High School Reform in Colorado: Meeting the Expectations of a New Era
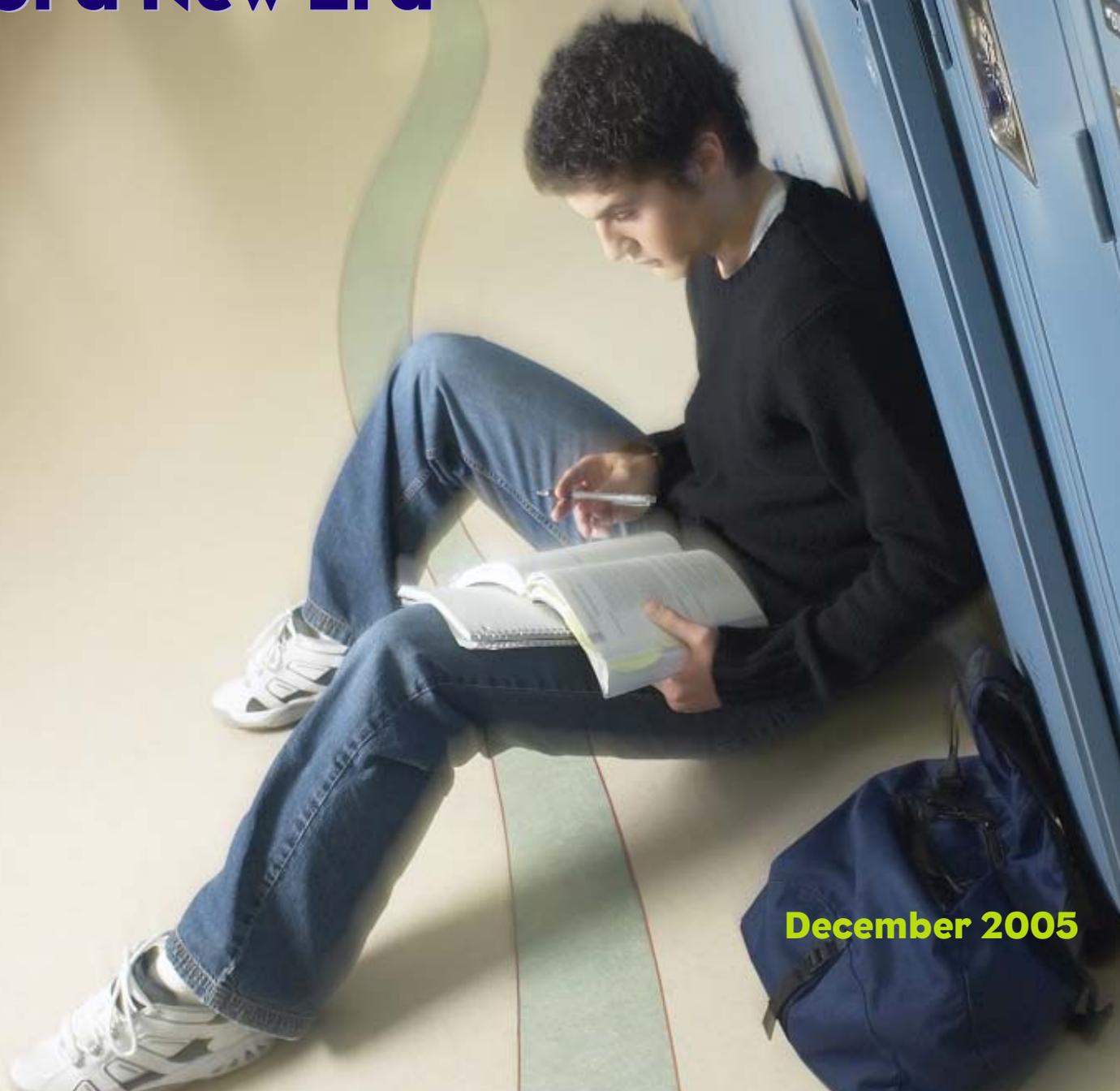
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Acknowledgements

For information about reprintng this publication, please contact the Colorado Children's Campaign.

Colorado Children's Campaign
1120 Lincoln Street, Suite 125
Denver, CO 80203
Office: 303.839.1580
Fax: 303.839.1354
www.coloradosmallschools.org
www.coloradokids.org

December 2005
Colorado Children's Campaign

December 3, 2005

The Colorado Children's Campaign (CCC) has been working to improve the lives of the state's children and youth for more than 20 years. The Campaign has advocated for many changes in Colorado designed to help all our children grow into healthy and well-prepared young people who can succeed in their lives and contribute as adults in our communities. Reforming our high schools is a powerful piece of this larger effort. It is fitting, then, that the Colorado Commission for High School Improvement (CCHSI) placed high school reform in a larger perspective, and connected the urgency we feel about improving our high schools to the preparation of young children in the earlier grades and their eventual transitions into adult lives. When nearly a third of our young people fail to graduate from high school, and many of those who do graduate are unprepared for further study, we clearly have a great deal of work before us.

The CCC began its work on high school reform when we founded the Colorado Small Schools Initiative in 2000. That effort included partnerships with schools and districts. We started work on the ground, helping educators and school leaders create new schools and converting large, low-performing schools into smaller schools. We also continued the CCC's tradition of using data and research to inform advocacy and policy work. As this effort progressed, we saw the need to develop a greater sense of urgency and a better understanding of high school reform in the state.

We formed the CCHSI in the summer of 2004 to focus attention on the tragic outcomes faced by many of Colorado's young people. We charged the Commission with examining the data and research about Colorado's high schools, reviewing what is known about improving and redesigning high schools, and making recommendations for concrete steps that would move the state forward. The report before you is the culmination of their work.

We strongly support the Commission and its recommendations. We urge everyone with an interest in Colorado's young people to read this report and determine their own role in making things better. There is work for all of us. I hope you will join us.

Sincerely,

Barbara O'Brien
President, Colorado Children's Campaign

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Problem

The "comprehensive" high schools that now educate almost all young people in Colorado and elsewhere in the United States were designed in a different era for a different economy. American comprehensive high schools were intended to provide a basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, preparing most students for work and some for college. These high schools were the workhorses of our democracy and economy throughout much of the 20th century. In the global economy, however, this traditional design allows too many students to drop out or simply "get by" and enter adulthood without the skills needed to thrive.

Over time, the expectations placed on our high schools have increased and schools have improved. The people in high schools are working harder than ever before. But the improvement has not kept pace with the challenge. Today, Colorado's citizens, government and businesses expect much more from our high schools.

Only a world class education system will adequately prepare our youth to succeed in a worldwide economy. It is simply not enough for Colorado's youth to perform at levels required of students several decades ago. Colorado must rise to the challenge of the 21st century by insisting on academic rigor for all students. Employment projections predict that jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will increase approximately three times faster than those requiring a high school diploma. Not only is education beyond high school key to greater job opportunities, it is also critical for improving equity in our society in which the earnings gap between those with and those without education beyond high school is substantial. A growing body of research about Colorado high school students has shown:

- **Graduation rates are extremely low** (70 percent).

- **Graduation rates among minority students are dismal** (56 percent for blacks and 44 percent for Hispanics).

- **Students score poorly on state assessments** (only 30 percent of 10th graders score proficient or better on the Colorado Student Assessment Program [CSAP] in mathematics).

- **There are huge gaps in achievement when students are compared by race and ethnicity** (76 percent of white students score proficient or better on the CSAP for 10th grade reading, whereas only 44 percent of blacks and 39 percent of Hispanics are proficient or better).

- **Graduates, especially those from low-income families, are poorly prepared for higher education** (only 29 percent of Colorado's high school graduates have taken the courses required to enter higher education.

- **Many of those who enter college do not complete their college education** (Only 20 percent of Colorado 9th graders graduate from high school and go on to finish either an associates or bachelors degree within six years of graduating from high school).

The Commission

In August of 2004, the Colorado Children's Campaign formed the Colorado Commission for High School Improvement (CCHSI), to help the state overcome this challenge. The Commission represents a diverse, bipartisan group of state and local leaders - including Republican and Democratic elected officials, policymakers from higher education and the K-12 system, and educators from public and private schools (see list of members on page X). In December 2004, the Commission released a preliminary report outlining recommendations and seeking feedback from a broad cross section of Coloradans. This final report incorporates that feedback and includes recommendations and strategies for improving Colorado's high schools that represent a consensus among Commission members and key stakeholders.

A Vision for the Future

Colorado's vision for improving high schools must start with the mission that, at a minimum, <u>all students</u> will graduate from high school prepared to succeed as adults in our society and capable of achieving their own lofty goals. To succeed, adults need an education that provides them with the ability to continue their education if they choose in community college, technical training program or four-year college or university; to begin a fulfilling career that pays a livable wage; and to contribute as citizens in our democracy.

Achieving such an ambitious mission requires that all of us - educators, policymakers and citizens - do things much differently. To succeed, reform efforts will need to encourage local action, allowing individual communities to shape their own efforts to meet the public need. There is no place in the state that can afford to ignore the call to better serve our high school-aged youth. But the nature of the challenges and the shape of the reforms will vary by local setting.

Recommendations

Commission members developed four recommendations (each with a set of specific strategies that are outlined in detail in the pages that follow) that are intended to raise student performance, close achievement gaps and ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed. The Commission recommends that schools and school systems:

1) Improve the teaching and learning process in high schools;

2) Improve student transition to and from high school;

3) Expand school choice and alternatives; and

4) Use existing and new resources and data more effectively.

In the body of the report, a wide range of responsibilities and tasks are assigned to students, parents, teachers, leaders at the school, district and state levels (including administrators and elected officials) as well as to business groups and the general public.

Colorado can and must do better for our students, particularly those who are struggling the most in today's high schools. In the months and years ahead, the commission urges everyone in our school systems to commit to action. We urge state, district, school and community leaders to use the recommendations, strategies and action steps in this report to guide their efforts to improve high schools for all of our state's students.

None of the changes suggested in this report will be quick or easy. High school reform is a complicated and difficult process. The status quo, however, is simply unacceptable. Our children - now and in generations to come - are counting on us.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Need for Action

The "comprehensive" high schools that now educate almost all young people in Colorado and elsewhere in the United States were designed in a different era for a different economy. Predominantly large schools offering a wide variety of courses and activities, American comprehensive high schools were intended to provide a basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic, preparing most students for work and some for college. These high schools were the workhorses of our democracy and economy throughout much of the 20th century. In the global economy, however, this traditional design allows too many students to drop out or simply "get by" and enter adulthood without the skills needed to thrive.

Over time, the expectations placed on our high schools have increased and schools have improved. The people in high schools are working harder than ever before. But the improvement has not kept pace with challenge. Today, Colorado's citizens, government and businesses expect much more from our high schools. We recognize the unfairness of relatively small percentages of students benefiting from an excellent education while others receive less. We also recognize that the economic marketplace and civic demands require that all students leave high school with much greater knowledge and skills than ever before. And ever increasing numbers of those who graduate will need additional education or technical training to pursue their chosen careers. Colorado now competes for well-paying jobs in a global economy. These developments make it even more urgent that the state better educate its young people.

It is no longer acceptable that more than 30 percent of Colorado's students fail to graduate from high school on time[1] (see Figure 1). We also cannot accept low achievement levels among students who do graduate.[2] It is simply not enough for Colorado's youth to perform at levels required of students several decades ago.

