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How Eight Rural Districts Came Together to Redefine Postsecondary Success in the Midst of a Pandemic

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July 2021

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How Eight Rural Districts Came Together to Redefine Postsecondary Success in the Midst of a Pandemic

Introduction

The town of Holyoke, Colorado, is situated in the state's remote northeastern plains. With a population of just over 2,400, the community is far closer geographically and demographically to rural Nebraska than to the Denver metro area. Forming the economic hub of Phillips County, the region is largely dependent on agriculture, meatpacking, and small business. It is a close-knit community that, according to Holyoke School District Superintendent Kyle Stumpf, deeply values education: "Our school is the heart of our community, and the community's continued investment in our students show this value."

When COVID-19 hit, Holyoke School District was nine months into an ambitious three-year strategy, the Homegrown Talent Initiative (HTI), designed to help rural communities across Colorado better prepare youth for success after high school by offering new career exploration and training opportunities. Holyoke was just wrapping up a year-long community engagement effort to identify the skills and competencies that community members said would put high school graduates on a path to success. These skills, like adaptability and collaboration, were being codified into a Graduate Profile. The next step was designing career-connected programming[1] and making other curricular changes to help students master Graduate Profile skills.

Just at the point when Holyoke was starting to design their implementation plan, the pandemic hit. In the midst of school closings, remote learning, and community hardship, Holyoke found time to finalize its plan. And while the pandemic disrupted internships and dual enrollment for students nationwide, Holyoke and other HTI districts increased youth access to these opportunities in the 2020–21 school year.

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1 Career-connected programming is the preferred term for HTI. It generally aligns with the federal government's definition of career and technical education in "Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act of 2018" (Perkins V). Both terms include career and technical education coursework; credentials signaling competency, such as industry-based or postsecondary credentials; work-based learning or competency-based education to help youth apply technical and problem-solving skills; dual or concurrent enrollment coursework; and career exploration. The primary difference is that Perkins prioritizes a progression of career and technical education coursework that aligns to a Program of Study at the postsecondary level in combination with work-based learning and leadership development through Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO). Career-connected learning, as defined by HTI, can include any types of learning listed above and in any combination.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has been closely tracking the progress of Holyoke and seven other rural Colorado districts as part of a three-year evaluation into the Homegrown Talent Initiative. Our analysis is grounded in a mixed-methods research design that documents key supports offered to communities and tracks curriculum and policy changes in participating school districts.

After a tumultuous second year, we found both opportunities for growth and clear successes. The pandemic did negatively impact communities' ability to launch the career-connected programming they had outlined in their implementation plans, but despite variation in how deeply communities engaged with the initiative, we found three promising features that helped communities persevere amid the pandemic:

- Community creation of a new definition of student success—a Graduate Profile— deepened districts' commitment to redesigning the high school experience, which propelled them to move forward with ambitious implementation plans.

- Support from the technical assistance providers, Colorado Succeeds and the Colorado Education Initiative, helped rural districts cultivate the capacity they needed to maintain progress. Support in cross-sector teams and personalized coaching was particularly helpful.

- Early efforts to transform district policy and monitor quality moved communities in the direction of sustained, systemic change.

It remains to be seen whether communities continue these initiatives and whether their efforts result in increased career and postsecondary opportunities. Nonetheless, their refusal to put efforts on hold during a school year with so much chaos is impressive. In each rural community, the underlying mission of the Homegrown Talent Initiative remains alive and resonant as they attempt to create and implement new models of secondary education and, along with it, a bolder vision for student and community success.

An Overview of the Homegrown Talent Initiative: Rural Districts Offer New Opportunities to Students

Districts that applied to be part of the Homegrown Talent Initiative (HTI) wanted to better prepare students for the future of their choice. This meant more than just a narrow track to college. The Holyoke School District has Advanced Placement classes, rigorous graduation requirements, and dual enrollment classes—yet 41 percent[2] of students opt not to enroll in college. In its initial application, district leadership said that even those who do go on to college "were graduating without having any idea about the career possibilities available."

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2 "District and School Dashboard," postsecondary enrollment data from 2018-19, Colorado Department of Education website.

Like other rural communities, Holyoke was also worried about brain drain when talented youth leave the area. The district hoped that by exposing students to career options within their community, more would stay in the region. Noted Superintendent Kyle Stumpf, "We need to give students opportunities to explore options they have in life within Holyoke and outside of Holyoke."

Of 16 applicants to HTI, Holyoke was one of nine communities that was ultimately selected, based on a set of criteria that included a clear vision for increasing career opportunities and demonstrated buy-in from the school district, local industry, and an institution of higher education.

Once communities were selected, they received financial resources and technical assistance from Colorado Succeeds and the Colorado Education Initiative (CEI). In the 2019–20 school year, communities convened design teams comprised of leaders from K–12, industry, and higher education, as well as teachers and students. Their first task was to create a Graduate Profile for their school district and submit a plan for implementing new career-connected learning. One of the nine communities did not continue with the initiative after the design year; the team failed to get buy-in from district leadership to move ahead on its implementation plan.

