

August 6, 2021

Colorado State Board of Education
201 East Colfax Avenue
Denver, CO 80203

Madam Chairwoman Schroeder, Members of the Colorado State Board of Education, and Commissioner Anthes,

As district leaders and those partnering with rural communities across the state of Colorado, we believe that Colorado students must come first, especially in a post-COVID learning environment. We strongly believe that bringing together community organizations, businesses, and higher education to provide students with meaningful ways to learn and demonstrate 21st century skills is an educational opportunity all Colorado students deserve.

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has created [urgency](#) around re-engaging high school students who have fallen behind on graduation requirements and college and career readiness. Rural regions were hit particularly [hard](#). There are untold numbers of high school students who, as a result of decreased engagement during COVID, failed or nearly failed courses this year. Students needing to recover credit, and who may be working in unskilled positions to contribute to their family's well-being, need encouragement to re-engage and do the hard work of recovering lost credits and getting back on track to graduation. Unaddressed, this situation will exacerbate Colorado's existing leaky pipeline problem, leaving more young people out of the strong middle and high skill economy Colorado offers.

Using unprecedented federal stimulus for recovery is not enough. We have an opportunity – in fact, an obligation to our students - to also set aside a portion of these resources to look to the future and reimagine learning. For these reasons, we recommend that the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) prioritizes a high school re-engagement strategy as part of the state's set-aside of federal stimulus dollars that prioritizes career-connected learning programs (e.g., work-based learning and career and technical education). A work-based learning initiative could include the following:

- 1. Prioritize Career Connected Learning and Partnerships***

Through our rural partnerships many of our districts have expanded the range of career and technical education courses and industry certifications available to students by partnering with community colleges and business leaders. This does not have to be a unique model. CDE should leverage stimulus dollars to provide incentives for more districts to develop these deeper partnerships. Specifically, stimulus funding could be used for more districts to partner with local institutions of higher education, industry, and other community partners to integrate career- connected learning into high school, certificate, and degree programs aligned to market demands.

While we appreciate the General Assembly's increased investment in the Career Development Incentive Program (CDIP), the state could also consider allocating additional funding to incentivize more districts and/or partnerships of districts, to provide career-connected programming for more students, especially those students furthest from opportunity and those most disengaged due to COVID-19.

With additional funding, districts could incentivize employers to partner with schools to create internships and apprenticeships, pay for site-based coordinators who facilitate the connections between

providers and industries, provide student internship stipends (an equity-focused priority), or helping to facilitate workshops and convenings with local employers. A key barrier for many schools to provide work-based learning is costs associated with implementation, including dedicated staff to keep the work on track. By offsetting these costs, more schools would be able to implement programs to provide students with more opportunities.

2. Prioritize Regional Partnerships and Collaboration

Through these initiatives, we have proven the power of regional collaboration across school districts to drive greater impact for students. One such initiative, the Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative, brings together higher education, industry, and five school districts to build stronger pathways for students interested in building trades and environmental sciences. Similarly, districts like Elizabeth, East Grand and West Grand are working in partnership with regional districts to develop shared work-based learning supports through a virtual internship framework.

In Fremont County, three districts are partnering with Pueblo Community College and TechStart through the Fremont Multi-District initiative to support students accessing P-TECH programming and have begun designing new regional pathways. A Pathway to Prosperity (multi-district, multi-grade, multi-career pathway) is in place across the Santa Fe Trail BOCES six districts with an additional pathway being built across six districts along the I-76 corridor.

Throughout these initiatives, districts have focused on ways to think more strategically about resource alignment in rural career-connected learning. These groundbreaking partnerships represent new opportunities for rural students to succeed in school and life, but they require start-up resources to formalize these emerging partnerships and to catalyze new ones across the state. When deciding how to allocate stimulus dollars, we strongly encourage incentivizing regional partnerships involving district, higher education, and industry so that more students in rural areas have access to high-quality opportunities and are equipped for college and career success.

