



A Blueprint for Education

**Colorado School Board Members
Plan and Partner for the Future**



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Jane Urschel, Ph.D., CASB deputy executive director, facilitated the 2007 Fall Regional Meetings.

Lynne Hunt chronicled meetings and was the author of this report.

Other CASB staff who contributed their time, expertise and advice to the 2007 Fall Regional Meetings include:

Ken DeLay, *executive director*

Lauren Kingsbery, *of counsel*

Jennifer Reeve, APR, *assistant executive director*

Randy Black, *director of member relations*

Nancy Weiss, *director of conferences*

Susan Zamudio, *director of executive and administrative services*

Jessica Kinghorn, *director of communications*

Jeri Hodgson, *director of policy services*

David Price, *director, lead counsel, CASB legal services program*

Kathleen Sullivan, *associate director, CASB legal services program*

Linda Buckalew, *business manager*

Ana Navratil, *executive assistant, government relations*

Renée Combs, *executive assistant, conferences and communications*

Debbie Flynn, *executive assistant*



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Introduction

Communities elect school boards to ensure accountability for student achievement because locally-elected men and women are the best people to determine those needs. This core belief underscores every effort the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) undertakes on behalf of local school boards to advance excellence in public education.

The Colorado Constitution (Article IX, Sections 15 and 16) gives local school boards the responsibility of organizing the learning environment, implementing curriculum, selecting textbooks and creating programs that provide academically rich opportunities for students. Some policymakers question, however, whether such local control is still the most effective method of governing Colorado public schools. They support a standardized statewide curriculum and graduation requirements for all Colorado school districts. Colorado is among only a few states that do not have such a statewide curriculum or graduation requirements, but Colorado school board members believe that our state does not need to pursue education reform by doing what other states do, especially since there is no empirical evidence that statewide mandates increase student achievement.

Colorado school boards question then, why the state would forge ahead with such standardization, hoping to achieve that elusive educational rigor. In a highly centralized state, if the state's reform policies fail, failure can spread throughout every school district.

CASB Mission Statement

Advancing excellence in public education through effective leadership by locally elected school boards.

There is no guarantee that statewide graduation requirements and curricular programs will be the education reform panacea their proponents are hoping for. According to CASB's Deputy Executive Director, Dr. Jane Urschel, "Our best outcomes will be realized in a process where state leadership affirms our common goals and provides direction and support, while local communities provide the diverse innovations and adjustments that make sense for their students" (CASB's legislative newsletter, *Bill*Board*, May 4, 2007).

Colorado school boards are indeed stepping up to the challenge of reforming education for the 21st century by leading their communities in discussions about community values and hopes for the future. With the force of their communities behind them, they can transform local control into quality control. School boards agree that the state (and higher education) must play an important role by partnering with them to achieve their local education goals. Planning and partnering with each other, they are confident they will be positioned to provide Colorado students with an education that responds to 21st-century needs.

A Blueprint for Education Colorado School Board Members Plan and Partner for the Future

House Bill 1118, signed into law in 2007, requires all school boards in Colorado to conduct a community-based process to develop a blueprint for education in the community and to determine the skills students will need to be successful after graduation. The law states that school boards must seek input from the community at large.

The board must use the blueprint, along with guidelines for high school graduation requirements developed by the State Board of Education, to establish local high school graduation requirements applicable to students enrolling in the 9th grade beginning July 1, 2009.

HB 1118 puts a workable process in place to accomplish the major goal of developing guidelines for high school graduation at the state level that will be considered as each local board of education revises its own local graduation requirements. The law puts the tools in place. Stakeholders now must give the process time to work.

The Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) is already deeply involved in this work as an advocate for local boards at the state level and as a resource as local boards undertake this challenge, community by community.

This report chronicles CASB's Fall Regional Meetings, held in 11 locations across the state from September – November 2007. These meetings were an important first step in introducing school board members to HB 1118, its process and its anticipated outcomes. School district leaders across Colorado engaged in detailed, productive discussions with other state and local policymakers modeled after blueprint discussions they might hold with their own communities.