HTI districts varied in terms of distance from an urban center, size, family poverty, and student race/ethnicity

Each community that moved to implementation was unique. While every community self-identified as rural, some, like Clear Creek and Elizabeth, are only about an hour's drive from Denver. Holyoke, Cortez, and Durango, sit far outside Colorado's urban corridor (figure 1).

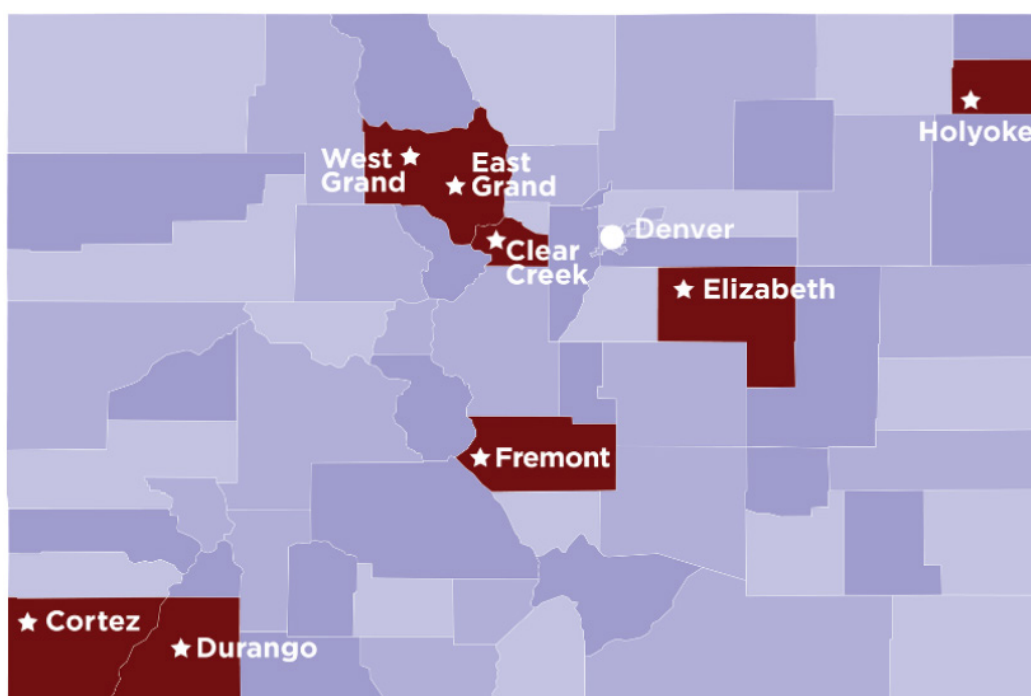**Figure 1. Eight HTI Districts Persist Through COVID Disruptions**

Table 1. Characteristics of Selected HTI Districts

Clear Creek School District RE-1	639 district enrollment 20% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 1% American Indian, 9% Hispanic, 10% Other, 85% White 63% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
Durango School District 9R	6,643 district enrollment 31% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 4% American Indian, 21% Hispanic, 8% Other, 67% White 60% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
East Grand School District	1,228 district enrollment 26% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 1% American Indian, 18% Hispanic, 4% Other, 76% White 62% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
Elizabeth School District	2,090 district enrollment 18% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 0.6% American Indian, 11% Hispanic, 3% Other, 85% White 42% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
Fremont School District RE-2	1,286 district enrollment 43% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 0.5% American Indian, 18% Hispanic, 5.5% Other, 76% White 24% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
Holyoke School District RE-IJ	584 district enrollment 59% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 48% Hispanic, 3% Other, 51% White 59% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1	2,540 district enrollment 54% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 27% American Indian, 20% Hispanic, 6% Other, 47% White 41% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
West Grand School District 1-JT	399 district enrollment 33% of students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 0.5% American Indian, 25% Hispanic, 3.5% Other, 71% White 39% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges
Colorado average	4,606 average district enrollment 40% students eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch 0.7% American Indian, 34% Hispanic, 12% Other, 53% White 52% enrollment in two- or four-year colleges

Note: "Other students" includes Asian students, Black students, Native Hawaiian students, and students of two or more races. We included the race/ethnicity of students who make up 10 percent or more of the population in at least one district.

Engagement with the initiative varied

As communities moved to implementation, many focused on increasing enrollment in existing classes or redesigning career-connected programs. Others launched entirely new programs (table 2). Because of the HTI initiative, seven districts either offered internships for the first time or increased student enrollment in new opportunities. Every district expanded or maintained dual / concurrent enrollment. These gains are notable considering that internships and dual enrollment declined nationally during the pandemic.

Table 2. Every Community Implemented New Career-Connected Learning Programs but Engagement Varied

	Internships	Dual or concurrent enrollment	Career pathways	Career exploration	High school career courses	Industry-based certifications	Classes to build Grad Profile skills
Clear Creek	New	Expanded	New	Expanded	Expanded	New	New
Durango	New	Expanded	No change	No change	No change	Expanded	None
Holyoke	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded	No change	New	New
Elizabeth	New	New	Expanded	New	No change	New	New
Fremont	New	Expanded	Expanded	New	Expanded	Expanded	None
East Grand	Expanded	New	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded	Expanded	None
Montezuma-Cortez	New	No change	New	No change	No change	None	None
West Grand	No change	No change	No change	Expanded	No change	Expanded	New

Notes: (1) This chart reflects community implementation as of June 2021. (2) "New" means a district did not have the program prior to the 2020–21 school year; "expanded" means that the program was in place but enrollment increased in 2020–21; "no change" means that the program was in place prior to 2020–21 and enrollment stayed the same; "none" means that the district did not have the program prior to or during the 2020–21 school year.