Most agree that only a world class education system will adequately prepare our youth to succeed in a worldwide economy. Colorado must rise to the challenge of

Figure 1.
Colorado High School Completion Rates
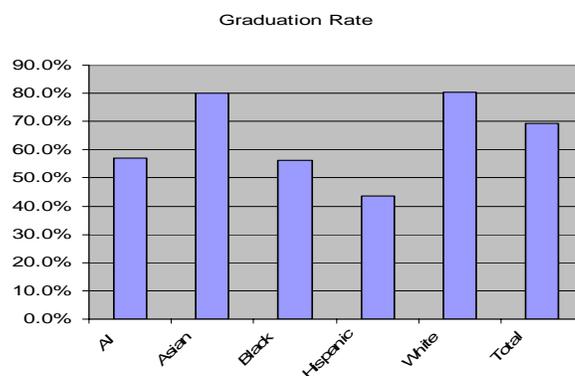
Graduation Rate

the 21st century by insisting on academic rigor for all students. Employment projections predict that jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will increase approximately three times faster than those requiring a high school diploma. Jobs requiring at least an associate's degree will grow even faster.[3] Regardless of whether they go on to a four-year college, a technical training program or start their careers directly after high school, students must be equipped with high-level skills in reading, writing and math, and with the ability to use the latest technologies. Indeed, the technical skills and knowledge required for many trades require higher levels of preparation or different kinds of training than we currently offer students on the traditional "college track."[4] In addition, young adults must be prepared to keep learning all their lives because they will probably change jobs several times before they retire and because in the future evolving technologies and world events likely will influence Colorado more directly than ever before.

Not only is education beyond high school key to greater job opportunities, it is also critical for improving equity in our society in which the earnings gap between those with and those without education beyond high school is substantial[5] (see Figure 2). Further, individuals with higher education levels are more likely to be engaged in and contribute to our democratic society.[6]

Colorado has a long history of education innovation and leads the nation in several areas of public education. The state was one of the first to establish academic standards and a linked assessment system, create charter schools, offer extensive public school choice, and implement online learning. Many of Colorado's high schools and educators are remarkably successful. Some educate all their students - regardless of background or circumstance - preparing them to succeed in college or technical programs, giving them the skills they need for high-paying jobs. Others help their top students achieve to world class standards. Still more do a great job addressing the many needs of especially vulnerable students. As we design our schools to meet rising expectations, we need to learn from these accomplishments so that all students in all Colorado schools succeed.

But, despite the laudable efforts of a large number of educators, there are important challenges facing our system today. A growing body of research has shown:

Figure 2.
Average Estimated Earnings and Taxes Paid According to Education Level For the U.S.

• **High school graduation rates in Colorado are extremely low.** Across the state, only 70 percent of the students who entered the ninth grade in the fall of 2000 graduated in 2004.[7]

• **High school graduation rates among Colorado's minority students are dismal.** While overall graduation rates are bad enough, outcomes for Colorado's minority students are even worse. In 2004, while 80 percent of white students graduated, only 56 percent of black students and 44 percent of Hispanics graduated.[8]

• **Colorado high school students score poorly on state assessments.** Since 2001, tenth grade scores in reading, writing and math have remained at disturbingly low levels. Math scores have been the worst, with only 30 percent of students scoring "proficient" or "advanced" in 2005,[9] (see Figure 3).

• **There are huge gaps in achievement among Colorado's high school students when they are compared by race and ethnicity.** In 2005, 76 percent of white tenth graders were "proficient" or "advanced" on the state reading test. Meanwhile, only 44 percent of black tenth graders and 39 percent of Hispanic tenth graders were "proficient" or "advanced." Similar disparities existed on the math test.[10]

• **Colorado's high school graduates, especially those from low-income families, are poorly prepared for higher education.** Only 29 percent of Colorado's high school students - compared to 36 percent of students nationally - graduate having completed the minimum coursework required to attend college.[11] In 2003, 26.6 percent of the public high school graduates who transitioned to Colorado's public higher education institutions needed remediation in at least one subject.[12] In some districts, more than 40 percent of the graduates going on to higher education needed remediation.

• **Many of those who enter college do not complete their college education.** For every 100 young people who enter ninth grade in Colorado, about 70 graduate from high school within four years. Of those, 42 enter college, 29 are still enrolled in college after their sophomore year and only 20 graduate with either an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree within six years of graduating from high school.[13]
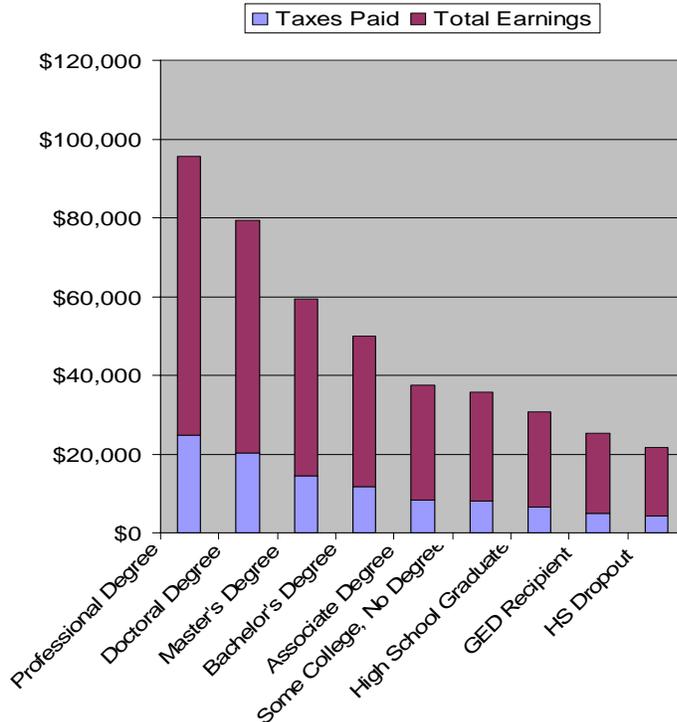
Figure 3.
Colorado Students Scoring Proficient or Better on the 10th Grade CSAP — 2005
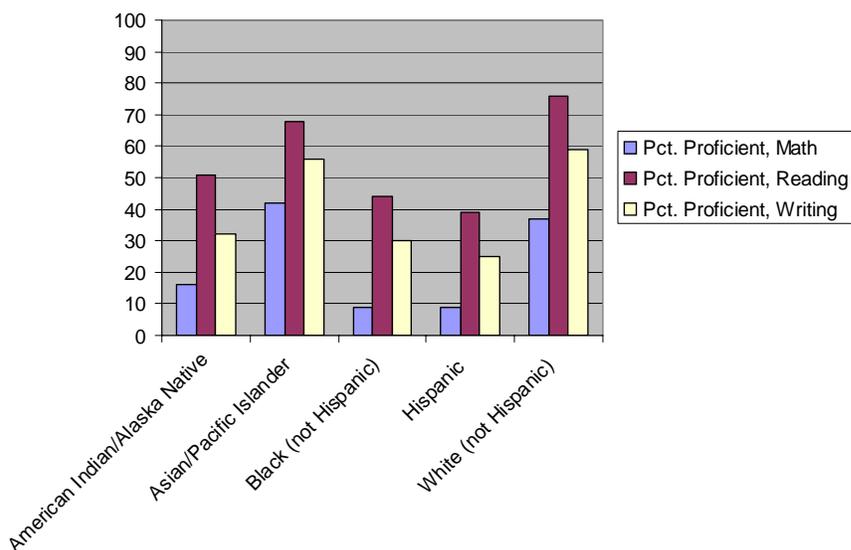
While the big picture shows much to be concerned about, evaluating the success or failure of individual high schools is a complicated task. Colorado's current accountability system does not adequately assess the performance of our high schools. To better understand how well our high schools are doing, the state will have to coordinate work among various organizations and institutions to develop appropriate indicators of high school quality. Indicators could include: improved and multiple measures of student performance (including longitudinal and value-added analysis and demonstrations of mastery), student retention rates, college-going rates, need for remediation in higher education, and middle-grades through college-level completion rates.

From the data that are available, we can agree that there are disturbing gaps in performance, graduation rates and college enrollment based on students' economic background, race and ethnicity. It is also important to realize that each year many of our young people - including thousands from middle class, white families - are failing. But Colorado also has students of all backgrounds receiving an excellent education and advancing to further studies or launching their careers with great promise. In fact, one of the great challenges in focusing public attention on the need for reform and improvement are the thousands of high school students in Colorado who are thriving in the current system. In calling for reform, we must celebrate those who are succeeding in the system, acknowledge and learn from what is working well, and find ways to help more young people meet their potential. We cannot, however, allow the success of some to be used as a justification for complacency when so many are being left behind.

If Colorado is going to continue to prosper economically and remain committed to the vision of providing all citizens the opportunity to achieve their full potential, we must fundamentally redesign our high schools to prepare all students for the 21st century. This will entail investing new resources and reallocating existing resources differently, adding new programs and schools, and changing current educational practices.

B. The Vision of Successful High Schools

Colorado's vision for improving high schools must start with the mission that, at a minimum, <u>all students</u> will graduate from high school prepared to succeed as adults in our society and capable of achieving their own lofty goals. To succeed, adults need an education that provides them with the ability to continue their education if they choose in community college, technical training program, or four-year college or university; to begin a fulfilling career that pays a good wage; and to contribute as citizens in our democracy.

Achieving this vision for all students would be bold. It sets the focus of the state and its school districts well beyond anything that has been accomplished anywhere to date.

Achieving such an ambitious mission requires that all of us - educators, policymakers and citizens - do things very differently. We must begin by expecting and demanding that all students achieve high standards, while acknowledging that some students will need more support than others. Therefore, Colorado high schools must offer and insist on mastery of rigorous curricula aligned with high standards and the expectations of local colleges and universities. At the same time, however, high schools must focus on the specific needs of each student. In doing so, they should:

 • Use data to assess students' strengths and weaknesses;

 • Demonstrate the relevance of academic learning through projects and internships;

 • Strengthen the relationship between high schools and colleges and universities;

 • Provide personalized support in the form of counseling, tutoring and research-based instruction that accelerate the learning of basic skills in reading, math and other subjects so that low-performing students can be successful in advanced courses; and

 • Change the way time is used, allowing more time for students to master the expected material when necessary.

This is a lot to ask of high schools, so we must also stop expecting every existing high school to be all things to all students. Some comprehensive high schools do educate most of their students effectively, and others could do so with additional assistance. But, clearly, we must create additional settings, including new high schools that meet the needs of students who are unlikely to be well served by comprehensive high schools as they are now structured and who are dropping out or failing to learn in traditional settings.

Although every high school must help all its students achieve high standards, it is also important for school districts to find new ways of serving all the high-school-aged youth in their community. One promising strategy for districts with more than one high school is to manage a "portfolio of options" that offers students and their families real choices in terms of academic focus and approach, types of support and interactions with their communities[14] (see Figure 4). For example, one high school in a district might take a traditional, liberal arts approach to schooling, while another might incorporate the arts into all courses. One high school might operate in a stand-alone building, while another might be located in a museum or on a college campus. One high school might serve a cross-section of students, while another might specialize in serving those who have dropped out or become entangled in the court system. Regardless, all high schools would be expected to address the needs of their students in meeting high standards.

