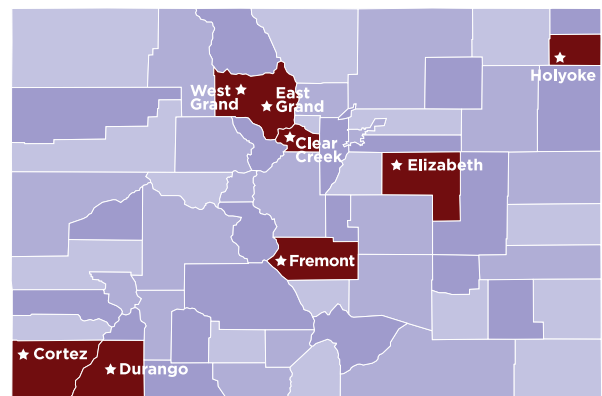


# Rural Collaboration

## Overview

In recent years, rural districts across Colorado have been collaborating more than ever to bring innovative opportunities to their students, families, and communities. Collaborations through the [Homegrown Talent Initiative](#) and the [Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative](#) are bringing higher education, industry, and K-12 together in new and exciting ways.

Since 2019, Colorado Succeeds and the Colorado Education Initiative have been supporting eight rural communities across the state through the Homegrown Talent Initiative, a statewide partnership that's building homegrown opportunity pathways to serve the unique needs of students, families, schools, business, and industry. These districts have received direct coaching to develop community-designed career-connected learning programs, centered around equity and student interest in all programming, strengthen relationships with local industry and higher education, outline local pathways to economic mobility, support systems change and program implementation, and increase hope, relevance, and value for student success.



Rural collaboration is one strategy to ensure all of Colorado's children are educated to their greatest potential, and all of Colorado's businesses have the homegrown talent they need to thrive. From regional collaboration to school and industry partnerships in rural communities, these programs inform policy priorities in everything from transportation needs to reshaping rural communities with modern, high-demand industry credentials, and new and emerging regional economies.

## Learnings & Best Practices

Although each community's needs, strengths, and goals are unique, there are common threads contributing to the success of rural collaboration across the state:

- ▶ Knowledge-sharing across communities is helpful as districts launch new projects and learn from other communities successes, failures, and replicable models.
- ▶ Strengthening relationships among civic leaders, businesses, and school districts increases likelihood of success and buy-in for small communities and leads to access to new opportunities for students.

- ▶ Leveraging funding opportunities to raise additional dollars to expand and sustain projects.
- ▶ Articulating value-add for industry when expanding career-connected learning so businesses better understand the importance of investing in programs alongside their school district.
- ▶ Sharing resources and programs to increase economies of scale that expands opportunities for students across an entire region.



## Student Experience

### Fremont Multi-District Initiative

The three school districts in Fremont County, Cañon City RE-1, Florence RE-2 and Cotopaxi RE-3, along with Pueblo Community College, have been working together for the last two school years to increase opportunities for students through cooperative resource-sharing and cross-district enrollment, while maintaining individual district identity. Through this collaborative, the [Fremont Multi-District Initiative](#), each district is able to identify and build on its core strengths in what it offers students, including internships, CTE pathways, concurrent enrollment and P-TECH pathways, and has opened those offerings to students that attend other districts. This collaborative strengthens programming and opportunities for students as a region that is hard for a single, rural district to offer on their own.



**86% OF  
COLORADO SCHOOL  
DISTRICTS  
ARE CONSIDERED  
RURAL OR  
SMALL RURAL**

[Source](#)

This type of collaboration is beneficial for both districts and students. Districts can offer additional programming through resource sharing and increased revenue that creates efficiencies and is sustainable. Students benefit as they are able to participate in classes or opportunities that may not be offered in their home districts. The group continues to formalize its work to make it sustainable over time and has been able to leverage additional philanthropy and funding. This partnership has been supported by [Empower Schools](#).

### Yampa Valley RISE

Support for rural collaboration has also manifested at the state and federal funding level. Governor Polis' [Response, Innovation, and Student Equity](#) (RISE) Education Fund grants prioritized applications from rural education providers to address “the impacts of COVID-19 in a manner that creates lasting innovations, improved student learning, and enhanced operational efficiency for K-12 and higher education.” Colorado Succeeds worked with two northwest Colorado districts—Hayden and South Routt—as a Design Support Partner, which [resulted in the rural Yampa Valley communities leveraging a more than \\$1M award](#). This collaboration has also been supported by the [Colorado Education Initiative](#).