But underneath these broad trends, districts varied in the breadth and depth of their activities. Three districts—Durango, East Grand, and West Grand—only implemented one new program this year and focused on expanding or maintaining others.

Efforts to date also remain fragmented. While communities expanded concurrent and dual-enrollment coursework, only three of the twenty college classes offered by HTI districts aligned to career and technical education certificates and degrees. Internships were typically not offered in conjunction with coursework or certificates. Five districts moved forward on developing career pathways, either at the district or in coordination with the local community college, but these were usually pursued in isolation from other career-connected programming. Fremont offers a counter example. The district expanded already existing welding and construction trade courses so it could offer pathways in the building trades. All newly implemented high school coursework and certifications are aligned with one of six pathways, four of which were new this year.
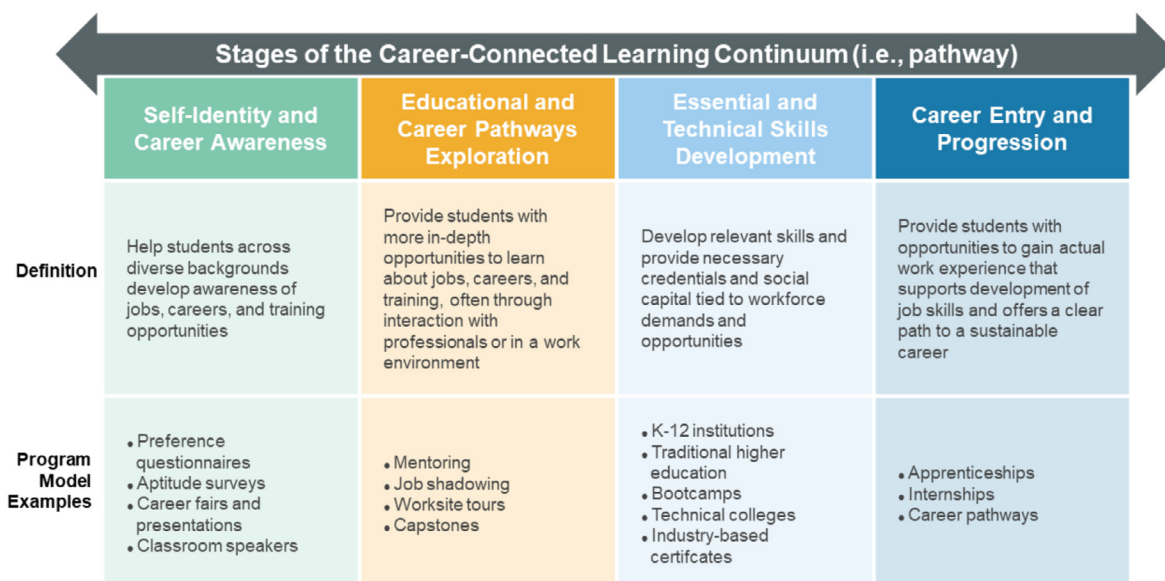
In general, rural districts struggle to provide robust career pathways; it makes sense that career-connected programs would be somewhat fragmented in the first year of implementation, especially during such a turbulent year. As the initiative moves forward, we hope to see communities build on their early momentum to create programs that are more coherent and therefore have a greater likelihood of leading to improved academic, college, and career outcomes.

Community characteristics do not explain variation in implementation

Variation in implementation did not appear to depend on the socioeconomic status of the family, the racial/ethnic makeup of students, district size, how many career-connected programs communities already had in place, or the district's COVID learning model. Instead, variation seemed to depend on the community's priorities for the first year and district leadership's ability to engage with the initiative.

As communities were developing their implementation plans, Colorado Succeeds and CEI encouraged them to use the career-connected continuum as a guide (see figure 2), but they did not require communities to implement any particular set of programs.

Figure 2. Colorado Succeeds Career-Connected Learning Continuum

Stages of the Career-Connected Learning Continuum (i.e., pathway)			
Self-Identity and Career Awareness	**Educational and Career Pathways Exploration**	**Essential and Technical Skills Development**	**Career Entry and Progression**
Definition Help students across diverse backgrounds develop awareness of jobs, careers, and training opportunities	Provide students with more in-depth opportunities to learn about jobs, careers, and training, often through interaction with professionals or in a work environment	Develop relevant skills and provide necessary credentials and social capital tied to workforce demands and opportunities	Provide students with opportunities to gain actual work experience that supports development of job skills and offers a clear path to a sustainable career
Program Model Examples • Preference questionnaires • Aptitude surveys • Career fairs and presentations • Classroom speakers	• Mentoring • Job shadowing • Worksite tours • Capstones	• K-12 institutions • Traditional higher education • Bootcamps • Technical colleges • Industry-based certifcates	• Apprenticeships • Internships • Career pathways

Because communities did not need to move forward on a prescribed set of programs, some opted to focus on a couple activities their first year. As a unique cross-collaboration, West Grand School District applied to be part of HTI in partnership with neighboring East Grand School District. The two districts shared a common implementation plan, but they had separate Graduate Profiles and the work evolved differently within each district. West Grand made significant progress in implementing its Graduate Profile across its K–12 system, while East Grand focused more on building out career-connected learning programming.