Figure 4.
A District Providing A Portfolio of Options

Higher Education

Associates Degree >

Common Performance Standards for High School Diploma

K-12 Education

K-12 International Baccalaureate School 400 Students

9-12 Applied Internship 250 Students Big Picture High School

9-12 Math/Science 400 Students High Tech High

9-12 Traditional Liberal Arts School, 400 Students KIPP

9-12 Comprehensive 900 Students

6-12 Arts 600 Students

6-12 Early College High 600 Students

Associates Degree

College Courses

Advanced Placement & College Courses

To make all of this possible, we must improve the use of new and existing resources, including funding. Ensuring that all students graduate and meet higher standards will clearly require additional resources, and, as important, new ways of allocating, tracking and spending those resources. To inform decisions about resource allocation and spending, data collection, reporting and analysis must improve. We will also have to adjust the use of time in our schools. In the past, time was the constant and how much students learned would vary, but high standards for all means that student learning is the constant and time must vary.[15]

Colorado and every one of its districts must commit to this work. The state has a rich history and a government structure based on local control of education. To succeed, reform efforts will need to encourage local action, allowing individual communities to shape their own efforts to meet the public need. There is no place in the state that can afford to ignore the call to better serve our high school-aged youth. But the nature of the challenges and the shape of the reforms will vary by local setting.

Creating the high schools we need is no easy task. Though educators and policymakers will play a central role, all citizens must be engaged and supportive. Change cannot be attempted randomly or in a piecemeal fashion, but rather undertaken comprehensively, systematically and strategically. With this document, the Colorado Commission for High School Improvement (CCHSI), attempts to plot out a road map for reaching our goals.

II. THE CHARGE

Because our high schools are not improving fast enough to meet our increasing expectations and needs, the Colorado Children's Campaign formed the CCHSI in 2004. The Campaign asked the Commission to study student outcomes in the state's public high schools, analyze the broader education system generating these outcomes, recommend changes in policy and practice, and create public awareness about the need for improvement.

The Commission represents a diverse, bipartisan group of state and local leaders - including Republican and Democratic elected officials, policymakers from higher education and the K-12 system, and educators from public and private schools (see list of members on page ii.). These individuals were asked to serve on the Commission because they are familiar with Colorado's education system and, specifically, its high schools.

In August 2004, Commission members began discussing the obstacles to improving high schools and collaborating to form a vision to strengthen them. Members worked to develop recommendations for educators, administrators, policymakers and the public to meet the goal of improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap in high schools.

In December 2004, the Commission released a report outlining preliminary recommendations and seeking feedback from a broad cross section of Coloradans. This final report incorporates that feedback and includes recommendations and strategies for improving Colorado's high schools that represent a consensus among Commission members and key stakeholders. Undoubtedly, some recommendations will be more controversial than others, but all are designed with two purposes in mind: to improve Colorado's high schools and to stimulate a vigorous and healthy public dialogue.

Each section of recommendations and strategies concludes with a table of responsibilities and action steps for various stakeholders. These are concrete actions that people throughout our education systems could take to make the recommendations of this report more real. The list, while extensive, is not exhaustive. There are many action steps that could be taken to implement the recommendations of this report that are not listed in these tables. Likewise, there are items in these tables that are not appropriate or necessary in all settings. These bullets are meant as illustrations and points of consideration that can facilitate conversations about what we can do to help.

Responsibilities and tasks are assigned to students, parents, teachers, leaders at the school, district, and state levels (including administrators and elected officials), as well as to business groups and the general public. All of Colorado's communities face unique challenges and bring their own strengths to their work. Rural and small schools are so different from more crowded, urban schools that several of the recommendations may need re-shaping to make them relevant or achievable in different contexts.

> **Colorado Schools and Students**
> Colorado is made up of a variety of settings. Geographically, the state has a large metropolitan area, far-flung and sparsely populated rural communities, as well as a significant population in small towns and suburbs. In 2004, 766,657 students attended 1,667 public schools in more than 178 districts. More than 210,000 students attend 291 public high schools. These students, statewide, are 63.5 percent white, 26.2 percent Hispanic, 5.9 percent black, 3.2 percent Asian and 1.2 percent Native American.
>
> Demographics vary dramatically depending on the setting. The Denver metro area serves more than 400,000 students. Several of the bigger districts in the Denver metropolitan area serve large proportions of minority students. Denver Public Schools, for example, has an 80 percent minority student body. These diverse populations include increasing populations of English language learners and students from low income families.
>
> Colorado's rural communities and small school systems represent a relatively small proportion of the state's total student population, but a sizable portion of the total number of districts, many of which have only one school serving each grade level.

Rural Challenges and Opportunities

Rural communities and districts face unique challenges when educating their students. At the same time, certain accomplishments come more easily because of the cooperative, close-knit nature of their communities. For example, a tight rural community can be conducive to coordinating education across all grades because more grades are likely to be in the same building, facilitating communication among staff and easing transitions between grades. Because teachers may see each student and their families on a regular basis, they can stay in touch and communicate regularly about the challenges and successes they face. Other issues that rural communities can more easily address include individualized instruction, dropout intervention, opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities that are accessible to *all students*, student and parent access to school and district leaders, and cross-curriculum collaboration and coordination among a small school's staff.

Rural communities also face different challenges than urban and suburban schools. Rural schools may be unable to offer as many options for students, either in school choice or class variety. Efforts to recruit highly qualified teachers can be frustrating — especially special skills classes like foreign language or music. In Colorado, many of the families that live in rural areas are more transient due to the economy and labor market. Rural communities generally are working with fewer resources and consequently they may struggle to offer things like quality pre-school opportunities for children or extra-curricular programs like before- and after-school programming. The availability of high-speed internet services is also a constraining factor. Finally, access to professional development and exchange opportunities are often limited or non-existent in these smaller settings.

Communities have found ways to address some of the challenges. In an effort to provide their students with programmatic options, many schools offer online courses for students allowing them to participate virtually in classes. Colorado's Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES), offer development opportunities for teachers and can provide non-traditional forums for professional exchange like virtual discussions over the internet. Through innovation and creativity, many rural principals and superintendents have found ways to provide education opportunities for students in their communities equivalent to those in settings with greater resources.

"Rural schools cannot provide all the resources needed to give their students access to technologies in learning; the development of a statewide strategy for the distribution of technology resources would help rural students keep pace with their city cousins," - **Tim Snyder,** *Executive Director, Colorado Online Learning*

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Commission members developed four recommendations (each with a set of specific strategies) that are intended to raise student performance, close achievement gaps and ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed. The Commission recommends that schools and school systems:

1) Improve the teaching and learning process in high schools;

2) Improve student transition to and from high school;

3) Expand school choice and alternatives; and

4) Use existing and new resources and data more effectively.

The Commission encourages communities across Colorado to apply these recommendations - the core of this report - in a way that best meets the needs of their students and families.

The strategies, which are described and enumerated under each recommendation, are intended to provide concrete ideas for educators, administrators and policymakers as they implement the recommendations. Although some strategies are more applicable in some contexts than others, we believe that all should be considered as promising practices that hold at least informational value for all schools and systems.

This report is written for community leaders, policymakers, educators, administrators, parents, student advocates and anyone else who is committed to improving Colorado's high schools for all students. It is the Commission's hope that this document will provide a useful blueprint for better preparing all high school students to succeed.

I. Improve the Teaching and Learning Process in High Schools

Any reform intended to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap in a high school will fail if it does not address the interaction among and between teachers, students, and instructional materials. To succeed, students must be motivated to learn challenging material and be taught to understand and apply it in a variety of contexts. Teachers must know what is expected of students, have a deep understanding of their subject matter and be able to impart knowledge in a way that all students will learn. Teachers also must measure student progress and address student deficiencies identified through assessment.

Although students and teachers should be the main agents of reform, they should not be expected to improve without support. Schools, districts and state government must put in place policies and procedures that facilitate improvement by creating environments conducive to learning. In other words, districts and states should aim to help schools become "learning organizations" as defined by Peter Senge in his 1990 book, *The Fifth Discipline*. Senge wrote that schools should be places, "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."[16] To be successful, high schools must become places where students, teachers and administrators clearly value education, while working together to foster the betterment of students and educators and implementing systems that continuously monitor and improve the teaching and learning process.

At their core, efforts to improve must actually affect students. High school students are different than students in earlier grades. Many have emerged from eight or more years of schooling bored, unmotivated and unengaged in their own learning. Thus, our efforts often must start with changing students' behaviors and attitudes. To succeed, education reforms for high school students must encourage them to take responsibility for their learning. We must create schools that persuade all students that they can and must do the hard work that is necessary to succeed.

Strategies for improving the teaching and learning process in high schools include:

a) Help school leaders, teachers, and students develop a strong culture in each school that is based on high expectations for all students.

Often, a school culture is expressed in a set of core values or principles that educators and students may use to guide their work. If shared broadly, a powerful school culture can turn an empty mission statement into a core belief that drives improvements in performance. "All students are responsible for their learning," or "All students complete high school education college-ready," are examples of the articulated values of a strong school culture. Schools with a strong culture find ways to get everyone in the building working together towards a clear, shared understanding of their vision and goals. A school's culture affects the expectations and behavior of teachers and students. These values are articulated, reiterated and concretely applied in the daily work within each school. Staff talks about them regularly and use them as they consider how to improve their work. Counseling - whether performed by counselors or other adults in the school - can also play a powerful role in shaping the culture of a school and the students' understanding of their options after graduating.

"At this school we have a set of core values that the teachers built word for word at a retreat, that is reiterated with the students, that is told to the parents, that has a whole form that kids sign and pledge to… (T)he school revolves around a set of core beliefs. It is a culture about how the school will run, how we will all behave and how we will work together. Articulate, reiterate, and bring it up every week and revisit it… (C)ulture should be created intentionally, rather than (by) default… The faculty and the kids have to believe it, otherwise it's just a sham, or words on a wall," High School Teacher.

b) Recruit, train and support strong school leaders.

Great leaders can help schools establish a strong culture. They also can guide and supervise staff. The qualities of leadership are likely to change with the demands of our varying schools. Leadership can extend beyond the lone principal. Depending on a school's size and mission, school leaders may include principals, other administrators, and teachers in leadership roles. Shared or distributed leadership models may be necessary to accomplish the tasks of improving instruction in classrooms and strengthening school culture. When describing strong leadership, teachers look for people who are visible and helpful in their classrooms and in the hallways rather than locked away in an office. They also look for help in keeping their school focused on its vision and working with teachers and students to achieve their shared goals.

"A good school leader is like a servant leader, they have the attitude 'what can we do for you to make things better—what resources do you need, etc?' They don't bark orders, but instead come up with data-driven decisions," High School Teacher.

c) School leaders, educators, and school systems should work toward making all students take responsibility for learning.

Students' engagement in school and self-investment in their education are crucial. Unfortunately, by the time they reach high school, too many have become uninterested in school and in learning. To help all students achieve at high levels, schools must become places where every student takes responsibility for his or her learning and engages in the hard work necessary to succeed. A lack of responsibility among students does not excuse professionals for poor school performance. Instead, fostering a school culture and supporting systems that strengthen student responsibility should be central to the work of teachers, administrators and district leaders.

d) Establish challenging and engaging curricula aligned to standards, assessments and post-secondary expectations.

Successful high schools are learning organizations that have clear goals for all students to master high-quality curriculum, and that prepare them for education beyond high school and, ultimately, to succeed in rewarding careers. A rigorous high school curriculum can have tremendous impact on student success.[17] Therefore, every Colorado school district should be responsible for creating a challenging, sequential, aligned, standards-based curriculum in both middle grades and high schools that prepare each student to succeed at the next level. Although individual districts and even schools may create their own curricula, each one must be aligned with state and local standards, assessments and post-secondary expectations. Curricula also should have the support of teachers and principals and address the needs of students in the community. In addition, districts should direct students through courses of study that prepare them for college and future employment. That may include Advance Placement classes, programs that provide college credit, or dual enrollment in high school and college.