At the meetings, board members discussed the need to reach out to all segments of their communities, to partner with higher education, state policymakers and local leaders, and to plan for the future to improve achievement for students. They acknowledged that they must maintain and strengthen trust in all segments of their communities. They understand that huge challenges remain to be solved but they are convinced that reform must begin and end in the local community first, before students become part of the global picture.

These ideas and similar sentiments were expressed at all 11 meetings, by large and small districts, in both metro and rural areas. Board members continually voiced the belief that in Colorado, the further education is removed from the local community, the less the local people would trust it and therefore, the less effective it would be. Board members made it clear that it is their belief that state-mandated graduation requirements, diplomas or curricular programs, developed far from the local community, would not increase student achievement in Colorado.

This report illustrates that boards across Colorado are addressing HB 1118 and its requirements and working together with all stakeholders to create innovative ways to design a blueprint for education reflecting the thoughts and input from their community members.

Background

In March 2006, key Colorado legislators, Senator Tupa and Representative Todd, met with CASB to propose a bill that would mandate statewide high school graduation requirements. The legislators and others were concerned about a perceived lack of rigor in the education systems throughout the state. They also were worried about how school districts were handling what they called “the great vacation year” – the senior year of high school.

CASB pledged to discuss these concerns with its members and subsequently conducted a series of 18 meetings with school districts throughout Colorado. The results were presented in a CASB report titled *The Next Generation of Colorado Education: Colorado School Board Members Speak Out on Transforming Education for the 21st Century*. The report concluded that school board members:

1. Do not support statewide graduation requirements.
2. Do not support asking the state to provide funding without accountability.
3. Strongly support re-examination of local district graduation requirements to ensure that these requirements prepare students for a variety of options in a changed world.
4. Cautiously support exploring a system that better aligns all parts of the education process.

(See http://www.casb.org/Files/Publications/pub_Next_Gen_Report.pdf)

Based on the outcomes of these meetings, CASB supported a comprehensive legislative package in 2006-2007 designed to accomplish the following:

1. Increase rigor and relevance of high school coursework and the diploma while preserving local community decision-making and opportunities for innovation.
2. Create structures to explore the alignment of educational systems along a P-20 continuum (preschool to post-secondary experiences) that fully engage all stakeholders, increase student achievement and respect all visions of student success.
3. Take immediate action to improve P-20 alignment through early childhood education funding and fifth-year programs for at-risk students.
4. Establish a public-private clearinghouse allowing districts and schools to learn from effective practices.
5. Create an interim committee to explore regulatory barriers to district innovation.

With the help of CASB’s advocacy efforts, HB 1118, which focused on high school graduation requirements, was signed into law in 2007. This new state law:

1. Requires the State Board of Education to review Colorado’s content standards and to adopt guidelines for the establishment of minimum high school graduation requirements.
2. Directs local boards of education to work with their communities to establish local high school graduation requirements, utilizing the State Board’s guidelines.
3. Directs the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) to review and align its academic admission standards with the State Board’s guidelines.

School boards across Colorado have begun working with their local communities to develop education blueprints and to determine the skills their students will need to be successful in the 21st century.

Read Appendix D to learn what school boards are doing to fulfill HB 1118 requirements.

This report presents the results of 11 regional meetings that CASB conducted statewide from September 5 to November 1, 2007 (see Appendix A). These regional meetings were intended to introduce local school district leaders to the new state law resulting from HB 1118. School board members and superintendents engaged in discussions with other state and local policymakers modeling conversations they might hold with their own communities. They discussed how they would carry out the requirements of this law, including how they would establish local graduation requirements that meet or exceed the suggested guidelines to be developed by the State Board of Education.