Other communities experienced delays moving forward in comparison to their HTI peers. Montezuma-Cortez and Durango are relatively large, geographically removed districts. Both held off on implementing new programs in the fall of 2020 and instead focused on refining their Graduate Profile and implementation plan. This was not because of something endemic to their communities, but rather due to leadership changes and constrained capacity brought on by the pandemic. Both communities benefited from HTI's personalized coaching and were able to move forward with implementation in the spring of 2021.

Finding 1: The Graduate Profile propelled communities to launch programs in a challenging year.

Increasingly, districts and states around the country have used a Graduate Profile to identify the personal and professional competencies that students should have when they graduate. The Graduate Profile allows districts and community partners to define and own a vision of student success that is distinct from, but complementary to, traditional measures like math and English proficiency. The skills and competencies in a Graduate Profile, such as self-awareness and communication, often align with social-emotional competencies and the "soft skills" that industry leaders say they value.

The Homegrown Talent Initiative has expanded the use of the Graduate Profile in a unique way: districts used it as a starting point to launch a series of career-connected programs. For HTI communities, the Graduate Profile proved to be a sturdy foundation that propelled them to implement new programs and initiatives, even as the pandemic brought challenges and uncertainty.

The first year of HTI focused on building the Graduate Profile with input from across the community, and each team did this a little differently. Some used surveys, while others sent emails or had informal conversations to collect input from industry leaders, families, teachers, and students. One set up posters on Main Street the night of the annual Halloween parade to prompt visioning about the ideal graduate.

Design teams then pored over the feedback to create a Graduate Profile with anywhere from three to seven competencies. While each Graduate Profile was unique, characteristics like critical thinking, lifelong learning, and collaboration tended to come up repeatedly (figure 3).

Figure 3. Common Competencies in Communities' Graduate Profile

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Before the pandemic's upheaval, the Graduate Profile motivated communities to create a strong foundation to design ambitious new career-connected programs. As articulated by Gretchen Morgan, a district coach for HTI, "What the Grad Profile does is provide a vision for success outside of traditional academics. . . . You need something that is a unifying force for your programming."

That unifying force reportedly motivated districts to continue with their implementation plan in a challenging year. Clear Creek Superintendent Karen Quanbeck explained: "In the past, we didn't talk about our promise to kids, about the skills and expertise we wanted to see. We didn't talk about how the world of work is changing and how education should change to reflect what exists in our community. The Graduate Profile really elevated that conversation. And now that we have it, it's a game changer."

To help students achieve the competencies outlined in the Graduate Profile, like resiliency or self-awareness, HTI districts must make changes to how and what students learn in school. During the 2020–21 school year, four of the eight districts moved forward on integrating Graduate Profile competencies. Clear Creek convened a committee of teachers to map how the competencies would be integrated across grade levels and content areas. Building off this foundation, the district plans to roll out project-based learning in grades K–8 next year—a common way for districts to help students hone skills in their Graduate Profile. In Holyoke, local businesses gave virtual presentations to 120 students about the importance of competencies in the Graduate Profile. Other districts used internships. Elizabeth surveyed 300 students about their interests and field-tested 13 internships in the fall, with 10 focused on building dispositions in the Graduate Profile.

Some communities plan to integrate the Graduate Profile through a proficiency-based Capstone, a portfolio of learning experiences that the Colorado Department of Education accepts as meeting state graduation requirements. With help from Colorado Succeeds and CEI to understand the state policy, five communities that were already working toward a Capstone are now using it to meet English and math proficiency and demonstrate Graduate Profile competencies.

But many of the districts still have much work ahead to fully integrate the Graduate Profile into their district's DNA. Fifty-three percent of high schoolers across all HTI districts said they were not familiar with their district's Graduate Profile.[3] Familiarity varied widely: 62 percent said they were aware of the Graduate Profile in Holyoke, while in three other communities only about a third of the students were. In districts where at least 10 percent of the student population are Native American, Native youth were also slightly less likely to be aware of the profile than their non-Native peers (59 percent vs. 65 percent).

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3 Results from a student survey that HTI districts administered in May 2021. See the appendix for a copy of the survey.

Finding 2: Technical assistance providers built district capacity through cross-sector collaboration and team coaching.

Colorado Succeeds and the CEI played an important role in building the capacity and expertise that rural communities needed to move forward on the complex and ambitious initiative.

In both years of the initiative, Colorado Succeeds and CEI convened HTI communities multiple times a year for two-day events that included site visits to exemplar districts, opportunities for peer sharing, and presentations on topics like authentically engaging a broad base of stakeholders, understanding state policy, or developing a data strategy. Each spring the organizations hosted "site visits" offering opportunities for communities to showcase the progress they had made on their Graduate Profile and career-connected learning programs.

Although all of these supports were valuable, two stand out: helping communities build cross-sector teams and implementing a robust coaching structure. These two supports built internal capacity, which helped districts maintain momentum through the pandemic.