Subjects outside of reading, writing, mathematics, and science should be integrated with each school's mission and help develop learning skills among all students. When integrated with the mission of a school, other core subjects like the visual and performing arts can engage young people in school and help them understand what it takes to excel. When implemented well and tied to the academic mission of the school, the arts and/or music can support and even drive student achievement in ways that a purely back-to-basics skills curriculum is incapable of achieving because of the lack of engagement by students.[18] Involvement in the arts, for example, can help "level the playing field" for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by helping students connect to one another and to adults in the building, bringing students who are not otherwise being reached into the school, and also challenging students that are already considered successful.[19] A 2002 review of research found links between certain types of arts instruction and improvement in language, mathematics, cognitive skills, motivation and social behavior.[20]

Extra-curricular activities such as sports and clubs can build connections between young people and caring adults and help students work with each other toward shared goals. Learning about the work world and government through internships, civic engagement, ROTC or leadership opportunities within the school can help young people understand the value of education both for themselves and their communities.

"Parents might have issue with that (reducing extra-curricular activities). But there is so much more to extra-curricular activities, sports, philosophy, work — there is so much more to education than my core classes. I would hate to take away arts, something would have to give," Rural High School Teacher.

e) Establish a strong adult-to-student advising system in all secondary schools.

Schools should have a formal system of adult and student advising for every student. All students enrolled in middle and high schools require strong supportive relationships with adults in the school to help guide and support their learning. These adult advisors can be teachers, counselors, administrators or other school staff that provide an additional formal link to school beyond the typical relationships generated through classroom experiences. Adult advisors should help students make the connection between the student's learning, the school and their family. Faculty advisors should be responsible for a relatively small of number of students over a long period of time so they can really track and guide students through their high school experience. These advisors will need to be advocates and coaches for students' success in a school.

"High school students need to see not just one adult that cares about them, but that… all adults care about their success," High School Teacher.

f) Use student and classroom data to inform decision-making.

Though our shared values and goals should "drive" decision-making, data ought to inform those decisions. Value-driven and data-informed decision-making require not only frequent revisiting of the goals and values that define our culture, but also a great deal of attention to what we are achieving. High schools and districts should make few decisions without supporting data, analysis, and research. Creating benchmarks allows teachers and administrators to focus their efforts on achieving concrete and attainable outcomes that are relatively easy to measure. Data should be collected regularly, compared to benchmarks, and then used to shape future action. Also, data should be presented under pre-determined indicators and widely circulated so that people inside and outside the schools and district administration know what the goals are and can track progress toward them. Finally, data should be accessible, transparent, timely, and used regularly for improving instruction for all students.

To be most helpful, data should include student outcomes on the CSAP, ACT and other school and district measures such as post-secondary remediation tests, college completion rates, and teacher and school characteristics. Over the last several years, the quality, amount, and transparency of such data in Colorado and other states have improved. These improvements eventually should help high schools educate students more effectively,[21] but teachers, principals, researchers and institutions of higher education need to be given data in a timely fashion and in forms they can use.

"The whole CSAP test is flawed—kids don't care, they don't buy into it. It is better than nothing but it needs to be in addition to something better and more augmented. One test, one day, and the whole kid is judged on that. Proctor a CSAP in high school and you would be amazed. The test is supposed to take an hour and ten minutes, and kids are done in 30 minutes and you ask them, 'are you sure you want don't want to check your answer?'" High School Teacher.

Moreover, schools and districts need additional support and training to ensure that data are used to address the individual needs of every student. Literature on effective schools and organizations suggests that the increasing use of research to improve policy, programs, and practice will have a positive impact on student outcomes. But literature and experience also suggest that the field of education has a long way to go before educational data and analysis will have broad and long-lasting impacts on students.[22]

g) Improve teacher quality and engage educators in the improvement process through coherent and sustained professional development.

School improvement is meaningless without great teachers. And even schools with many high-quality teachers can struggle without the support and organizational structures that help all teachers improve as professionals and work together to achieve shared goals. Creating and improving the quality of teaching can take time, money and energy, but it is central to making real change in our schools.

Improving teacher quality involves better training by Colorado's higher education institutions and better recruitment and induction procedures by our districts. Those changes will help identify and hone the skills of educators with the knowledge that can help students achieve the goals we set for our schools. Defining what makes a quality teacher is not a simple task and the answer may vary depending on the context. But important skills for all our teachers include:

- Expertise and knowledge in their subject areas;

- Understanding of how to teach adolescent literacy skills when students are below grade level in reading and writing;

- Knowledge of what is expected of graduates through state standards as well as in the workforce or in further education; and

- Techniques and skills needed to manage today's classrooms, improve instruction and build positive relationships with students.

The distribution of our best teachers must also reflect students' needs. In too many settings, the most qualified teachers are not in the classrooms or schools with students who could benefit the most from their skills. Until all our teachers are able to achieve our goals, policymakers and district leaders must ask hard questions about how teachers are assigned to schools and classes. Data systems and reporting by districts and the state should include measures that reflect the distribution of quality teachers across our districts and schools.

As we improve the quality and distribution of our teaching force, the role of schools in professional development also must be addressed. The key to fostering any learning organization is to enable staff to work together to identify problems, develop strategies to overcome those problems and collaborate to ensure those strategies are implemented effectively.[23] It should be no different in high schools. Specific actions to consider include:

- Giving teachers information on student demographics and achievement;

- Making available recent research that addresses issues facing local educators;

- Allowing teachers to develop and offer a variety of options to students in meeting academic standards;

- Measuring student progress against high performance standards and empowering teachers to design and implement strategies for providing support to low-performing students; and

- Providing time, space and structure for teachers to work together and watch each other teach.

Using research to improve the quality of high schools is critical. Yet such research, to the extent it exists, is meaningless if schools and districts fail to set aside time for teachers to understand the problems they face in increasing student achievement, identify and understand applicable research, and apply the research in a way

that will benefit their students. Old high school designs in which high schools deliver content in 50-minute classes led by teachers responsible for 140 to 150 students each a week will have to change to allow teachers the time to reflect and plan for change. Therefore, schools and districts should provide teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors and administrators opportunities to work together to analyze student work, discuss strategies, observe and discuss instructional practices, and identify and use research-based programs and practices that address local challenges.

> **Improving Teacher Quality**
> Specific steps that can be taken to enhance teacher quality through professional development:
>
> • Use a research-based school reform design[24] such as Talent Development, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, High Tech High, or International Baccalaureate;
> • Work with academic and school improvement "coaches" who are focused on measured student growth;
> • Encourage full and open communication that values the contributions of all adults;
> • Prevent turnover among teachers and administrators; and
> • Enhance and focus induction, mentoring and professional development programs to reduce staff turnover and help retain high-quality teachers and principals who are skilled in and knowledgeable about their school or district's chosen approach.
>
> Most important, effective professional development focuses on content and is different from traditional, one-shot workshops and conferences. In addition, successful professional development:
>
> • Lasts about 40 hours or more, spread across the calendar year;
> • Engages teachers as members of a group with shared goals and needs;
> • Actively involves teachers in the learning process; and
> • Meets teachers' needs, as well as the expectations of the environment where they are teaching.
>
> Despite consensus about the ways professional development should improve, most training efforts continue to be one-shot workshops and conferences characterized by few, if any, of these features.[25]

h) Restructure failing schools.

When, after receiving support from the district and other organizations, a high school fails to transform into a learning organization that helps its students meet high standards, the district is obligated to take action. Actions might include:

• Creating specialized schools within a school;

• Hiring an external management organization;

• Creating performance contracts;

• Hiring new staff; and

• Closing the school.

Although thoughtful and immediate action is needed, districts must be aware that research has failed to identify any one intervention that has worked in turning around all low-performing high schools.[26] Therefore, districts must identify strategies that best fit their contexts, make modifications as necessary and provide time and support for planning and implementation.

In Colorado's small and rural districts, the options for how to address failing schools are different. Distances between communities can make closing a school unrealistic, and the pool of personnel and resources may be limited. Without lowering our standards for performance, our strategies for intervening and helping rural schools will need to be based on hard thinking about what will work given the local context.

Lessons of Creating Small High Schools

The recent experience of breaking up Denver's Manual High School into three small, distinct schools has been well studied. A 2005 report by the Colorado Children's Campaign[27] summarized the major lessons from several evaluations of that effort, as well as research from other national evaluations, to provide a list of the "top ten recommendations for creating small high schools." That report and a growing body of research recommend:

- Recruiting strong principal leadership;

- Using research-based school designs that help promote alignment between school culture and classroom practice;

- Allowing at least one year planning time for principals and teachers;

- Supporting high-quality, ongoing professional development;

- Setting high expectations with flexible supports for students;

- Providing personalized advising for every student;

- Developing high-quality data and accountability systems;

- Ensuring sufficient and flexible resources to be used at the school level;

- Providing time and support for the reform process; and

- Providing access to information, while encouraging community engagement and varied school choices.

ACTION STEPS

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
Students	**Responsibility and Culture** • Take responsibility for doing the work assigned in school (including homework and regular attendance) • Become involved in your school, including decision-making opportunities • Help to reinforce the culture of your school through your behavior
Parents	**Family** • Speak daily with your child about school and homework • Monitor your child's attendance, work and performance • Provide time and support for your child to study outside of school • Help your child prioritize and focus on school by limiting after-school jobs and other extra-curricular activities • Select, or help your child select, a school in which he or she can thrive **School** • Become involved in your child's school, including participating in decision-making opportunities • Regularly attend student conferences and school meetings such as "back to school nights," college options and other events related to your child's academic program and learning • Be in monthly communication with your child's teachers regarding support for your child
Teachers	**Curriculum and Expectations** • Know and review the academic and general status of each student • Know, become competent in and strategically implement best practices • Support the implementation of a coherent vision and culture in your school • Establish and reinforce high expectations of performance for all students **Professional Development** • Know state standards and understand how to teach to those standards • Take responsibility for, and act as necessary, to strengthen the quality of instruction by peers in your school • Work in teams to define student mastery in content areas, improve instructional strategies and assessment techniques, provide feedback to peers, identify and support struggling students and review data and research **Student Engagement** • Engage students in, and ensure they are mastering, the academic content of your curriculum **Data and Assessment** • Regularly use quantitative and qualitative data to adjust instructional strategies to better meet the needs of different groups and individual students
School Leaders (includes principals, and in some schools can include additional administrators and instructional leaders)	**Curriculum and Expectations** • Articulate and work with staff and students to implement an effective school culture that promotes high performance for all students • Ensure that all students have access to a rigorous curriculum and support services as needed • Create high-quality reading, writing and math programs that accelerate the skills of low-performing students so that they can master rigorous high school curriculum