These meetings presented a unique opportunity for school board members, administrators, representatives of higher education and legislators to discuss how they intend to work together to improve student achievement in Colorado. Fourteen legislators, 35 representatives of higher education, and more than 500 school board members, board candidates and superintendents attended CASB's regional meetings. They pledged to listen to each other and include each other in their respective educational planning and policymaking efforts in the future. They acknowledged that a lack of cooperation with each other in the past resulted in misunderstanding and the erroneous perception that the various levels of the Colorado educational community did not have the same goals of high student achievement. As Jill Brake, a Commissioner of Higher Education, said, "We can work together for the education of our kids. We should have done this a long time ago. We can't go back, so I look forward to doing things the right way in the future."

Since the new state law requires school boards to work with their communities in developing education blueprints, CASB staff modeled several discussion questions (Appendix C) that local boards could use as they conduct these blueprint conversations in their own communities. The following themes emerged as participants discussed the model questions:

- 1. Action.** Participants explored action plans for involving their communities in developing the educational blueprints required by HB 1118. They concluded:
 - School boards must *go* to the community instead of expecting the community to come into the boardroom.
 - Local school boards must *strengthen* working relationships with their communities in order to achieve their shared goals.
 - School boards must *develop* innovative ways to reach all segments of the community, not just those people who have children in school.
 - School boards must *mobilize* the community to ensure that everyone takes ownership of the educational blueprint. This means that community leaders, businesses, local government leaders, retired citizens, administrators, teachers, parents and students must be encouraged to think like owners of the school district rather than customers.
- 2. Partnerships.** Participants concluded that educational stakeholders must partner with each other to improve student achievement in Colorado.
 - Partnerships among *P-20 educational entities* (preschool, K-12, postsecondary) must be strengthened if education reform is to be successful in Colorado.
 - The *state* should partner with *school boards* to support local efforts to improve student achievement, not dictate the means by which boards should achieve this goal.
 - *New partnerships* must be forged (and old ones strengthened) with the business community to ensure that those students who wish to enter the workforce directly from high school will be successful.

Executive Summary

3. **Trust.** Participants concluded that in order for partnerships and action plans to work, trust is crucial and must be cultivated at all levels (local community, K-12, higher education, state legislature).
 - Board members feel the degree of trust necessary to work together toward common educational goals must begin at the local level where board members are visible and are known to care about what happens in the community.
 - Recognizing that trusteeship goes two ways, boards acknowledge the need to tap the community's wisdom to help solve the challenges of educating students for the 21st century.
 - National and state research indicates that a greater level of trust exists for local governance than for federal and state-level policymakers.
 - Board members perceive that state-level policymakers do not trust local school boards to get the job done.
 - School districts need to build trust with families where there traditionally has been a pattern of lack of trust (due to cultural, social and economic constraints) so that all children can be successful.
4. **Challenges.** Participants were hopeful that the blueprint discussions could help rally support to solve continuing challenges in areas such as:
 - funding for schools
 - early childhood education
 - compliance with No Child Left Behind
 - teacher training
 - standards and graduation requirements
 - P-20 curriculum alignment
 - declining enrollment and school choice
 - remediation
 - social support
5. **Dropouts.** Participants also discussed the issue of dropouts as a means of understanding how school might be made more meaningful to students. Questions discussed were:
 - Why are we losing students?
 - What can we do about losing students?
 - Why do we care so much about losing students?

School board members at the 2007 CASB regional meetings strongly supported the belief that local requirements and support have a more positive educational influence on local students and their families than do statewide mandates. Meeting participants acknowledged that research continues to confirm that strong, supportive relationships and mentoring are the most important factors in a student's individual success. They also agreed that such relationships are most productive when personal contact occurs on a daily basis, in the classrooms of their local school districts, where people care about the students and know what it is going to take to help each one of them be successful after high school.