Colorado Succeeds and CEI help communities build cross-sector teams

The architects of HTI believe that multiple sectors working together leads to lasting and responsive change in school systems. The organizations also believed that the needs and resources of local partners would inform the implementation plan, resulting in an initiative that suits local conditions. Building cross-sector connections can help rural districts overcome common barriers to implementing career-connected learning models, such as having few internship opportunities or limited teacher availability, by leveraging resources available in local industry and higher education.

But building strong K–12, higher education, and industry partnerships can be challenging, so Colorado Succeeds and CEI did not leave the team structure to chance. The organizations showed communities what effective partnerships looked like through visits to exemplar communities in the first year of the initiative. The organizations introduced districts to best practices for coordinating with industry and higher education. Coaches encouraged districts to communicate the value-add for industry, which includes shaping the talent pipeline and meeting less tangible needs like meaningfully giving back to the community. The organizations hired a higher education coach and consistently reinforced the importance of having a representative from the local community college on the design team.

We found that having regional industry and higher education partners on the HTI team enabled districts to launch new programs like internships and concurrent enrollment, even during the pandemic. Clear Creek is now trying to meet community demand for more childcare and preschool options by creating an early childhood pathway with Red Rocks Community College. The community knew prior to HTI that Clear Creek "is a childcare desert," as Becky Dancer, the HTI coordinator put it, but working toward a solution across the school district and college would not have happened without the closer relationship that blossomed from HTI.

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However, there is still room to grow more integrated and aligned partnerships with industry and higher education. In most community teams, the school district works with industry and higher education separately, instead of the three parties partnering together. Communities should consider moving toward integrated programs that offer benefits to every stakeholder; when cross-sector partners work outside their respective silos they can create mutual need and accountability. The Montezuma-Cortez School District offers an example of what this can look like. Cortez, Fort Lewis College, and local industry are working together on a two-year concurrent enrollment program that will put graduating seniors directly into an apprenticeship. As the initiative moves forward, communities and their technical assistance providers may need to continue to build structures to reinforce cross-sector collaboration in the absence of a unifying activity, such as creating the Graduate Profile. For example, industry could sign hiring pledges with the district, or higher education partners could offer enrollment discounts for youth with dual-enrollment credits.

Colorado Succeeds and CEI give responsive support through team coaching

Personalized coaching helped rural districts build leadership skills, which supported district leaders as they balanced the demands of social distancing, remote learning, and HTI implementation.

While communities always had access to coaches, in the second year Colorado Succeeds and CEI put in place a more robust coaching structure. They asked project coordinators from each community to meet monthly with a dedicated coach to discuss insights and trade resources on common goals like data collection and community engagement. In response to demand, the coach hosted an Internship Forum with an expert to help communities launch and refine work-based learning.

Larger community teams also met three times each semester with a pair of coaches—one who had experience implementing career-connected learning initiatives and one who brought experience with change management. Coaches grounded each session in the community's own implementation plan and a set of leadership dispositions designed to build skills—vision building, stakeholder engagement, and coordination—that are needed to lead a cross sector initiative (figure 4). Alex Carter, one of the coaches, says that in these sessions they have been able to "ask the hard questions, forcing them to be reflective" about student engagement and how grant funds are allocated. He noted that having the time and structure was especially important during the pandemic when district attention could be easily pulled elsewhere. He noted, "People are just bad at reflecting in education, and the focus on logistics during COVID is magnifying it."

Figure 4. Leadership Dispositions

Dispositions & Mindsets

Innovation

- Try small versions of programs to test ideas and problem-solve
- Communicate with community throughout process
- Look for existing examples of programs to adapt for your community

Equity

- Ensure meaningful influence from marginalized learners & families in your community
- Be prepared to pivot if desired results are not achieved

User-Centered

- Keep work focused on Graduate Profile
- Let input from businesses & learners drive design and problem-solving

By working with the entire design team, coaches have been able to focus on the dynamics between members. The team coaching structure has also helped teams build buy-in and momentum across multiple people, lessening the focus on a single leader. For example, in one community, a school board member is part of the HTI team and has helped secure a commitment to financially support the initiative once grant funds run out.

Finding 3: Early attention to transforming district policy and practice set the stage for sustained progress.

Coaches encouraged districts to move forward on systemic reforms like scheduling, graduation policy, and integrating HTI into other strategic priorities so the initiative would sustain over time. Reforming district policy and practice is also important so districts are not posing unintended barriers to students wanting to participate in career-connected learning. Although these efforts are nascent, they demonstrate the commitment of the technical assistance partners in building district structures for sustaining momentum.

Three districts moved forward on new school schedules so requirements to be on the school campus would not interfere with student access. Elizabeth convened a committee to identify a new schedule that will better accommodate internships and concurrent enrollment. Holyoke and Clear Creek are part of a trend to offer core coursework on four days of the school week and then use the fifth day for concurrent enrollment, work-based learning, or enrichment. There are challenges to this model—the fifth day is voluntary and academic achievement can suffer if districts don't maintain instructional minutes. Nevertheless, it does offer schools an opportunity to broaden the curriculum without jeopardizing a traditional course load. Holyoke plans to use

the fifth day for internships while Clear Creek will launch enrichment and project-based learning tied to competencies in the Graduate Profile.