3. Explicitly Allow Learning to Happen Everywhere

We know that students do not just learn inside our school walls, they learn everywhere. Many of our districts are considering permanent changes to school schedules and seat time practices to enable greater flexibility for work-based learning, concurrent enrollment, and paid employment.

We encourage CDE to explicitly expand seat time flexibility for districts so that learning outside of the classroom, tied to the Colorado graduation requirements and the student's learning, counts more seamlessly as instructional time. One way to do this is by giving the flexibilities provided in the Innovative Learning Opportunities Pilot (ILOP) to all Colorado school districts. This flexibility would allow more districts to partner and provide students with opportunities to explore internships, apprenticeships, and experiential learning without fear of a state audit or burdensome tracking of hours.

At a minimum, CDE could invest in targeted professional development for helping districts interested in pursuing changes to the traditional student schedule. Targeted assistance could focus on: understanding how work-study/work-based learning experiences count under current school finance rules, how to make changes to the school calendar/day to facilitate more flexible groupings of students, and how to facilitate smaller scheduling blocks in high schools to truly enable and empower learning to happen everywhere.

4. *Provide More Flexibility in Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships with Institutions*

As part of the stimulus planning, the state should consider greater flexibility with community college service areas by offering a time limited waiver of these service areas through 2024. With more students familiar with online instruction, many of these concurrent enrollment courses in partnership with the community college system could be made available online. Many schools and districts in rural areas have limited access to the postsecondary provider of their choice, decreasing the course opportunities for students. This is simply an equity and access issue. While we appreciate efforts the state is taking to examine these policies through taskforces created by recent legislation, we also encourage you to examine potential short-term flexibilities to provide all Colorado students with equal opportunity to postsecondary success.

5. *Create a Learning Network of Districts with Supports for Sustained Success*

As the network of districts dedicated to career-connected learning expands, the state could supercharge and improve the learnings and educator supports by providing some funding for more technical assistance to facilitate a growing community of practice. Statewide systems change is more likely when districts can learn from each other and be in the journey together. We've learned through the Homegrown Talent Initiative and the Colorado Rural Education Collaborative and our partnerships with rural school districts the importance of having a cross-section of partners involved in learning communities – including industry and higher education partners. Thinking about the “edu-conomy” (education and economic development) of COVID recovery will help establish stronger communities of practice motivated to look for opportunities forward in new and innovative ways. Through dedicated technical assistance professional development, and partnership, community leaders are in a better position to deliver high quality opportunities to more students.

6. *Make Blended Learning Easy for Districts to Implement*

We have learned through this past year that one way we can be responsive to parents and students is to provide a variety of learning environments. We appreciated the state's recent guidance on the blended learning and supplemental online course variance waiver process. We are hopeful that CDE will use the next two years to learn about what is working best for students and their parents and how these flexibilities could be expanded to include more holistic changes to seat time and schedule flexibility.

In closing, we believe this is a moment not just to focus on recovery, but also a time to look to the future in order to accelerate student success. Many of the priorities outlined in this letter could be packaged together to maximize the investment of these federal dollars. The state could also consider matching any district's investment in these efforts with a portion of ESSER III dollars to allow for longer-term impact and greater participation of students. Another idea is the state allocating a portion of stimulus dollars to support a community of practice of districts dedicated to addressing high school disengagement through expanded career-connected learning.

We firmly believe these strategies will provide students with more opportunity to succeed inside and outside the classroom and in their futures. By elevating and investing in these strategies more Colorado students will have the opportunity to gain a leg up by earning a postsecondary credentials, leverage career-connected learning, and plan for their futures.

Sincerely,

Districts and Partners:

Archuleta School District
Bayfield School District
Canon City School District
Clear Creek School District
Durango School District
East Grand School District
Elizabeth School District
Fremont School District
Ignacio School District
Montezuma-Cortez School District
Mountain Valley School District
Pueblo Community College - Southwest Campus
Silverton School District
West Grand School District

Organizations:

Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE)
Colorado Education Initiative
Colorado Succeeds
Empower Schools
Generation Schools Network
Rural Schools Alliance
Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative