **Sarah Anthony**, D-Lansing, and former state **Rep. Sheryl Kennedy**, D-Davison – approved $30 million in state funding.

Michigan employers’ ability to find highly skilled and capable employees is more difficult than ever and is cited as a top concern in the most recent Michigan Future Business Index Report. Michigan Reconnect will help address the dual challenges of the state’s widening talent gap and aging workforce.

As of 2019, only 41% of Michigan's working-age residents had an associate degree or higher, placing Michigan at 31st in the nation. The average age of Michigan's 365,232 residents currently enrolled at a community college is 25.7 years old, and more than 36% are 25 or older, according to the Michigan Community College Association.

"Even if Michigan were able to keep every high school and college graduate, it wouldn't be enough to fill our state's talent gap," **Sen. Horn** said. "Our aim with Michigan Reconnect is to meet our state's workforce need by encouraging and assisting residents to afford and achieve a college credential or advanced certificate. Now our state has a tool to reach out to adults wanting to pursue postsecondary education, if they choose to."

Michiganders without a college degree or training credential often face economic challenges. A 2020 analysis by the American Association of Community Colleges reports the median earnings of full-time employees with a high school degree is $40,510 annually, while those with an associate degree make $50,079 per year, based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

"Michigan Reconnect is a win for Michiganders across our entire state," **Rep. Anthony** said. "When adults earn degrees and gain new skills, they have the ability to advance in the workplace, earn higher wages and fulfill lifetime dreams."

Several organizations from all sectors of the state's economy have pledged to work as Reconnect Champions to promote awareness of the program, including the Michigan Manufacturers Association.

"By helping workers get the training they need to thrive, businesses will have the much-needed skilled talent required to succeed," said MMA President and CEO **John Walsh**. "Michigan Reconnect helps businesses across the state increase the size and quality of our workforce and serves as an incredible asset for economic mobility."

Individuals looking to take advantage of Reconnect who are unsure what they'd like to study are encouraged to consider some of Michigan's high-demand careers. A **list of those careers and wages** by occupation and region is available on the Michigan Reconnect website.

Shabaka Bailey, 25, of Lansing, spoke at today's virtual news conference and described Michigan Reconnect as an "almost too good to be true" opportunity.

Bailey learned about the program through a career coach at the Capital Area Michigan Works agency in Lansing. He is currently looking for work after receiving lay-offs last summer from a lumber yard and a local restaurant that closed due to the coronavirus.

"It's hard right now with the pandemic," said Bailey, who is the father of a 5-year-old son, Josiah, and 1-year-old daughter, Journi.

"I had thought about going to Lansing Community College to get my associate degree," he said. "But I couldn't afford to pay the cost of tuition and still support my kids at the same time. Michigan Reconnect is a great opportunity for me to pursue my dream now.

"I plan to enroll at LCC and begin their aviation program," Bailey added. "I want to become an aviation technician and work on plane engines. I think that's a good career for me that will allow me to make something of myself."

A virtual news conference tour through March will also introduce Michigan Reconnect benefits to audiences across the state. The events will feature state legislators and local leaders representing community colleges and business and workforce development organizations, as well as testimonials from prospective Michigan Reconnect applicants from every region of the state.

While more than 8 in 10 parents of a Michigan high school student expect their child to earn a college degree, 70% said that high costs are a barrier, according to a survey commissioned by the Michigan Association of State Universities.

Michigan Reconnect is an ideal solution for those families and students who initially decided they couldn't afford to pay tuition to attend community college or feared taking on student loan debt.

The program builds on the success of the **Futures for Frontliners** initiative Gov. Whitmer launched last September and to which more than 120,000 Michiganders submitted applications by the Dec. 31 deadline.

The nation's first program of its kind, Futures for Frontliners offered tuition-free college or high school completion to Michiganders who provided essential front-line services during COVID-19 Stay Home, Stay Safe orders between April and June 2020.

Approximately 20,000 Michiganders who applied but didn't qualify for Futures for Frontliners and are 25 years or older will automatically be eligible for tuition-free college assistance with Michigan Reconnect.

Eligible residents can learn more and apply for Michigan Reconnect at **michigan.gov/Reconnect**.

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