Colorado offers flexibility in graduation requirements but as of yet, only two districts have changed course requirements in response to HTI. In Holyoke, students must now complete an internship in order to graduate. In East Grand, students must take an additional global studies elective to build the Graduate Profile competency of global awareness. The district also added a required class to build post-secondary skills like writing a resume and applying for a job.

Some districts are starting to integrate HTI into their core district strategy. Continuing this effort will be critical next year as districts plan for how they will use ESSER and other stimulus dollars. Four HTI districts were awarded Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) grants from a fund established by Governor Jared Polis using federal stimulus dollars. The RISE initiatives vary in scope, but most have the capacity to complement HTI. In Montezuma-Cortez, the RISE grant will strengthen counseling services to build postsecondary readiness skills articulated in the Graduate Profile. As schools integrate HTI with current and future initiatives, they should strategically align these initiatives to "craft coherence" and maintain a unified vision of school improvement.

In 2020-21, every community launched data collection routines connected with HTI. Colorado Succeeds and CEI required communities to collect information about new programs and implement a student survey to capture information about student participation and satisfaction (see "Student Survey: Spring 2021" in the appendix). The survey revealed important insights. For example, while the initiative is designed to expose youth to careers and build career-related skills, students reported significantly greater satisfaction levels with earning college credits (figure 5) than with internships or connecting with employers.

Figure 5. Youth Are Most Satisfied with the Opportunity to Earn College Credits

When thinking about your education, how satisfied are you with the current opportunities offered by your school:

Percent satisfied and very satisfied
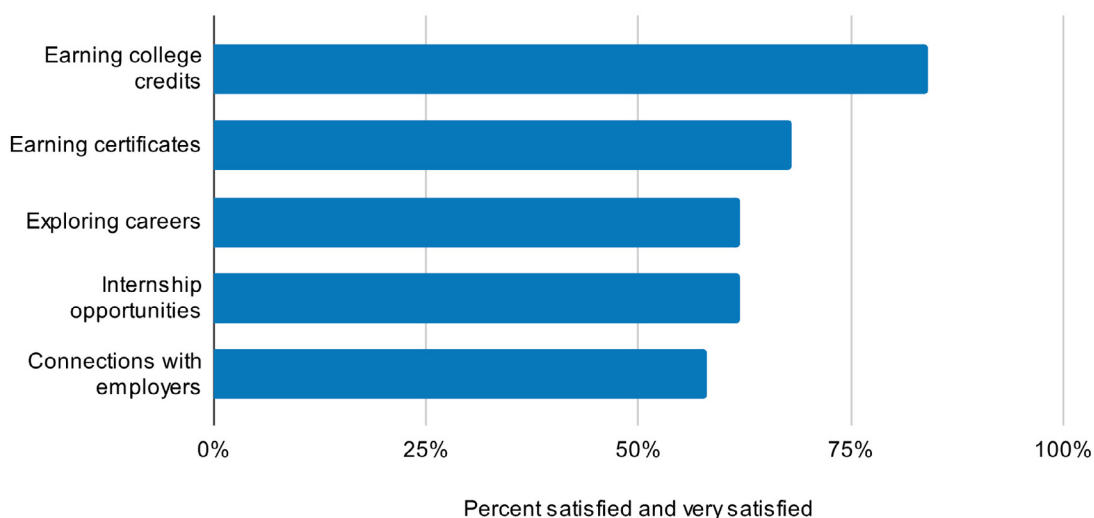
Some communities are already planning updates to their programming in light of data they collected. For example, Clear Creek is planning more structured opportunities to expose high school students to the Graduate Profile and career-connected learning options.

The community evaluation plans and student survey are important first steps toward creating a culture of evidence-based decision-making to help districts monitor access and quality. Districts can also consider using other evidence to inform program development. Similar to districts nationally, student interest drove HTI districts in their decision-making about which classes, internships, or certificates to offer. As suggested by Perkins V, districts should consider using wage and demand data to inform industry and postsecondary pathways planning. Whether districts can increase youth access and satisfaction to careers of their choice after high school or college will be the true measure of success.

Conclusion

The Homegrown Talent Initiative intends to give youth the skills and dispositions they need to pursue a fulfilling career and personal life. Thriving graduates become part of a thriving community that has the skilled and creative workforce it needs. The initiative hopes to put K–12, industry, and higher education in a partnership to create new opportunities that leverage the strengths and needs of the local community. Despite the roadblocks that the pandemic put in their way, HTI communities took bold steps toward this vision.

While the pandemic did slow the initiative in most communities, it also helped sharpen their resolve to rethink what and how students learn. Teachers at Fremont noted that the pandemic made them more open to new instructional practices. In Durango, the pandemic offered an opportunity to pilot a new bell schedule and remote work-based learning. And at Holyoke, the pandemic helped the district move forward on a plan to offer more schedule flexibility. Noted Superintendent Stumpf, "It has shown our parents and teachers that our kids can do some classes online or virtually, which then frees up opportunities for them to do more and longer internships." New resources, in the form of ESSER and state stimulus funds, offered new capacity to continue and even expand original implementation plans.