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
School Leaders (includes principals, and in some schools can include additional administrators and instructional leaders) Cont'd.	***Professional Development*** • Tailor and regularly evaluate professional development that meets teachers' needs and is tied to measurable school targets • Develop and implement a supervision and evaluation system that focuses on student performance that is measured against benchmarks and best practices • Ensure teachers know state standards and instructional, assessment and remedial strategies that are effective in meeting needs of students • Ensure all new teachers are part of a high-quality induction program that familiarizes them with the district's standards and expectations and equips them to succeed in implementing them • Provide time, space and structure for teachers to work together and observe each other teaching • Encourage teachers to develop and offer a variety of options to students in meeting academic standards ***School Design/Choice*** • Consider using a research-based school reform design ***Resources*** • Effectively manage and support instruction by appropriately targeting school resources (personnel and funding) based upon data analysis of student work and behaviors
District Leaders (Administrators and Board Members)	***Curriculum and Expectations*** • Create and require every student to take a rigorous, sequential, aligned standards-based curriculum ***Professional/Leadership Development*** • Invest and ensure effective implementation of high-quality professional development for teachers and school administrators • Ensure students in high-poverty schools have the most committed and qualified teachers • Develop procedures and allocate resources that help your district hire, train, supervise, evaluate, and compensate great school leaders • Support the development of successful non-traditional educational leadership and teaching programs such as "Teach for America" and "Leaders for New Schools" to help newcomers enter the education field • Enhance induction, mentoring and professional development programs to retain effective teachers and principals • Work with teachers' unions to remove ineffective teachers and reward effective ones ***Schools Design and Choice*** • Institute processes to identify needs in the community and design choice options to meet those needs • Effectively manage a variety of schools of different designs through performance-based contracts • Create new, small, high-quality high schools and restructure failing ones • Consider using a research-based school reform model and/or other third-party service provider to build school and district capacity • Ensure that all school improvement efforts are focused on and directed at improving the quality of instruction and student learning ***Data and Assessment*** • Collect and disseminate timely and high-quality data so that schools, administrators and teachers can use research to improve instruction and school environment. (Districts should be able to provide diagnostic and general assessment data for every student in real time for qualified users

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
State Leaders (Including the Governor, legislators, members of the State Board of Education, the Commissioner of Education and Higher Education Officials)	**Collaboration and Partnerships** • Work with universities and colleges to improve teacher and principal preparation progra **Curriculum and Expectations** • Help to ensure that state standards and assessments and district curricula are well aligned with post-secondary expectations **Professional/Leadership Development** • Invest in high-quality induction mentoring, and professional development programs for teachers and principals • Help to ensure students in high-poverty schools have access to great teachers **School Design and Choice** • Institute processes to identify needs in the state and facilitate choice options to meet those needs • Provide incentives for school districts to encourage the development of alternative high school options • Help districts create small, high-quality high schools, improve existing schools, restructure low-performing schools and eliminate some failing schools **Data and Assessment** • Collect timely and high-quality data and help districts use the research to improve the quality of schools
Rural Communities	**Choice/Program Alternatives** • Pursue alternative delivery formats such as online learning and collaborative efforts through BOCES or other partnerships **Ask Questions:** • What assets and strengths does your community enjoy that can help schools improve? • Are there programs that can be instituted in your schools that will better engage and support at-risk youth?
Community and Business Leaders	**Demand Action:** • Ask school districts to provide listings of teacher qualifications by building and by classroom. • Ask principals to provide frequent and regular data regarding graduation rates, dropout rates, achievement gaps, IB and AP enrollment by race – and to provide community forums to address these concerns.

2. Improve Student Transitions to and from High School

Too often, the work of middle grades is viewed as distinct from high schools, and the work of high schools is not connected to what awaits students after graduation — whether higher education or employment. In fact, success in high school and beyond starts with quality early childhood education and continues through all the grades. By the end of middle school, students must be prepared for their high school experience and even begin thinking about what they will do when they graduate. The transition to higher education or the work force should be smooth and successful, and students should have a real and meaningful choice between the two. Too often students are forced into the job market -usually in low skilled and low-paying jobs - because they are not prepared to continue their studies or their options for post-secondary education are unnecessarily limited. Improving these transitions will require in-

creased coordination between the many agencies and institutions that provide, govern, or support education in the state.

Strategies for improving student transitions to and from high school include:

a) Take a P-16 approach to education.

Colorado should consider its pre-kindergarten, K-12 and post-secondary institutions (i.e., a "P-16" approach), as part of an integrated system designed to prepare students for adulthood, work and civic life. Or, as envisioned by the Education Commission of the States:[28] "Imagine a system of education where every child enters school ready to learn, where all third graders read at or above grade level, where all students have taken

algebra by the end of the eighth grade, where high school exit exams test students at the 12th grade level and are aligned with college-admission requirements, where all young people graduate from high school prepared for college or work, and where every student who enters college finishes college." One reason that this approach begins with preschool is because research has found that high-quality preschool results in better academic outcomes, high school graduation rates and financial earning power later in life.[29]

To help accomplish the vision of integrated education, policymakers should align standards across all grades, from Pre-Kindergarten through college and align high school exit requirements with entrance criteria for colleges and universities, as well as with the knowledge expected and skills required of students to succeed in higher education. This means more than increasing the number and types of credit (or Carnegie Units) that students earn through seat time rather than performance. A high quality P-16 system would have a clear set of performance standards that link to the knowledge and skills that allow for students to succeed.

P-16 integration does not mean Colorado should create a new structure or bureaucracy for governing its schools, nor give additional authority to the preschool sector, K-12 sector or post-secondary sector. Rather, the state should help facilitate collaboration among each of the sectors that have had difficulty working effectively together for the benefit of all students. Work and attention has increased on this front recently.

"School districts are governing entities working hard to prepare young people to learn to use their minds well and to be able to find fulfillment in their pursuit of the Good Life in our American democracy. Today, they exist in a breach of collaborative and cooperative efforts between bureaucracies. This breach can be filled easily if state agencies, school districts, colleges and universities will talk to each other and work together to design ways to move our students and our schools to higher levels of learning," - Jane Urschel, Associate Executive Director, Colorado Association of School Boards

Taking a P-16 approach also brings attention to the impact that preparation of our younger children has on their long-term success. High-quality early childhood education is one of the most powerful tools to boost both retention and achievement in the later grades. And the middle grades need to prepare students for the work required in high school.

b) Ensure that students know about and are able to apply to a college or university.

All students in middle and high school should receive instruction, guidance, and prepare them to apply to and succeed in post-secondary education or a career of their choice. One notable practice that deserves consideration in Colorado, and that is used in schools within the state now, is to require students to apply or even gain admission to some form of post-secondary institution to graduate from high school.

Students who enter ninth grade unprepared for high school are less likely to graduate, and those who do graduate are generally unprepared for further education or the workforce.[30]

Accelerated literacy and math recovery programs help provide ninth-grade students with the skills they need to be successful in high school and the confidence and support they need to stay in school until they graduate. These programs often provide additional instruction to accelerate students' skills and enable them to take a college preparatory curriculum beginning in tenth grade. Colorado can help ensure that more students have the skills to succeed in high school and take courses that will prepare them for college by designing and supporting these accelerated programs for implementation in high schools statewide.[31] This also requires rethinking the traditional counselor role and providing training and support so that any adult helping students make these decisions can help navigate their path through preparation, application and admission to higher education.

A variety of partners are available to help schools and districts improve the likelihood that all their students will be able to successfully transition from high school to further study. These "pre-collegiate" programs work with high schools to improve the academic, social and logistical preparation of students (and their families) for post-secondary education. These programs are run by a variety of organizations in Colorado, including federally-funded programs like TRiO and GEAR UP, and college-based and community-based programs, like College Summit, High Horizons and AVID. Pre-collegiate programs use a range of strategies to ensure that more students are prepared to apply to, enter, and succeed in further education after high school.

"You have to change the climate and culture. Eighth graders get the feeling of the last half of their 8th grade year that they're seniors, none of this really matters. Nobody really holds 8th graders back because you don't want kids with deep voices and moustaches driving their car back to the middle school parking lot,"
High School Teacher.

These forms of identification and assistance need to start in the early grades as well. Students who are truant or unengaged in the seventh or eighth grades need early guidance to help them prepare for a successful transition into high school. In addition, all entering high school students should work with some-one in their school who functions in an advisory role - such as a trained teacher, administrator, counselor or pre-collegiate service provider - to develop a plan to legitimately apply to a post-secondary institution. This plan would list the student's academic goals and the courses, support programs and required college admissions exams needed to accomplish the goals. The student's advisor would then meet regularly with the student and, if appropriate, his or her parents or guardians to ensure that the family is on track for meeting the goals.[32]

c) Revise eligibility requirements for in-state tuition and state financial aid to give Colorado's undocumented students who would otherwise qualify for in-state residency the same access as documented students.

All Colorado high school graduates who meet in-state residency should be eligible for in-state tuition rates and state financial aid, regardless of whether the student is a U.S. citizen, legal resident, alien, foster youth or undocumented immigrant. This would not only allow, but also encourage, Colorado's most vulnerable young adults who complete high school to pursue higher education. Such encouragement would promote higher graduation rates by creating incentives to finish high school, bolster the state's long-term economy, and ultimately create safer and more equitable communities.

ACTION STEPS

Actor	Key Responsibilities
Students	*Preparation and Course Taking* • Take challenging courses in middle school that expose you to and prepare you for high school work • Take challenging courses in high school and gain experience doing the type of work required to succeed in higher education • Participate in internships and other opportunities to learn the skills required in the workforce • Treat the eighth grade and senior year of high school as important times to accelerate and strengthen your skills and knowledge, rather than simply waiting for the next phase of your education • Enroll in pre-collegiate programs where available and take advantage of programs such as the www.collegeincolorado.org online guidance system

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
Parents	*Family* • Encourage your high school-aged students to prepare for and take challenging courses, including college-level classes, before completing high school • Do not let your children use eighth grade or senior year as rest stops before the next phase of their education. Insist that they take demanding courses and engage in activities that prepare them to succeed in the next phase of their schooling *School* • Learn about the high school options available to your student before he or she completes middle school • Insist that middle schools prepare your children for the type of work they will face in high school, including assigning homework • Ask school administrators and teachers whether your child is being given the courses and skills necessary to enter and succeed in higher education or the workforce. If the answer is no, insist on change *Your Child and Higher Education* • Seek out assistance and learn how to apply to and get financial aid for higher education
Teachers	*Curriculum and Expectations* • Expect that all students will be going to college and prepare them accordingly • Become thoroughly familiar with the academic skills needed to succeed in college and ensure that students master necessary subjects • Learn about what it takes to apply to higher education so you can better counsel students about the work necessary to enter and succeed in higher education • Know the achievement strengths and weaknesses of incoming students and the expectations for students in local colleges and universities
School Leaders (includes principals, and in some schools can include additional administrators and instructional leaders)	*Curriculum and Expectations* • Examine alternatives to the "lost" senior year, (as well as eighth grade). Develop ways to ensure all students use these final years in middle school and high school as launching pads instead of rest stops. For example, encourage high school seniors to engage in post-secondary education options, internships, AP and IB courses or capstone projects in which students demonstrate mastery through a significant final project • Ensure that all staff support a culture that includes universally high expectations of student performance and preparation • Expect that all students will be going to college and ensure that they are being prepared accordingly *Advising* • Ensure that all students work with an advisor to develop and follow a plan that will enable them to apply to a post-secondary institution *Professional Development* • Know and help teachers understand the expectations for students in local colleges and universities • Implement accelerated literacy and math recovery programs that provide low-performing students with skills needed to succeed in high school and beyond *Data and Assessments* • Provide data to teachers that help them to understand the strengths and weaknesses of incoming students *Ask Questions* • Are all students in your school expected to be prepared for college or technical training when they graduate from high school? • Are all your students planning to apply to college or technical training and then following through? • Are all the students who do not plan to attend post-secondary institutions receiving the education they need to succeed in the workforce and as citizens?

