

## FOUNDATIONS: EARLY LEARNING & K-8 EXCELLENCE

### WHY THIS MATTERS FOR COLORADO

Early literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving form the foundation for every opportunity that follows. When students read by third grade and build mathematical confidence by eighth, they are prepared to engage deeply in learning, explore future pathways, and succeed in a fast-changing economy.

Yet too many Colorado children lack consistent access to high-quality early learning experiences and effective K-8 instruction. Recent statewide assessments show persistent gaps in reading and math proficiency, rising chronic absenteeism, and uneven access to strong curriculum and teaching. These gaps begin early and widen quickly.

Colorado's business community knows that investing in foundational skills yields the highest return. Strong early learning and K-8 excellence not only boost long-term academic success but also strengthen the future workforce and fuel economic mobility.

### BY THE NUMBERS



**56%**

of Colorado students in grades 3-8 are not meeting grade level expectations in reading



**66%**

of Colorado students in grades 3-8 are not meeting grade-level expectations in math

**70%** of Colorado four-year-olds are enrolled in part-time Universal Preschool Program

**\$2.25** returned to the economy for every \$1 invested in early childhood education

**347,000** kids are enrolled in a choice seat — a school other than their zoned neighborhood school

**50% INCREASE** in enrollment in charter and innovation schools over the last decade

## OPPORTUNITY FOR GUBERNATORIAL LEADERSHIP

Colorado's next governor can make early learning and K-8 excellence a defining priority. The opportunity is to set clear expectations, align systems, and ensure that every child builds strong foundational skills from the start. Focused, statewide leadership can create coherence across early childhood, K-12, and accountability systems, enabling schools to have the support, tools, and data necessary to improve outcomes. The opportunity is to:

- 1 Set measurable statewide goals for kindergarten readiness, third grade reading, and eighth grade math proficiency
- 2 Champion high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum and evidence-based instruction in every classroom
- 3 Strengthen alignment between early childhood and K-12 systems so expectations, data, and supports are consistent
- 4 Increase access to high-quality public school options, including innovation and charter schools
- 5 Invest in great teaching through high-quality curriculum, coaching, and ongoing professional learning
- 6 Improve transparency so families and educators have clear, comparable data on school performance

## THE VISION

**A strong start for every Colorado child builds the foundation for lifelong learning and opportunity. We envision a state where:**

- ▶ Every child enters kindergarten ready to learn, supported by high-quality early learning that develops early literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills
- ▶ Every student achieves grade-level proficiency in reading by third grade and in math by eighth grade
- ▶ Every teacher has access to high-quality instructional materials, aligned coaching, and time to plan and collaborate
- ▶ Every school uses data to identify gaps early, deliver targeted interventions, and support continuous improvement
- ▶ Every family can easily access clear information about school performance and student progress
- ▶ Every community has a diverse set of school options, including district-run, charter, and innovation schools, where students are known, supported, and challenged

## WHAT THIS UNLOCKS

Delivering high-quality early learning and K-8 instruction creates ripple effects across the entire education and workforce pipeline.

- ▶ **Stronger outcomes.** Consistent expectations, strong curriculum, and evidence-based instruction ensure every child is held to high standards.
- ▶ **Better use of resources.** Early investments reduce remediation needs in high school and beyond.
- ▶ **Educators equipped for success.** Teachers benefit from aligned materials, training, and coaching that translate into better instruction.
- ▶ **Families empowered.** Clear, comparable, accessible data help families support learning and choose the school that best fits their needs.
- ▶ **Opportunity for all.** When expectations and supports are aligned statewide, gaps close early instead of compounding over time.

# THREE STATE MODELS TO LEARN FROM

## MARYLAND

In 2024, Governor Moore introduced a state plan organized around 10 key implementation priorities, including a focus on “Setting Students Up for Success.” The plan has many notable education connections:

- ▶ Expanding equitable early childhood education; improving teacher recruitment/preparation; strengthening college and career readiness; increasing student support resources for wrap-around and mental health services.
- ▶ The plan pairs goals with measurable performance indicators (e.g., kindergarten readiness assessments, grade three proficiency, teacher retention, high school graduation rates) designed to drive accountability and improvement.
- ▶ Provides a strong example of how articulating aligned goals and tracking clear metrics can underpin systemic change.

## MISSISSIPPI

Over the past decade, Mississippi has become a national case study in how consistent, evidence-based policy can dramatically accelerate early literacy and math achievement.

- ▶ The state enacted the 2013 Literacy-Based Promotion Act, fully embracing the science of reading and shifting classrooms toward structured, research-aligned instruction.
- ▶ Paired policy with sustained investment, deploying high-quality reading coaches statewide, targeting resources to low-performing students, aligning curriculum to standards, and strengthening parent engagement and local district capacity.

The results have been transformational: in the 2024 NAEP, Mississippi improved across all four major assessments, reached its highest share of students scoring proficient or advanced, and climbed from the bottom of national rankings to ninth in 4th-grade reading and 16th in 4th-grade math, with Black, Hispanic, and low-income students performing among the best in the nation.



## COLORADO

Colorado has one of the strongest charter and choice ecosystems in the country, built on more than two decades of bipartisan commitment to innovation, autonomy, and accountability. The state’s Charter Schools Act and Innovation Schools Act provide clear pathways for new, high-quality school models while granting schools the flexibility to design programs, staffing, and instructional approaches that meet local student needs.

- ▶ Families benefit from robust open-enrollment policies, strong authorizing standards, and a performance framework that emphasizes outcomes rather than inputs.
- ▶ These policies helped create a diverse landscape of high-performing charter and innovation, particularly in communities that historically lacked access to quality options.
- ▶ A long-standing commitment to choice continues to drive improvement, foster innovation, and push the system toward higher expectations for all learners.

# HOW COLORADO SUCCEEDS IS LEADING

Colorado Succeeds has a long history of advancing policy and practice that strengthen early learning and K-8 outcomes.

## We support this work by:



Advocating for evidence-based early literacy and math instruction, including strong implementation of the READ Act and high-quality instructional materials



Championing school finance and accountability reforms that ensure transparency, equity, and high expectations for all schools



Supporting innovation in school models, including charter and innovation zones that expand high-quality options for families



Promoting data transparency, ensuring families and educators have clear, actionable information about school performance



Elevating the business voice in conversations about early childhood access, K-8 outcomes, and the skills Colorado needs for long-term economic growth

Colorado Succeeds stands ready to advise the next administration on vision, funding, implementation, and partnership strategies that strengthen early learning and K-8 achievement statewide.



## CONTACT

**Shannon Nicholas**

Senior Vice President,  
Impact

[snicholas@  
coloradosucceeds.org](mailto:snicholas@coloradosucceeds.org)