The technical assistance that Colorado Succeeds and CEI provided was essential for maintaining momentum. Next year, and in the following years, districts will have new financial resources in the form of ESSER grants or other statewide grants. But it's important to note that this initiative's success so far came from its dynamic investment in people. This focus on building the capacity to create community partnerships and cross-sectional teams has already resulted in more robust and diverse programming.

But it remains to be seen how well communities will pivot from initial ideation and implementation to sustaining and improving their programs and community coalitions. More work is needed to ensure that the new thinking brought on by HTI and the pandemic leads to new ways of working that benefit youth. While flexibility and responsiveness helped build buy-in, communities and their technical assistance partners must put structures in place to ensure access and quality in new programs, strategic integration across initiatives, and continued stakeholder involvement.

As districts and states shift their attention to rebuilding their education systems following the pandemic, HTI offers a glimpse into the ingredients for enduring systemic change. These school districts began to make progress because community and education leaders together invested their energy and creativity in a new shared vision of success for students and communities.

Acknowledgments

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

Appendix A. Data Collection and Analysis

CRPE is two years into a three-year evaluation of the Homegrown Talent Initiative. The three-year project is broken into three phases: **design**, **implement**, and **scale**. In this brief, we focus on Phase 2 of the initiative, implementation:

Phase 1: Design (2019-2020)

Communities develop the Graduate Profile through broad community engagement.

Communities visit "exemplar" sites in Colorado that have robust career-connected learning, leadership dispositions, and established connections to their local economy.

Communities create a plan to pilot and implement Graduate Profile skills and career-connected learning.

Phase 2: Implement (2020-2021)

Communities embed the graduate profile in learning experiences throughout the K–12 system.

Communities pilot and implement career-connected learning.

Phase 3: Scale (2021- 2022)

Communities create structures for sustainability so the initiative lasts beyond the life of the grant.

Communities scale program models within and across communities.

Our evaluation is grounded in a set of research questions based on the initiative's theory of change (figure A1):

- Did the initiative unfold as anticipated?

- Did the initiative enable new cross-sector and community collaborations that facilitated closer partnership between and changes within school systems, regional community colleges, and local industry?

- Did HTI communities design new learning programs, and did students engage and find benefit in these new options?

Figure A1. HTI Theory of Change
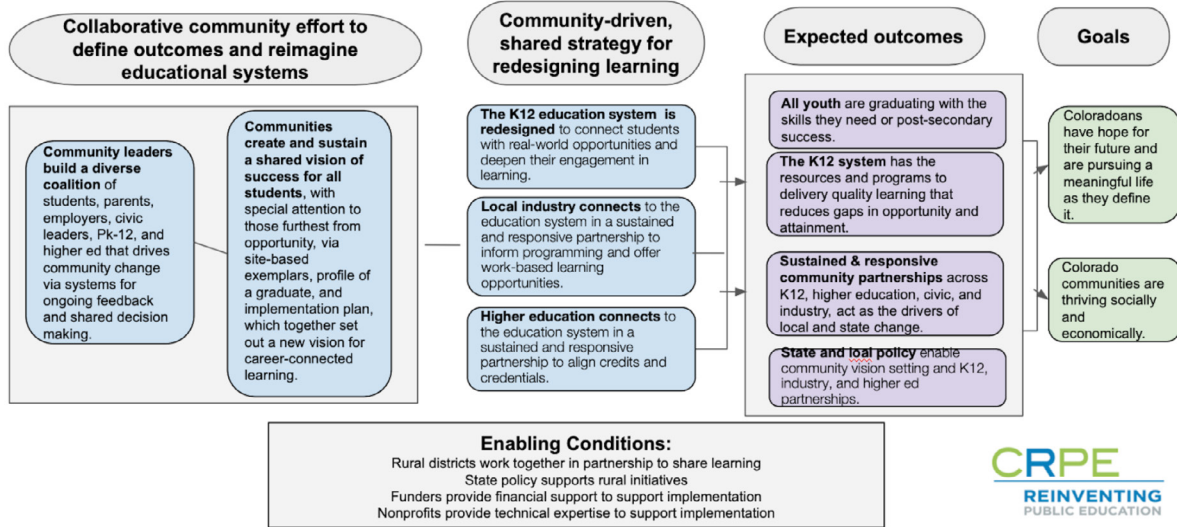
Over the course of two years (September 2019 - June 2021), CRPE attended community convenings hosted by Colorado Succeeds and CEI; listened to planning sessions and coaching calls; read community applications, implementation plans, and evaluation plans; reviewed support documents from Colorado Succeeds and CEI; interviewed coaches twice per year and community teams three times total; and surveyed students in June 2021.

Data collection was supported by the research and evaluation team at the Colorado Education Initiative, but the analysis is CRPE's alone. This brief is the first of several reports; we will publish additional reports about Year 3 activities in 2022.

Student Survey: Spring 2021

Relevance of School & Hope for the Future

1. Please rate your agreement with the following statements:

Scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

   a. I find the things I learn in school interesting.

   b. I use the ideas I learn in school in my daily life.

   c. I think what I learn in school will be useful to my future.