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
District Leaders (Administrators and Board Members)	***Collaboration and Partnerships*** • Encourage and facilitate coordination between your district and other agencies, including higher education institutions, to ensure your students are prepared for success • Consider expanding high-quality early childhood education and kindergarten programs ***Culture, Curriculum and Expectations*** • Have a board-level discussion to create a goal of graduating all students prepared for post-secondary options • Foster a culture of high expectations for all students • Consider requiring all students to apply for higher education as a graduation requirement • Align high school exit requirements with entrance criteria for colleges and universities • Communicate high school exit requirements to all stakeholders • Design and help schools implement accelerated literacy and math recovery programs for low-performing students • Require that all students take a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for post-secondary education ***Advising*** • Design and help schools implement student advisor programs in which all students have a quality, one-on-one relationship with an adult who can help them plan for life after high school • Create "Post-Grad Centers" that provides advice, counseling and assistance to students as they transition to their post-high school life • Work with schools serving the middle grades and high schools to get students to plan their education. Six- or eight-year plans would start in the seventh or eighth grades and extend a year or two after high school • Establish and support clear expectations for counseling *all students* about their plans for post-secondary education ***Data and Assessments*** • Provide data that help schools understand the strengths and weaknesses of incoming students • On a timely basis, share data about transfer students with other schools and districts
State Leaders (Including the Governor, legislators, members of the State Board of Education, the Commissioner of Education and Higher Education Officials)	***Collaboration and Partnerships*** • Encourage and facilitate coordination and collaboration among preschool, K-12 and post-secondary sectors • Expand outreach activities from the Colorado Commission for Higher Education (CCHE) and higher education institutions to start no later than middle grades ***Standards and Assessment*** • Align standards across all grades P-16 and ensure that districts are aligning high school exit requirements with entrance criteria for colleges and universities ***Resources*** • Provide funding and guidance for accelerated literacy and math recovery programs, student-advisor programs and college-preparation courses ***Higher Education Access*** • Revise eligibility requirements for in-state tuition and state financial aid to give Colorado's undocumented students the same access to admission and aid as documented students
Rural Communities	***Collaboration and Partnerships/Curriculum*** • Explore ways to provide high school students with access to college-level work through technology and partnerships ***Communication*** • Ensure that all parents, students and teachers have accurate information about the range of higher education and workforce options and the financial support available

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
Community and Business Leaders	*Demand Action* Hold legislative forums (hosted by business community) to query lawmakers on outcomes, recommendations and legislation to: • align standards across the K-12 and higher education systems • align standards and curriculum between middle and high schools • close the achievement gap between students • achieve higher graduation rates and lower the dropout rate • deal with the remediation problem(s) that colleges and universities are having to address • prepare students who are not headed to college for the workforce or other post-secondary education

3. Expand School Choice and Alternatives

The Commission is guided by the premise that parents, students and teachers are best served when they can choose a school that can best address their values, needs and interests. This means that, to the extent possible, Colorado districts should offer students a choice of high schools from a variety of schooling options, provide each school the support it needs to educate students to common, rigorous standards and hold schools accountable for doing so. Clearly, in Colorado's small and rural districts, providing a range of schooling choices can be difficult. But additional programs and services within a single school can give students options that help them succeed.

Colorado is a leader among states in providing students and their families a range of public school choices. These include charter schools, transfers to other schools within and across districts, online learning, and specialty schools designed and managed by districts to improve outcomes of students most at risk of failure. The goal is not choice for choice's sake, but rather to ensure that schools serve the variable needs of all students and their families.

Despite the criticism leveled at them recently,[33] many of our traditional, comprehensive high schools continue to educate many students to high standards. Though we need other types of schools that meet the needs of students who are currently under-educated, comprehensive high schools will continue to play a sizable and critical role. We could better serve students who are struggling or dropping out by expanding the options and services available to students in our large high schools.

Strategies for expanding school choice and alternatives include:

a) Establish broadly defined, high standards for high school performance and hold all schools to these standards.

While it is important to create a variety of schools and allow students to select the one that best addresses their needs, it is equally important to ensure that all schools are focused on the same goal: helping all students meet rigorous standards and prepare for success. While standardized test scores such as the CSAP are one measure, other measures can gauge a school's success helping its students. Determining the appropriate measures of success will require coordination and cooperation among K-12 and higher education institutions and other affected groups like employers.

To help all schools meet these expectations, districts must work to ensure that all schools - regardless of their instructional approach, educational philosophy, size or location - share the following characteristics of effectiveness:

• **Common focus** - Staff and students are driven by a shared understanding of what an educated person is and what good teaching and learning look like. Every decision and every action is guided by this common vision.

• **High expectations** - Teachers are dedicated to helping students meet state and local standards. All students leave school prepared for success in college, work and civic life.

• **Personalization** - The school promotes sustained relationships between students and educators. Each student has a professional advocate who ensures that his or her academic and developmental needs are being identified and addressed.

• **Climate of respect and responsibility** - The environment is authoritative, safe, ethical and studious. Teachers exemplify, teach and expect responsible behavior. Relationships are based on mutual respect.

• **Time to collaborate** - Teachers have time to work collaboratively with each other to meet the needs of all students. The school partners with businesses, civic organizations and institutions of higher education to give students the best opportunities.

• **Performance based** - Students are promoted to the next instructional level only when they have achieved competency. They receive extra help when they need it.

• **Technology as a tool** - Appropriate technologies are used as learning opportunities and to communicate with the public about performance.

These characteristics are common in effective schools.[34] Therefore, the primary role of districts should be to ensure that these qualities prevail in all schools and all classrooms.

Colorado's current accountability system is less useful for diagnosing performance in our secondary schools than it is for earlier grades. The percent of students in a school scoring at a particular level on the CSAP is not necessarily an accurate measure of high school performance. To ensure quality programs, state and district leaders will have to develop and apply a variety of measures such as test scores, including value-added measures and demonstrations of mastery; completion rates; college-going rates; and graduates' success in college, among others. For some of our schools - particularly those serving highly at-risk students - leaders will have to clarify how we will know that students are learning adequately and decide how to appropriately measure

the contribution these schools make to their students' lives. More work is required to determine the appropriate measures, and this work will require coordination and collaboration across the state.

School districts can provide guidance to students, parents and educators by setting goals that are aligned with state standards and that prepare all students for college when they are met. For example, a school system might seek to have 70 percent of all incoming students graduate from high school academically prepared for college by 2006 and to increase this percentage by 10 percentage points each year thereafter. It is critical that districts and schools create these goals for all students as well as for subgroups of students including racial minorities, English language learners, low-income students and students with disabilities.

b) Identify and replicate high-performing schools.

Certain high schools in Colorado and elsewhere in the nation are succeeding when their circumstances suggest they should fail.[35] In addition, some reform models - such as Talent Development, First Things First, SREB's High Schools that Work, and High Tech High[36] - have shown promise in improving outcomes among high school students. We understand that all schools cannot adopt a single model for educating students. Still, we encourage more districts and schools to use proven strategies for increasing overall student achievement and closing the achievement gap.

Identifying successful schools, strategies and reform models is relatively easy. The challenge is to apply what we know about the success stories to improving schools across the state and sustaining that improvement over time. The following elements are critical to helping high schools improve: rigorous, timely and relevant research; dissemination of that research; training for educators and policymakers to make use of the research; and support from districts, the state, and the community.

c) Create new small high schools.

Any analysis of most communities' needs likely would find that some students (20 to 80 percent, depending on the community), are not being well served by high schools. These students require different approaches to schooling if they are going to meet high academic standards. Some students may require or prefer an instructional approach (for example, working on projects in a small group) that a district's high schools use rarely. Other students may perform better in a school that demonstrates the relevance of learning academic material through internships in local businesses. Still others may have special needs (such as homelessness or experience in the court system), that require attention and resources traditional schools cannot offer.[37] Districts can promote individual learning by creating new schools that address the interests and needs of students in their communities.

> *"There is no way you should have 1,500 kids in a middle school – there's no way. No way should you have that many people in puberty in one building,"*
> *High School Teacher.*

> *"Great! They should have choices. There is an alternative school in this district, but it only allows 150 kids. Choice is not expanding with the population. The only way to get into the alternative school is if you have a baby or… (get) expelled," High School Teacher.*

Whatever the approach or philosophy, most new schools should be kept small. Although more research is needed, small high schools have been found to be an effective and cost-efficient way to improve student achievement for young adults. Small schools can offer more personalized education, provide tutoring and support services for struggling students and implement more effective and engaging instruction. Though not a silver bullet, they can promote more effective teaching and learning.[38] The relative intimacy of a small school setting also makes it easier to promote a strong culture and build cohesion among a small group of students and staff about what they are collectively trying to achieve.

d) Empower parents, students and teachers to make school choices.

Colorado is a leader among states in providing students choices about which schools they attend. Choice is a critical strategy for meeting the needs of all students and, in particular, students most at risk of failure. Unfortunately, too many students make uninformed or accidental choices, ending up in schools or programs within schools that do not prepare them to succeed after high school. For example, many high school students - especially poor and minority students - choose or are directed to easy courses, leaving them ill prepared for the rigors of college. Furthermore, some school districts in Colorado offer choices of schools that are not deliberately designed, are not managed to meet individual student needs, nor used to promote academic excellence. Rather, most of these districts are merely collections of schools that have wide ranging performance levels and a variety of educational designs and instructional approaches that typically are not well planned (though many tend toward low-level seat work). Districts typically arrive at their mix of schools and offerings by default (through individual decisions made by classroom teachers), rarely planning deliberately to meet the needs of their communities and seldom allowing students to choose a coherent educational package that is most suited to them.

A high-performing district would create and manage a portfolio of high school options that educate all students to the same high standards while meeting the specific needs and interests of students, families, educators and the community. Such a district also would help to staff schools ensuring that the mission and approach of the school match the interests, skills and temperament of its teachers and administrators. It is vital that educators believe in the type of schooling they will be implementing. Ideally, teachers and schools are matched in a reciprocal process that honors both a school's need to implement a single, coherent approach to education supported and understood by its educator, as well as the need for staff to believe in and feel empowered by the model they will implement.

e) Encourage districts, teachers and their unions to establish new partnerships that allow schools to operate differently from one another – thus offering a greater variety of choices within the district's public schools.

Such partnerships could require revisions to collective bargaining agreements that allow variation in work rules among schools based on differing educational approaches and operations. Incentives and/or procedures should be established so that experience and talent is more equitably allocated among schools in a district. Individual principals should have the ability and authority to hire teachers directly from outside the system based on the school's needs, and should not have to accept only incoming transfer teachers.

f) Provide more than one way to earn a high school diploma and earn college credits.

If the goal is to ensure that all students graduate from high school meeting high academic standards, additional approaches are needed to help students most at risk of failure. These approaches include:

• Specialized high schools that use curriculum, staff, community resources and time in radically different ways to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth;

• New arrangements between high schools and colleges that help make the transition to college faster and easier;

• Programs that make creative use of time and resources outside the school building and school day to engage young people in intensive learning; and

• Programs and institutional arrangements that combine academic and vocational studies, offer work experience and provide technical training that is valued in the labor market.[39]

In general, high schools should award diplomas based on students' mastery of academic material, not the number of hours spent in class. Promising practices include:

• Colleges and universities opening their doors to a broader range of students who have the knowledge and skills to succeed, but who may not yet have completed their high school degree;

• K-12 systems finding ways to expand high school students' exposure and access to college-level materials, through AP, International Baccalaureate, early college, and middle-college programs, as well as expanded post-secondary education options; and

• The use of online education, including cyberschools and supplementary online services.

