

A Policy Platform for Colorado's Next Governor: A Business Vision for Education & Opportunity

COLORADO
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Colorado's next governor faces a defining choice: align our economic strength with our greatest asset, our people, or risk falling behind other states and countries that outpace us in education, talent development, and economic mobility.

Despite years of growth, too many Colorado learners remain disconnected from good jobs and economic mobility. It's not because we lack talent; it's because our systems aren't yet fully connected. The next governor has the chance to lead a new era of education and workforce alignment. An era that ensures every learner can access a pathway to prosperity and every employer can find the skilled, homegrown talent they need to thrive.

Colorado Succeeds represents the business community's voice for that vision. For nearly two decades, we've worked across sectors and political divides to remove barriers, modernize systems, and expand opportunity. The next administration can, and must, build on this foundation to make Colorado the national model for talent development and economic mobility.

Our Proven Track Record

Colorado Succeeds' mission is clear: every learner educated to their greatest potential and every business strengthened by a talented, innovative, homegrown workforce.

Since our founding nearly twenty years ago, we've advanced bipartisan solutions that make Colorado's systems more agile, equitable, and effective. Working with governors, legislators, and educators, we have:

- Expanded access to high-quality early learning.
- Modernized K-12 funding and accountability systems.
- Strengthened college and career pathways through concurrent enrollment, industry credentials, and work-based learning.
- Aligned postsecondary and workforce programs with Colorado's economic priorities.

Our impact comes through partnership and leadership: uniting business, education, and government leaders around shared goals and evidence-based solutions that deliver measurable results for learners and employers alike.

The Opportunity to Lead

Our next governor has the opportunity to build upon the momentum in Colorado that is connecting education, workforce, and economic development and make this the state where talent meets opportunity for every learner, in every community.

We hope to see leadership that:

- **Centers learners and prioritizes outcomes**, measuring success by the number and quality of opportunities that learners can access, and the long-term employment and wage outcomes they achieve.
- **Builds on what works and improves what doesn't**, ensuring sustainability for high-quality programs that expand college and career pathways while closing or refining those that are not working.
- **Champions transparency**, turning disconnected data into actionable insights that help families, educators, employers, and policymakers make better decisions.
- **Elevates business as a partner**, not just a stakeholder, in shaping and sustaining talent pipelines.
- **Supports innovation**, allowing local districts, higher education and learning providers, and intermediaries to design solutions responsive to regional needs.
- **Leads with the best ideas, not ideology**, working across political divides to find common ground and deliver opportunity for all Colorado learners.

The Business Community's Agenda for Colorado's Next Governor

Colorado's future depends on **agile learners and agile systems**: learners who know how to learn, and systems flexible enough to evolve with the dynamically changing demands of the economy and needs of learners.

Achieving this vision requires five interconnected commitments:

1. **Build strong foundations**
2. **Expand pathways to prosperity**
3. **Modernize postsecondary for a talent-driven economy**
4. **Connect data for smarter decisions**
5. **Empower business as co-creators of solutions**

1. Build Strong Foundations

The Challenge

Too many students fall behind before high school, limiting their future options. Without strong early literacy, numeracy, and foundational skills offered in elementary and middle school, students cannot access pathways or postsecondary opportunities now required for lifelong opportunity.

The Vision

Every Colorado child enters kindergarten ready to learn, masters grade-level reading and math, and has access to high-quality educational options that meet their needs.

The Priorities

- Expand access to high-quality early learning through a state-supported mixed delivery model, especially for children furthest from opportunity.
 - Ensure that early literacy instruction aligns with the science of reading and math standards emphasize problem-solving and conceptual understanding.
 - Provide transparent, easier-to-access data on school performance and student progress.
 - Empower families with real choices through diverse, high-quality school options and accessible transportation.
 - Begin career awareness in middle school so students see how education connects to future opportunities.
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K-8 Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Early Childhood Education

- Expand access to high-quality early learning programs, offered through a state-supported mixed delivery model, particularly for children furthest from opportunity
- Ensure early childhood programs focus on school readiness skills, including early literacy, social-emotional development, and executive function
- Create seamless transitions between early learning providers and K-12 systems with shared data on kindergarten readiness
- Invest in professional development for early childhood educators focused on evidence-based practices

