

state of
Reopening Education
in Colorado



The State of Reopening Education in Colorado
Themes and Ideas for Moving Forward

November 2020





On November 13, the Colorado Children's Campaign and the Colorado Education Initiative cohosted a **three-hour virtual event**, convening almost **200 educators, district administrators, education advocates and policymakers** to discuss the state of **reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic**. Across two virtual panels featuring system leaders from rural and urban/suburban contexts, panelists answered four questions:

What hard lesson have you learned in reopening?

What's a proud accomplishment in reopening?

What are the "elephants in the room" that we need to name?

What are bold ideas for the future of education?

The goal of the event was to give panelists and attendees space to pause and reflect on COVID's impact on education, and to think about what might be possible in what remains of this school year, and in school years beyond, for young people who have experienced significant learning disruption.

Panelists included: Superintendents Karen Quanbeck of **Clear Creek School District**, George Welsh of **Cañon City School District**, Darrin Peppard of **West Grand School District**, Bree Jones of **La Veta School District**, Michael Thomas of **D-11 School District**, Chris Gdowski of **Adams 12 School District**, Diana Sirko of **Mesa-51 School District**, as well as David Singer, Founder and Executive director of **University Preparatory Schools** in Denver. In small group discussions following each panel, attendees were invited to share their thoughts on the same questions, and capture their thinking using a tool called FunRetro. Commissioner of Education Katy Anthes shared her thoughts on the state of reopening in closing comments.

Several major themes, and many forward-looking policy ideas, emerged across all of these conversations and are summarized here. **View the comments shared directly by breakout discussion participants [here](#) and [here](#).**





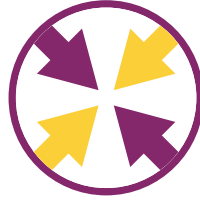
Theme #1: Existing inequities and opportunity gaps have become even more apparent and have widened.

From the dilapidated state of school buildings and ventilation systems, to the unevenness of access to broadband across the state, to the challenges with workforce shortages and low levels of resources, disparities are impossible to ignore during the pandemic.

- **Internet/Information Access:** The internet is now an essential education resource and one that is not evenly distributed across the state. Our rural areas struggle with deploying access given connectivity barriers in their communities and resource gaps.
- **Learning Loss:** Superintendents and participants have serious concerns about the amount of learning loss due to the disruption this year. There is consensus that this loss will disproportionately affect kids furthest from opportunity.

Recommendations:

- Students will need significant supports to overcome academic losses, perhaps with extended learning time and flexibility. This should be seen as an opportunity that benefits all students, not as a remedial punishment.
- Build on the instructional models that have emerged to create flexible learning formats and personalize learning to meet the needs of every child.
- While strides have been made in securing internet access for more kids and families, further state resources are needed to ensure access for all.
- As districts consider approaches, they should take care to consider whole child interventions that can account for a diverse set of needs for all students.



Theme #2: Building relationships and maintaining frequent communication with families and community members is more critical than ever.

Effectively communicating in a crisis is challenging, but the practice has been essential to the work of reopening. Districts are piloting and innovating new ways of staying in touch via social media or outreach, but there are challenges, too. Small districts often lack the infrastructure or capacity to maintain the dialogue, while larger districts struggle to reach everyone, and all districts struggle with cutting through the “noise” of a 24-hour news cycle.

Recommendations:

- Use lessons learned about communicating with students and families to establish new coordinated outreach efforts that are culturally and linguistically inclusive.
- Support districts to pool resources to offer scalable best practices for communication so that districts don't have to invest by themselves in critical outreach methods.



Theme #3: Mental health needs – of students and teachers – have multiplied.

The fatigue of reopening has had a major impact on the social emotional well-being of our teachers and students across Colorado, and these challenges will linger. Educators have been asked to dramatically shift their practice and are worried about their job security given budget cuts, all while juggling the effects of the pandemic on their own lives. Students are being asked to learn in new and different ways, are disconnected from their peers and are living through the trauma of COVID's impact on their family or community.

Recommendations:

- Support effective and targeted professional learning for educators to deal with crisis fatigue and mental health issues.
- Prioritize investment in mental health supports for educators and students.
- Colorado needs to think different about teacher shortage needs. We need to expand pipelines dramatically but also think about leveraging communities of professionals in innovative ways, such as out-of-school settings and beyond.

“Everything in education that we have been putting band-aids on, maybe they were cracks in our system... **all of those cracks are now chasms.**”

Commissioner Katy Anthes



Theme #4: Shifting instruction to remote has been a challenge, but there are silver linings and opportunities.

Remote learning is working well for some students and families, and anecdotal evidence seems to suggest this is across difference and income levels. Virtual parent conferences have been deployed and have led to increases in participation. The mindset that “learning only happens at school” has been necessarily disrupted. For older students, superintendents report that work-based learning opportunities such as internships and job shadowing lead to relevant learning.

Recommendations:

- Foster connections among districts to learn about emerging new modes of instruction.
- Reexamine the notion of “seat time” as it is currently linked to accountability and funding.
- Ensure narratives of success emerge during the pandemic to support bigger opportunities for flexibility and change.



Theme #5: In these challenging times, school system leaders are restructuring and collaborating more than ever.

In reopening, districts and schools have found innovative ways to restructure systems and allocate staff time. From rethinking accountability through site visits in the Student-Centered Accountability Pilot to fostering collaboration among system leaders in a region dealing with similar challenges, to rethinking entirely how decisions are made at schools, Colorado districts are doing the hard work of adapting their systems to the moment. This requires state recognition of the need for flexibility.

Recommendations:

- Give districts flexibility when they desire it and support when they ask for it – whether in operational structures or in resources.
- Convene and encourage districts to spend time reimagining what is needed to restructure and adapt before the next school year.
- Use the pause on state accountability frameworks to imagine a new system and community process for school and district quality reviews.

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Interested in learning more?

Watch the recording of the two panels and Commissioner Anthes’s closing reflection on [Vimeo](#).

Read the *Colorado Sun*’s [coverage](#) of the event.

Read post-event reflections from CEI’s President and CEO [Rebecca Holmes](#), or the Children’s Campaign’s Vice President of Education Initiatives [Leslie Colwell](#).

See the thoughts and ideas shared by attendees on two community boards:

[Breakout Discussion #1](#)

[Breakout Discussion #2](#)