These changes most immediately would benefit non-traditional students who often work or receive community-based services and therefore require more flexibility from their education providers.

g) Ensure equity.

Despite the benefits of providing options to students, families and teachers, the way school choice is implemented can weaken its ability to help close achievement gaps and promote college readiness among all students. Therefore, according to a diverse Commission convened by the Brookings Institution, several safeguards - outlined in the "Strengthening and Safeguarding School Choice" box on page 27 - should be built into any system of choice to ensure that the benefits are realized.[40]

Protecting Public Interests while Expanding School Choice

The National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education notes that virtually all districts will need to address issues related to choice. The group recommended that districts seeking to expand options for their students be proactive by systematically establishing the following safeguards:

i. Specifying that poor and disadvantaged students should be first in line for new options. This would help change the reality that these students often have less access to high-quality schooling options;

ii. Considering school location and the transportation needs to ensure that low-income and minority students have access to high-quality options;

iii. If demand exceeds enrollment caps, using a lottery and/or giving preference to students living in the neighborhood or who have siblings already in the school;

iv. Ensuring that funding levels are sufficient for creating and sustaining school options and for supporting instructional excellence. In addition, schools should receive funding in proportion to the number of disadvantaged and handicapped students served;

v. Using common tests across schools to give parents and the state data about schools' basic performance on core skills. Parents also need information to help them understand how instruction differs among schools so they can decide which programs would and would not benefit their children;

vi. Making a conscious effort to reach out to low-income, minority and limited English proficient families to ensure that they have the information needed to make informed choices for their children; and

vii. Taking reasonable steps to safeguard students by setting academic standards and intervening or even closing schools that are not performing adequately.

Establishing these safeguards maximizes the benefits of school choice, especially for students who are failing to thrive in traditional schools.

ACTION STEPS

Actor	Key Responsibilities
Students	**School Designs/Choice** • Learn about the options available to you and consider which schools best match the way you learn
Parents	**School Designs/Choice** • Learn about the different options available in your community, as well as the strengths, weaknesses and needs of your child before helping him or her choose a school • Limit the number of transitions or choices your child makes. Give the school you select a chance rather than allowing your child to hop from school to school
Teachers	**Professional Development** • Become knowledgeable about how to implement and reinforce your school's chosen approach and culture **School Design and Culture** • Help to ensure that your school has all characteristics of effectiveness (see page 25-26xx?) • Choose to work in schools with a desirable mission and approach that you endorse and can help to implement

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
School Leaders (includes principals, and in some schools can include additional administrators and instructional leaders)	***Curriculum and Expectations*** • Insist that all students meet rigorous standard • Set goals that are aligned with standards, demonstrate progress toward accomplishing the mission of preparing all students for college and communicate the urgency of preparing all students to succeed ***School Design and Culture*** • Articulate the distinctive vision your school is trying to achieve • Ensure that the school's culture as well as staff and student behavior help establish and implement that vision • Ensure that school has all characteristics of effectiveness (see page 25-26xx?)
District Leaders (Administrators and Board Members)	***Curriculum and Expectations*** • Establish and apply broadly-defined standards of high performance for your secondary schools • Set goals that are aligned with state standards and prepare all students for college when they are met ***School Design/Choice*** • Ensure that all schools share characteristics of effectiveness (see page 26xx)? • Institute processes to identify needs in the district and facilitate choice options to meet those needs • Identify and replicate high-performing high schools • Create new small high schools that address the interests and needs of students • Provide more than one way to earn a high school diploma and college credits ***Access and Equity*** • Encourage the creation of schools and options within schools that better address the needs of under-served students such as teen mothers, disengaged youth, chronically failing students and recent immigrants • Empower parents, students and teachers to make school choices • Encourage and help schools of choice reach out to under-served populations Strengthen equity in systems of choice by: 1. Providing information about all options to all families 2. Supporting transportation, particularly for students from low-income families
State Leaders (Including the Governor, legislators, members of the State Board of Education, the Commissioner of Education and Higher Education Officials)	***Data and Assessments*** • Improve the state's accountability system so that it better measures the quality of secondary schools. Include a variety of measures ***School Designs/Choice*** • Institute processes to identify needs in the state and facilitate choice options to meet those needs
Board of Education (the Commissioner of Education and Higher Education Officials)	***Curriculum Alignment and Standards*** • Change higher education admissions practices to allow for performance-based approaches, regardless of school or course characteristics ***Access and Equity*** • Provide information about ensuring equity among all schools • Ensure that district- and school-level choice policies do not discriminate against any students ***Resources*** • Provide additional money for new schools and districts trying to establish innovative programs
Rural Communities	***Collaboration and Partnerships*** • Seek ways of providing different services and programs within existing schools through technology and partnerships • Seek out partnerships with assets in your community, such as businesses, that may be able to help expand the services available in your schools

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
Rural Communities Cont'd.	**Curriculum and Student Engagement** • Identify the characteristics of students who are failing or disengaged, and design programs and services around their needs
Community and Business Leaders	**Collaboration and Partnerships** • As a group of interested businesses, meet with the superintendent(s) of local districts to talk about programs for technical training, magnet schools and the needs of businesses in your area **School Choice, Access and Equity** • Insist that all schools are effective and tailored to meet the interests and needs of students • Identify schools and programs that address the interests and needs of youth in your community and advocate for more of them, district by district **Ask Questions** • Are there students who need other options in your community? • Are choices available that could meet their needs? • What can your community do to ensure all kids have equal access to quality choices?

4. Invest New Resources in Improvement Efforts and Use Existing Resources and Data More Effectively

Though nobody can say for sure how much money is required to provide every student an excellent education, it is obvious that very low or erratic funding levels can put public education at risk. This is especially true when we spend less on the children with the greatest needs than on more advantaged students. Consequently, schools striving to address their students' needs must seek additional public and private funding in strategic ways.

While many of the proposals in this report will require new funding to implement, adding money alone is not going to solve public education's ills without other reforms. In particular, districts may wish to allocate resources based on need, allow the resources to move from school to school along with students, and grant principals - who require much more training and support in this area - greater authority to spend the resources once they have the skills and tools to make effective decisions.

Data are critical for any administrator to make wise budget decisions. Because much more data are available now than 10 years ago, most high schools and districts can report broadly about how various groups of students are doing. But in general, data systems are not yet able to assess performance of individual students over time, identify effective programs or policies, and tie performance to the real expenditures in schools and districts. An effective school data system will inform administrators for management; teachers for instruction; and parents, policy makers and other stakeholders for a variety of purposes.

According to the National Center for Educational Accountability, an adequate data system provides the following nine essential fields of information:[41]

• Statewide student identifier that tracks individual students and their progress from grade-to-grade, school-to-school, district-to-district and even from high school to and through college;
• Student-level data on enrollment;
• Student-level data on state tests data;
• Information on the characteristics of untested students;
• Student-level data on course-completion;
• Student-level SAT, ACT and AP test results;
• Student-level data on graduation and dropout rates;
• State data audit process; and
• Ability to match K-12 and higher education data.

Colorado principals would be much better equipped to improve their high schools if they had data systems with these elements and had adequate resources they were authorized to spend meeting the needs of their students. Strategies for using new and existing resources and data more effectively include:

a) Invest in additional supports for low-performing students.

Unfortunately, the poorest students often attend schools with the least money, the worst prepared teachers, and the highest rates of teacher turnover.[42] School practitioners serving the most disadvantaged youth know they require more time and a more comprehensive commitment to youth development than typically offered. Additional money is needed to keep these schools open longer, hire additional highly qualified educators and support personnel, such as counselors, and work to tap other resources in the community.

b) Increase and improve the allocation of resources and explore ways to enhance school-level flexibility.

A high-performing district requires a dramatically different approach to spending and decision-making than is generally the case in districts today. Many of the reforms in this report will require additional spending, as well shifts in spending priorities. To address students' needs, money should be controlled by people closer to the student, meaning those responsible for the school in which the student is enrolled. Teaching school administrators the entrepreneurial skills that are currently not offered in administrator training programs could help ensure success.

One approach is to "attach" funds to individual pupils so that all students will have the same baseline amounts spent on them. If a student transfers from one school to another, the dollars attached to him or her transfer to the new school as well. Another approach would also "attach" dollars to students, but it would add varying amounts to different types of students. Students who cost more to teach - those with disabilities or limited English proficiency, for example - would carry more dollars with them. So too would low-income and low-performing students. To avoid inequitable distribution of experienced teachers, this "weighted-student" funding plan would need to pay the actual cost of each school's teachers (not average teacher costs as is currently done).

Weighted-student budgeting is just one strategy districts may want to explore as they look for ways to improve. There are other possible strategies. If schools receive dollars but lack discretion for spending, resources may not flow from less to more productive uses. Schools with more spending authority could decide how to configure their staffs and make tradeoffs between teachers, other employees, equipment, and purchased services. Schools also need the flexibility to adopt reform models and shift spending priorities to implement technical assistance programs with different costs. Such freedoms can allow schools both to incorporate new ideas and respond to changes in their students' needs.

Resources that are locally controlled and can be shifted quickly and strategically will allow more flexibility in public education. When they have developed the necessary capacity, schools and districts should be given the authority and responsibility to spend money most effectively on different students and to reallocate spending on new methods of instruction.

c) Improve the use and reporting of student outcome data.

Before principals or administrators can take responsibility for resources, they must have access to timely and useful data and be trained to budget and manage resources.

Measuring quality of high schools is a complicated and imperfect science. For example, how do you assess and hold schools accountable for meeting student needs and creating rigorous and supportive environments where students are motivated to learn, especially when high schools can be so different from one another and serve such diverse mixes of students? The answer is that we have a long way to go before we do so most effectively and fairly. That said, there are several important steps that can be taken in the short term that will lead to immediate improvements. Colorado's data system needs to be improved and used more effectively if high schools are going to make wise decisions that will increase overall student achievement and narrow achievement gaps.

Districts need to set clear, measurable benchmarks for all subgroups of students that are aligned with the goal of preparing all students for college and the workplace and with state and local academic standards. The benchmarks should call for specific outcomes in the following areas that could improve each year:

- High school graduation rates;

- Gains in student achievement as measured by various test scores and other means;

- Percentage of students taking a college-preparatory curriculum; and

- Percentage of ninth-grade students who are proficient in algebra.

Creating benchmarks allows teachers and administrators to focus their efforts on achieving concrete and attainable outcomes that are relatively easy to measure. Data should be collected regularly, compared to the benchmark and then used to shape future action. Also, data should be presented under pre-determined indicators and widely circulated to help people inside and outside the systems know what the goals are and track progress toward attainment. Data can and should provide valuable information to teachers, and data systems ultimately should be judged on their ability to actually impact teaching and learning.

Effective school data not only reports overall performance on state standards, it also compares performance with similar schools to identify high-scoring schools that are underperforming and lower-scoring schools that are doing better than expected. Appropriate and accessible data are made available to teachers, parents and policymakers. Data should report far more than CSAP scores, showing how Colorado compares with other states on high school results (e.g., graduation rates), curriculum support (e.g., Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate participation and passing rates) and post-secondary costs, access, remediation, persistence and graduation rates. When used for accountability measures, data should be valid and accurate, closely tied to the purposes of high schools, understandable to the average person and allow for comparisons across districts and with other states, as appropriate. In addition, data should be shared quickly between schools so students' histories are available when needed. Given all the goals we hold for high schools, we must also develop meaningful indicators that capture a high school's ability to prepare students to participate in our democracy and in the workforce.