K-8 Policy Recommendations, Continued

Ensure Grade-Level Proficiency in Reading and Math

- Maintain rigorous standards and high-quality assessments that provide clear, actionable data on student progress
- Require evidence-based reading instruction aligned with the science of reading, particularly in grades K-3
- Provide intensive intervention and support for students who fall behind, with frequent progress monitoring
- Ensure students develop essential technology and digital literacy skills alongside reading and math
- Ensure middle school math instruction builds computational fluency and conceptual understanding to prepare students for algebra and beyond
- Publish transparent, accessible data on school and district performance in core academic areas

Expand Educational Choice and Transparency

- Protect and expand access to diverse educational models, including public charter schools
- Hold all publicly-funded schools, regardless of governance model, to the same high standards for transparency and outcomes
- Ensure families have clear, comparable data on school quality, including academic outcomes, postsecondary success rates, and student growth
- Support innovation in school models and instructional approaches that respond to diverse student needs and learning styles
- Remove barriers that prevent families from accessing their school of choice, including transportation challenges

Make Data Accessible for Continuous Improvement

- Provide families with timely, understandable information about their child's academic progress and how it compares to grade-level expectations
- Publish school-level data that shows not just current performance but growth over time and outcomes for specific student groups
- Create early warning systems that identify students at risk of falling behind and trigger interventions
- Use assessment data to identify and replicate effective practices across schools and districts
- Ensure accountability systems recognize and reward schools that serve high-need populations effectively

Launch Career Awareness in Middle School

- Expand career awareness programming starting in grades 6-8, helping students understand the connection between education and future opportunities
- Update and strengthen Colorado's Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) to begin in middle school with meaningful career exploration activities
- Connect middle school students with professionals, workplace visits, and hands-on projects that expose them to various career options
- Ensure career navigation support helps students and families understand pathway options before high school course selection

2. Expand Pathways to Prosperity

The Challenge

Only 27% of Colorado high school graduates complete a postsecondary credential within six years, yet 90% of jobs that pay a living wage require postsecondary training.

Our Vision

Reimagine high school as a launchpad, a place where every student can discover their purpose, gain hands-on experience, and graduate ready for what's next.

The Priorities

- Guarantee access to the “Big Three” experiences: college credit, industry credential, or work-based learning for every student by graduation.
 - Simplify and scale concurrent enrollment and dual-credit pathways, especially for students traditionally underrepresented in higher education.
 - Create community infrastructure that connects districts, higher education, and employers around shared pathways in high-demand fields.
 - Use accountability systems that measure outcomes that matter: credential attainment, employment, and wage progression.
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Pathways Policy Recommendations

Expand and Simplify Postsecondary Pathway Access

- Support “Big Three” implementation with K-12 and postsecondary pathway programs that align into a more unified structure with reliable funding and streamlined reporting
- Provide seed funding and support to communities to build infrastructure for cross-district, cross-institution access to coursework and career-connected learning opportunities in high-demand pathways
- Remove barriers to industry professionals teaching courses in areas where they can demonstrate expertise
- Remove barriers to concurrent enrollment, increase access to students not traditionally accessing postsecondary education
- Better connect Career and Technical Education with postsecondary credit through Guaranteed Transfer

Modernize Accountability to Measure What Matters

- Track and publicly report on the statewide goal: ensure every high school student completes at least one high-quality “Big Three” experience (college credit, industry credential, or work-based learning) by graduation
- Promote accountability systems that better measure postsecondary and workforce outcomes, including credential attainment and career-connected experiences
- Use state budget and incentives to reward districts, colleges, and workforce programs that offer and scale high-quality credentials, concurrent enrollment, and employer-connected work experiences

3. Modernize Postsecondary for a Talent-Driven Economy

The Challenge

As Colorado's labor market tightens, employers are increasingly concerned with finding skilled, qualified workers. Half of middle-skill jobs require training beyond high school but not a bachelor's degree, yet only 15% of working-age Coloradans hold such credentials. At the same time, AI and automation are transforming job requirements and threatening to eliminate many traditional entry-level roles, turning a career into a lifelong journey of continuous learning, upskilling, and reskilling.

The Vision

A talent-development system that is flexible, responsive, and focused on outcomes where short-term credentials, apprenticeships, non-degree, and degree pathways are all valued, funded, and scaled to meet both employer demand and learner needs for economic mobility.