Through an MOU, the districts used regional collaboration to share knowledge, staffing, funding, and existing programming to co-create and implement an aligned K-12 curriculum and pathways model centered on principles of agriculture to honor the historical vitality of the region; as well as new opportunities in career-connected and hands-on learning. Specifically, the districts have:

- ▶ Aligned schedules to better allow for both student choice and flexibility as well as virtual instruction and complementary course offerings across districts.
- ▶ Expanded course offerings in the Agriculture career and technical education (CTE) pathway, both with at least 10 pathways courses, including two concurrent enrollment opportunities through Colorado Northwest Community College.
- ▶ Supported nearly 50 high school students in obtaining over 60 certifications.

- ▶ Built or expanded hands-on learning labs across all CTE pathways offered to increase real-world exposure within the content, such as a Food Products lab for meat and honey processing; and a Business Lab where students will operate a community storefront.
- ▶ Leveraged RISE to jointly raise an additional \$900,000 to support capital construction costs, which are not allowed under the RISE Education Fund.
- ▶ Braided and leveraged other funding and programmatic opportunities to scale and sustain the work, such as the Innovative Learning Opportunities Program (ILOP), Career Development Incentive Program (CDIP), Perkins Innovations in CTE grant, and individual but aligned strategic planning processes.



**148,000  
STUDENTS  
ATTEND  
153 RURAL  
OR SMALL  
RURAL DISTRICTS**

[Source](#)



## National Context

In Texas, the [Rural Schools Innovation Zone](#) (RSIZ) is another model of rural collaboration and partnership focused on expanding opportunities for rural students. The formalized collaboration among three school districts, two higher education institutions, and multiple workforce partners in South Texas honors each community’s unique strengths and identity, and helps coordinate, shape, and refine the pathways needed to meet the regional workforce needs of the community. Through the RSIZ, students remain enrolled in their home district for the purposes of funding and attendance but may attend programming at any of the five specialized academies at any of the other RSIZ schools. Transportation is provided and districts receive additional funding based on student outcomes. Early results are promising:

- ▶ The RSIZ has quadrupled the percentage of students completing a dual-credit course from before the RSIZ to now from 15% in 2019 to 63% in 2021
- ▶ The RSIZ has more than doubled the percentage of students earning an industry certification each year, from 4% in 2019, to 12% in 2020 to 26% in 2021
- ▶ The RSIZ has nearly closed the gap in percent of college ready students in three years. The percentage of college ready students jumped from just 16% in 2018 to 41% in 2021, almost matching the state average of 43%

This model, similar to the Fremont Multi-District Initiative in Colorado, has been supported by Empower Schools and allows schools to build robust programming for students that is not duplicative of neighboring districts’ offerings and, therefore, not a drain on limited resources.



## Policy Recommendations

Given the diversity of rural communities across the state, we know there will be no one-size-fits-all policy solution to encourage rural collaboration and meet the unique needs and strengths of each community or regional context. However, there are policy conditions that could incentivize rural collaboration and regional solutions to local challenges:

- ▶ **Explore incentives for regional, cross-district enrollment.** HTI districts have changed their schedules, updated graduation requirements, and expanded concurrent enrollment offerings—all changes made possible through the local policies under the direction of the local school board. Incentive dollars could be authorized by the state to support more rural school district collaboratives. Investing in a shared FTE role across districts, for example, could bring new course offerings to a rural community or support business relationships regionally.

- ▶ **Authorize a transportation fund that would provide extra dollars to school districts or students.** With this fund, more students could access courses from a neighboring district or travel to career connected learning opportunities. Some rural school districts like Peyton, Widefield, and others in the Colorado Springs area have partnered to offer transportation services to students so that they can access different CTE pathways. Similarly, Warren Tech in Jefferson County provides CTE courses to numerous surrounding rural school districts, such as Clear Creek.
- ▶ **Allow learners to take courses virtually outside of their “home” school.** The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted an opportunity to value virtual learning experiences, particularly for students interested in a career pathway or internship opportunity not readily accessible in a local community. Most schools and businesses are now equipped to run virtual programming to meet these needs. Additionally, virtual or hybrid instruction models encourage knowledge-sharing and collaboration among geographically dispersed districts, allowing a community in the far northeast corner of the state to learn from peers in the southwest.
- ▶ **End community college service areas for concurrent enrollment by 2022.** Rural school districts often note challenges in concurrent enrollment. School districts are locked into community college service areas, forcing the school district to only have one higher education partner for concurrent enrollment offerings. This limits student and district choice, getting in the way of students enrolling in the highest quality offering and limiting a school district’s ability to offer a wide array of concurrent enrollment options.