The state also needs to take leadership to improve the collection and use of data. For example, Colorado is in the third year of implementing an individual student identifier system that tracks students and their progress from grade-to-grade, school-to-school, district-to-district, and even from high school to and through college. When used effectively, data systems with student identifiers can help more accurately measure the progress of students and schools (including determining the "value added" by teachers and schools on students' academic progress), improve teaching and learning, and better coordinate K-12 and higher education in pursuing the shared goal of ensuring that all students graduate from high school ready for college. The state should continue its development of a data system that has these features and tracks students throughout their P-16 experience.

In addition, the Colorado State Board of Education (SBE) can show leadership by ensuring that the state has an accurate measure of high school graduation and dropout rates as required in recently passed legislation.[44] Currently, the graduation rate reported by the state of Colorado is overly optimistic and misleading, preventing schools, districts and advocates from accurately assessing and addressing the dropout problem. Graduation rates provide important information about how well schools are serving certain student populations. They become meaningless, however, when they are inflated by inappropriate calculation methods and when schools, districts and states use different approaches that prevent useful comparison.[45]

d) Improve data on school finance.

Citizens, policymakers and school personnel need timely, reliable and transparent data about available resources to make informed decisions. Additional information needed includes:

- The costs of improving an existing school, as well as the temporary transition costs associated with major school improvement efforts;

- The differences in spending or costs associated with factors such as which grades or which types of students schools serve;

- The true cost of personnel at each school;[45] and

- The incentives for school improvement at the high school level created by finance systems.

Changes in state and district policy and in school and district practice could improve our data about finance and increase our understanding of resource allocation and effectiveness.

ACTION STEPS

Actor	Key Responsibilities
Students	**Data and Assessments** • Take assessments of your performance seriously
Parents	**Family** • Communicate to your child the importance of preparing and trying "to do your best" – do not disparage testing **School** • Ask hard questions about how well students, yours and others, are doing **Community Engagement** • Support efforts to raise additional funding
Teachers	**Data and Assessments** • Focus on meeting district benchmarks • Use data to identify students who are not performing up to par **Intervention** • Implement ways of intervening quickly to address the needs of students who are behind
School Leaders (includes principals, and in some schools can include additional administrators and instructional leaders)	**Professional Development** • Help teachers develop skills to analyze and use available data **Resource Management** • Make a strong case for how current and additional resources can be used effectively • Develop budgeting and financial management skills

Actor	Key Responsibilities and Tasks
School Leaders (includes principals, and in some schools can include additional administrators and instructional leaders) Cont'd.	***Data and Assessments*** • Focus on meeting district benchmarks • Collect and widely disseminate data related to the benchmarks • Share data with teachers on a timely basis • Use data to identify methods that are working well and not so well in your school, and act on that information
District Leaders (Administrators and Board Members)	***Professional/Leadership Development*** • Provide principals and other administrators with training and assistance in using data and finances differently • Recruit new leaders who can use data effectively and have the skills to appropriately use discretion regarding budgets • Allow principals more flexibility in spending resources ***Resource Management*** • Strategically pursue additional funding from available sources to implement high priority reforms • Consider allocating funds using a weighted student budgeting strategy ***Data and Assessments*** • Set clear, measurable benchmarks for all subgroups of students • Collect and widely disseminate data related to the benchmarks • Ensure that performance data on students is transferred quickly and thoroughly as students transfer between schools and from middle school to high school
State Leaders (Including the Governor, legislators, members of the State Board of Education, the Commissioner of Education and Higher Education Officials)	***Resources*** • Ensure that schools and districts are funded adequately and increase funding for high-priority reform efforts ***Data and Assessments*** • Continue development of data system with student identifiers that track students P-16 • Develop increasingly accurate methods of identifying and measuring high school quality and adjust accountability systems to incorporate data that more accurately reflect school quality • Provide useful and accessible student, school, district and statewide achievement and other relevant data • Provide fair and reliable accountability that allows for all students to attend a high quality school • Take leadership in ensuring that the state has an accurate measure of high school graduation and dropout rates • Increase the speed with which state data is "turned around" and made available to school and district administrators
Rural Communities	***Resource Management*** • Are there any untapped assets available in your community that could be used to support your public schools? • Explore the potential role of technology in efficiently expanding the range of programs and services within budget constraints
Community and Business Leaders	***Resources*** • Provide resources to assist with strategically chosen reform efforts ***Ask Questions*** • Does the school, the district or the state have and share meaningful research on student performance in ways that you can understand and use it? • Does the amount and distribution of resources and authority match the priorities of your community • Do all schools have adequate resources?

IV. CONCLUSION: A PROBLEM WE ALL HAVE A ROLE IN FIXING

Colorado can and must do better for our students, particularly those who are struggling most in today's high schools. In the months and years ahead, the Commission urges everyone in our school systems to commit to action. We urge state, district, school and community leaders to use the recommendations, strategies and action steps in this report to guide their efforts to improve high schools for all of our state's students. Stakeholders in communities across Colorado are encouraged to examine how their high schools are performing, what more needs to be done and how the recommendations and strategies in this report may help them reach their goals. The time is now to redesign high schools for the 21st century that help our young people - and our society as a whole - support employment, democracy and a high quality of life.

There is a role for everyone. We challenge parents and students, as well as educators, school leaders, district leaders, and state leaders to begin this work.

NEXT STEPS

Parents and Students

Parents and students need to begin discussing the importance of education at an early age and continue the conversation through the middle grades and into high school. Discuss plans for life after high school that include an examination of all the options for further study.

Parents need to find out what work is expected of their child in middle and high school and help students make their school work a priority. Reinforce and strengthen your child's sense of responsibility for his or her own learning, as well as the importance of mastering high school material.

Students and parents should become involved in their schools. Speak to your counselors, teachers, or other caring adults at your school about ways to get involved with the decision-making process at the school. If your school has no opportunities for participation now, work with people in the school and district to create meaningful opportunities for parent and student involvement.

Teachers and School Leaders

Teachers and leaders must develop a shared vision for their school, articulate that vision regularly and use it to revisit and improve their work with students. Everyone in each school - students, teachers, administrators and staff - needs to take responsibility for making that school successful. As a community, ask a series of questions:

• What can staff and students do to help the school achieve its vision?

• Which students are engaged in your school and which are not?

• What is being done to build meaningful relationships between alienated youth and the adults in your school, and what more could be done?

• How can staff collectively and as individuals improve and turn your school into a professional learning community?

• How do your school and its staff respond when you find a student is not prepared for the material before them? Do you have the time and systems in place to intervene? What else could you do to identify students who need intensive help and provide that assistance?

• What changes in your schedule, curriculum, professional development and daily practice could help more students succeed?

"My hope is that the recommendations in this report are not met with defensiveness. As a long-time high school principal and ardent supporter of high schools, high school teachers and administrators, and high school students, I firmly believe that we have every right to be proud of the accomplishments of the unique institution known as the American high school. But I believe just as strongly that, as this report says, 'there is no place in the state that can afford to ignore the call to better serve high school- aged youth.' It's time for all of us to step up to the challenge,"
Tim Westerberg, Past President, Colorado Association of School Executives and Former Principal, Littleton High School

School Board Members and District Superintendents

We challenge all school districts in Colorado to begin community conversations about improving high schools. Convene meetings with your board, administrators, teachers, parents and other community stakeholders. Gather and examine data from your district and your schools about student performance, enrollment, graduation rates and experiences of students after they leave your system. After asking a series of questions, determine what your district can and should do differently. Questions to start the conversation include:

• Which students in your current schools are succeeding and which are floundering?

• Are the interests of the students who are struggling represented in your discussions, or are the concerns of families of high-performing students dominating public discourse? If so, how can you include additional voices?

• Using data, can you identify which things your schools are trying to do that are effective and which are not working?

• What services, programs and schools are currently available to meet the needs of students in your community who are not thriving in traditional school settings?

• If something is working for some students, are there additional students who also could benefit? How can you identify and replicate such successes?

• What do your school leaders and teachers need to better serve their students?

• Are there resources in your community - including businesses, higher education institutions or public agencies - that could be invited to partner in efforts to improve high schools?

"School Board members can play a significant role in focusing a spotlight on the needs of secondary students. By listening to their communities and empowering the district leadership to seek innovative and targeted solutions they can ensure that students are well prepared for post secondary education and the workforce." - Helayne Jones, President, Boulder Valley School Board.

State Leaders

The state's role in improving high schools should address statewide policies and coordinate between disparate geographic areas, education levels and institutions to help bring results. The state should focus on the following:

• Colorado's leaders in K-12 and higher education should work together to develop a student identifier system that tracks individual students from kindergarten through their college education. We challenge leaders across our systems - in the legislature, the Governor's office, Colorado's Department of Education and the governing bodies of our higher education institutions - to put in place such a system within one calendar year. This single, concrete step could provide data to support many related efforts for promoting a P-16 approach to education. Efforts to improve transitions, align and coordinate expectations and curricula between grades, as well as to determine what is working in the state and for whom, would all be furthered by more continuity in our data.

• Ensure that data systems produce timely, reliable information on performance and completion for students at the high school level.

• Coordinate K-12 and higher education systems to help students enter higher education if they demonstrate mastery of the knowledge and skills required to succeed in post-secondary education without necessarily completing all "Carnegie units."

Although high schools face their own unique challenges, the Commission feels that these recommendations can be useful in some way in all settings. None of the changes suggested in this report will be quick or easy. And we expect that after taking the steps above, leaders will uncover more challenges and more opportunities for a long-term effort. High school reform is a complicated and difficult process. The status quo, however, is simply unacceptable. Our children - now and in generations to come - are counting on us.

END NOTES

[1] This figure is based on an analysis of graduation rates by the Colorado Children's Campaign based on data from the Colorado Department of Education. The percentage of students who do not graduate on time was calculated by diving the state's ninth grade pupil count by the number of graduates four years later. The number was adjusted to account for overall changes in student population. In 2004, Colorado's on-time graduation rate was 69.1 percent; thus, 30.9 percent of students did not graduate on time.

[2] Greene, J. and G. Forster (September 2003). *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

[3] Rentner, D. and N. Kober (September 2001). *Higher Learning=Higher Earnings*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy and The American Youth Policy Forum.

[4] The American Diploma Project (2004). *Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*. Washington, DC: Author.

[5] See, for example, United States Census Bureau, Earnings by Occupation and Education. Available on-line at: http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/earnings/call1usboth.html

[6] Wirt, J. et al. (June 2003). *Condition of Education, 2003*. NCES #2003067. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

[7] Data from "The High Cost of Not Graduating High School". Donnell-Kay Foundation, Colorado Succeeds, and Colorado Children's Campaign, October 2005.

[8] These figures are from an analysis of graduation rates by the Colorado Children's Campaign, see note #1.

[9] Colorado Department of Education, see at: (most recent website for download)

[10] Colorado Department of Education, see at: (most recent website for download)

[11] Greene, Jay and Greg Forster (September 2003). *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States*. Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute.

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1120 Lincoln , Suite 125 ● Denver, CO 80203
303.839.1580 ● www.coloradokids.org