The Priorities

- Fund postsecondary and workforce programs based on outcomes: completion, employment, and wage gains.
- Expand high-quality short-term credential programs and support federal Workforce Pell implementation.
- Invest in stackable credentials that let learners progress from certificates to degrees while working.
- Expand apprenticeships and earn-and-learn models that reduce the opportunity cost of education.
- Align financial aid and wraparound supports (childcare, transportation, coaching) to make training accessible and completion attainable.

Postsecondary Policy Recommendations

Invest in What Works

- Fund postsecondary and workforce programs via an outcomes-based model, investing limited resources in programs that help graduates achieve sustainable careers with family-sustaining wages
- Establish clear metrics for program quality that are tied to completion rates, employment rates, median wages, and advancement within 1, 3, and 5 years
- Direct public workforce development funding to programs that demonstrate measurable employment outcomes and wage gains, particularly for populations furthest from opportunity
- Champion federal Workforce Pell implementation that would extend Pell Grant eligibility to high-quality, short-term credential programs (8-15 weeks) that lead to family-sustaining wages in high-demand fields

Postsecondary Policy Recommendations, Continued

Expand and Align Training Pathways and Stackable Credentials

- Invest in stackable credential pathways that allow learners to enter the workforce quickly with a certificate, then continue education while employed to earn associate or bachelor's degrees
- Ensure required implementation by the state's public institutions of transfer-aligned policies, including concurrent enrollment credit, prior learning assessments, military experience, and guaranteed transfer policies
- Expand earn-and-learn models, apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship, in high-demand sectors, reducing the opportunity cost of education
- Support community colleges, technical colleges, and workforce training providers to use real-time labor market data to guide program development and enrollment targets
- Ensure Colorado's Eligible Training Provider List (currently 5,300+ programs) includes transparent outcomes data so learners and workforce centers can identify high-quality options
- Ensure training programs prepare learners not just for entry-level jobs but for career advancement and wage progression over time

Address Barriers to Access

- Create financial aid structures that support stackable credentials, allowing learners to earn credentials incrementally while working, building toward associate and bachelor's degrees over time
- Support investments in wraparound services (childcare, transportation, mental health support) that enable learners to complete training programs and maintain employment
- Invest in career navigation and coaching services that help learners, particularly 18-26-year-olds, understand training options, access financial aid, and persist through job placement
- Partner with employers and training providers to find statewide solutions to non-credential requirements for high-demand fields (e.g., security clearances for aerospace and cybersecurity, background checks, licensing requirements)

4. Connect Data for Smarter Decisions

The Challenge

Colorado's education and workforce data systems are disconnected, making it difficult to measure impact, identify equity gaps, or support seamless transitions across education and career pathways. We are data-rich but information-poor.

The Vision

A secure, statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) that connects early childhood, K-12, higher education, training, and workforce outcomes, empowering families to make informed decisions, supporting educators and employers with actionable insights, and equipping communities to strengthen opportunity.

The Priorities

- Build a single, sustainable statewide longitudinal data system linking education and workforce outcomes.
 - Publish clear dashboards showing supply and demand, program effectiveness, credential attainment, employment outcomes, and return on investment at 1-, 5-, and 10-year intervals.
 - Require all publicly funded training programs to report consistent outcome metrics.
 - Use data to identify equity gaps and direct public investment to programs that deliver results for populations furthest from opportunity.
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Data Policy Recommendations

Build and Implement Best-in-Class Longitudinal Data

- Consolidate resources to a single, long-term, sustainable longitudinal data system centered on using data to ensure more Coloradans access quality programming that leads to economic and social benefits
- Ensure the Colorado Longitudinal Data System (CLDS) publishes reports featuring wage outcomes for learners who participated in college and career readiness programs while in high school
- Link workforce training data to the SLDS to enable long-term tracking of learner outcomes and program effectiveness
- House efforts in a single, data-neutral office under robust security and data governance structures designed to minimize risk and maximize data use and utility

Data Policy Recommendations, Continued

Make Data Transparent and Actionable

- Develop public-facing dashboards and tools that allow students, families, and educators to see which programs lead to in-demand, high-wage careers with 1, 5, and 10-year return-on-investment data
- Create clear reporting on credential attainment, postsecondary outcomes, employment outcomes, and performance across student groups (by race, region, income)
- Ensure data is accessible to researchers and practitioners to improve programs and expand access to high-value pathways

Improve Data and Accountability for Workforce Programs

- Require that all publicly funded workforce training programs report consistent outcomes: completion rates, credential attainment, employment rates, median wages, and demographic breakdowns
- Create public-facing dashboards that allow learners to compare workforce training options based on cost, time to completion, and employment outcomes
- Conduct regular evaluations of WIOA programs to identify effective programs and sunset those that aren't delivering results
- Publish disaggregated data showing which programs effectively serve populations furthest from opportunity, including adults without degrees, individuals from low-income backgrounds, and communities of color

5. Empower Business as Co-Creators of Solutions

The Challenge

Business leaders want education and training providers to produce more students with the needed skills. Education leaders want more input and participation from business. Yet both sides feel progress is insufficient, and existing engagement structures are fragmented and siloed.