2. What do you plan to do during your first year after high school? (check all that apply.)

a. Enroll in an Associate's degree program in a two-year community college or technical institute

b. Enroll in a Bachelor's degree program in a college or university

c. Obtain a license or certificate in a career field

d. Attend a registered apprenticeship program

e. Join the armed services

f. Get a job

g. Start a family

h. Travel

i. Do volunteer or missionary work

j. Other (please specify)

k. Not sure yet

3. Here are some statements about your hope for the future. Please rate your agreement with these statements:

Scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

a. I have a great future ahead of me.

b. I know I will find a good job in the future.

c. I have at least one adult in my school who makes me excited about the future.

4. Please rate your agreement with the following statement:

Scale: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

a. My school offers a variety of classes, activities, and other learning opportunities to prepare me for life after high school.

Work-Based Learning Experiences

In the following section, we'll ask about your participation in career-connected learning activities. By career-connected learning activities, we are referring to a variety of opportunities within and outside your school that help you learn about and gain real-world experiences tied to relevant career pathways.

5. Which of the following career-connected learning activities did you participate in during the 2020-21 school year?

Note for students: consider both in-person and virtual activities.

Note: customize by school

a. Participated in an internship or apprenticeship

b. Participated in a job shadow or an informational interview

c. Listened to a guest speaker discuss his/her career in a class

d. Completed a career inventory or survey

e. Attended a career fair

f. Took a concurrent enrollment class

g. Took a career and technical education (CTE) class

h. Participated in a work study program

i. Worked towards and/or obtained a certification related to a potential career

j. Worked towards and/or obtained an Associate's degree

k. Other (please specify)

l. None of the above

6. When thinking about your education, how satisfied are you with the following opportunities offered by your school:

Note: customize by school

Scale: Very dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Satisfied, Very satisfied

a. Opportunities to explore different careers of interest

b. Opportunities to gain experience in a career I'm interested in

c. Opportunities to earn college credits

d. Opportunities to earn certifications

e. Opportunities to make connections with employers

f. Opportunities for internships or apprenticeships

[skip Q7-12 if "none of the above" for Q5)

7. To what extent did the career-connected learning activities you participated in during the 2020-21 school year help you gain a deeper understanding of your career interests?

Extent scale: Not at all, Small extent, Moderate extent, Large extent

8. After participating in career-connected learning activities during the 2020-21 school year, to what extent do you have a better idea of the steps to take to pursue the career you want?

Extent scale

9. During the career-connected learning activities you participated in this school year, to what extent did you learn new skills for a specific career?

Extent scale

10. During the career-connected learning activities you participated in this school year, to what extent did you learn skills about what is expected in the workplace?

Extent scale

11. Following the career-connected learning activities you participated in during the 2020-21 school year, to what extent do you feel more connected with your local community and businesses?

Extent scale

12. Are there additional comments you would like to share based on your experience(s) in career-connected learning?

[open-ended]

13. How do you learn about career-connected learning opportunities at your school? Please check all that apply.

    a. Talking with a counselor

    b. Talking with a teacher

    c. Talking with another school staff

    d. Talking with a friend or peer

    e. Poster

    f. Newsletter or handout from the school

    g. Other (please specify)

    h. I don't know.

14. When thinking about all the people in your life (at school, at home, anywhere), who is most helpful as you learn about potential careers and gain real-world work experience?

Choose up to 2 options.

    a. A teacher

    b. A parent

    c. A counselor

    d. Another school staff

    e. A community member

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f. Another family member

g. A friend or peer

h. Other (please specify)

i. None of the above

15. How can your school improve its career-connected learning opportunities for students? Think about the additional opportunities (whether within or outside your school) you want to see offered. Are there specific industries or jobs we should focus on?

[open-ended]

16. When thinking about your education, how satisfied are you with:

Question	Response				
Your ability to learn real-world skills?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Opportunities to explore different careers of interest?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Ability to begin preparing for/get a leg up on a career?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Opportunities to earn college credits?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Opportunities to earn credits toward certification?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Opportunities to make connections with employers?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Opportunities for internships?	Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied

Graduate Profile Competencies

17. Are you aware of the [school's graduate profile name]?

a. Yes

b. No

[skip Q17 if no for Q16]

18. Please name as many of the competencies in your [school's graduate profile name] as you can.

19. During this school year, to what extent did you have opportunities to develop the following competencies in classes and other school-related activities.

[customize list based on GP; include descriptors when available]

Extent scale: Not at all, Small extent, Moderate extent, Large extent

Review the list of competencies above. Please share a story or example from this school year of when you demonstrated one of these competencies. Consider your experiences in your classes and other school-related activities within and outside of school.

20. What competency did you demonstrate?

[customize drop-down of competencies]

21. Tell us about how and when you demonstrated this competency.

[open-ended]

Student Profile

22. What grade are you in?

    a. 8

    b. 9

    c. 10

    d. 11

    e. 12

23. Which of these best describes you?

    a. Male

    b. Female

    c. I identify in another way

    d. Prefer not to say

24. Do you identify as Hispanic or Latinx?

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Prefer not say

25. Which of these best describes you (or your family background)? You may choose more than one.

a. White

b. Black or African American

c. American Indian

d. Asian

e. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

f. I identify in another way (please specify)

g. Prefer not say

Acknowledgments

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.