The Vision

Colorado establishes a business-led, data-driven, publicly empowered talent development effort that connects local innovation to a statewide system—putting employers in the driver's seat while building infrastructure that lasts.

The Priorities

- Establish a business-led coordinating body with real decision-making authority on workforce strategy and investment.
 - Align federal and state plans (WIOA, Perkins, etc.) under shared goals and sector-based priorities.
 - Provide incentives and streamlined processes for businesses to offer apprenticeships, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities.
 - Invest in intermediaries such as nonprofits, chambers, and talent associations that help small and mid-sized employers participate in talent development.
 - Focus resources on Colorado's six high-growth sectors: Healthcare, Professional & Technical Services, Aerospace, Energy, Construction, and Transportation.
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Business Engagement Policy Recommendations

Elevate Business Leadership and Decision-Making Authority

- Create a business-led coordinating body with real authority to shape workforce strategy, not just advisory input
- Build a single, visible entry point for businesses to engage with talent efforts, eliminating fragmented programs and duplicative asks
- Elevate statewide goals that all of the state's federal plans (WIOA, Perkins, etc.) back into and ensure the decision-making authority of sector leaders is clear and actionable.
- Form state-level sector advisory boards of employer representatives to build more efficient sector pathway maps and education-to-employment alignment

Business Engagement Policy Recommendations, Continued

Support Employer Participation in Career-Connected Learning

- Offer tax credits and incentives to small and medium-sized businesses to host apprenticeships, internships, and other career-connected learning opportunities
- Provide public funding to nonprofits, chambers of commerce, and associations to serve as intermediaries in supporting businesses with career-connected learning programs
- Simplify and reduce administrative burdens on curriculum alignment and pathways design through state-level sector advisory boards

Align Training with Labor Market Demand

- Advance regional sector partnerships that bring together employers, training providers, and workforce development boards to identify skills gaps and co-design solutions
- Implement performance measures to track and publicly report on regional goals and action plans, allowing for continuous improvement and collective action
- Prioritize funding for training programs in Colorado's six critical sectors: Healthcare & Social Assistance, Professional & Technical Services, Aerospace, Energy, Construction, and Transportation
- Develop rapid-response training programs that can quickly scale up to meet emerging workforce needs in high-growth sectors
- Ensure training programs prepare learners not just for entry-level jobs but for career advancement and wage progression over time

What Success Looks Like

By 2035, Colorado should be recognized nationally as the model for education-to-employment alignment.

For Learners:

- Every child enters kindergarten ready to learn
- 80%+ of students achieve grade-level proficiency in reading and math by third and eighth grade
- Students begin career exploration in middle school with clear pathways identified before high school
- 50% of Colorado high school graduates complete a postsecondary credential of value within six years, regardless of zip code or racial demographic
- Every student graduates with at least one meaningful credential and real work experience
- Clear pathways exist from education to family-sustaining careers

For Employers:

- Talent shortages are reduced through a reliable pipeline of homegrown workers with relevant skills
- Businesses have clear, efficient ways to engage in talent development
- Sector-based and regional collaboratives address specific workforce needs with data-driven solutions

For the System:

- Families have access to transparent data and meaningful educational choices
- Early interventions prevent students from falling behind
- Transparent data shows which programs work, for whom, and at what cost
- Public funding is directed to programs with proven outcomes
- Agile systems respond quickly to changing economic and societal needs

These priorities are already taking shape across Colorado, from regional talent collaboratives and stackable credential pathways to the development of a statewide longitudinal data system. With continued bold leadership, coordination, and commitment, Colorado can realize a future where every learner and employer thrives.

Colorado Succeeds is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization. We do not support or oppose any candidate or political party. The information provided here is intended to inform and advance dialogue on education and workforce issues in Colorado.