As might be imagined, the CASB regional meeting discussions were spirited and intense. Although CASB regions differ greatly in characteristics such as location, size of school district and financial resources, surprisingly similar themes emerged:

Action: Going back into the community

Colorado school board members believe they know the values and needs of their communities. Their communities trust them to represent these values and needs. Therefore, most meeting participants welcomed the challenge presented by the new state law to assess community values as they relate to educating students in the community. Board members agreed that it is often challenging to engage their communities in school-related dialogue. Therefore, they concluded that they could not expect the community to come into the boardroom but must create new ways of soliciting community input. They agreed they must strengthen existing relationships as well as seek out new ones as they mobilize the community to help develop the education blueprints.

“The schools should reflect the needs and values of the community. How will we know this unless we ask the people?” ~ Lamar participant

A new opportunity to connect with the community

Most school districts that participated in the regional meetings have developed mission statements, goals and objectives, and strategic plans with community input, but few participants believed that there had been enough involvement from all segments of their communities in educational planning that included reworking content standards, revamping the curriculum and revising the graduation requirements. Participants from across the state shared the belief that what happens in the schools affects the entire community, yet the entire community often does not have a voice in determining what happens in the schools. Board members concluded that this is sometimes due to a lack of interest among some community groups and sometimes due to a lack of assertiveness on the board’s part in obtaining input from a cross-section of the community. So, while there was some frustration expressed that HB 1118 requires school boards to do what they already are doing, most boards were eager to discuss their action plans for going back into the community to work on the education blueprints.

Regional meeting participants were hopeful that HB 1118 would present a new opportunity for developing innovative methods of connecting with all segments of their communities, especially those groups that have been uninvolved in the past. Board members identified groups such as seniors, taxpayers without children or grandchildren in the district, single parent families, and migrant workers as groups with limited or no involvement in education. Although the reasons for lack of community involvement include such things as disinterest and lack of time, board members felt strongly that these groups could contribute a great deal to education planning, are an integral part of their communities, and as such, require more creative and aggressive action plans in order to be reached.

Plans underway for community discussions

Several districts already have embarked upon such plans. The Wiggins School District plans to continue its “Blue Dot Forums” in which more than 350 community members discussed three questions regarding the school district: (1) What are you most proud of? (2) What are your concerns? (3) What are your hopes and dreams? Other school districts brainstormed ways of providing child care so that single parent families could be included in the blueprint discussions. Some districts conducted community-based processes before the law passed, which may serve as models for districts to use as they develop blueprints. For example, Denver

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Public Schools (DPS) completed a community-based process to revise graduation requirements as part of its “Denver Plan.” Dividing the district into quadrants, educators and community members volunteered to act as representatives to various parts of Denver. Administrators, teachers, parents, business and community groups were invited to take part in community-wide discussions and focus groups. The groups developed a timeline, reached a consensus and the DPS Board approved new graduation requirements which exceed those of CCHE.

Read more about how other school districts gathered community input in Appendix D.

Getting them there

Other large districts already created leadership teams, and some districts plan to make use of existing school committees (such as strategic planning committees and accountability committees) to get the word out about discussion opportunities. A great many districts discussed organizing phone trees to personally contact people. Most districts indicated that they would enlist the aid of existing avenues of communication such as newsletters, e-mail lists, blogs, Web sites and the media. In several rural districts with limited social activities, board members proposed hosting discussion opportunities “with plenty of food.”

Districts plan to mobilize all members of the school community – administrators, teachers, employees, parents and students. As an Alamosa board member put it, “If the entire community has input into the educational blueprint, they will support our schools. They will feel like they had a voice in the education of our children.”

Partnerships: A new era in Colorado

Preschool through Postsecondary (P-20) partnerships

School board members across the state strongly agreed that if K-12 were a true participant in higher education alignment efforts, a P-20 system could hold great promise — especially if the unique needs of rural school districts were acknowledged. CASB therefore invited representatives of higher education to co-host its 2007 regional meetings. More than 35 representatives of higher education attended the meetings and some attended more than one.

“We intend to live by the philosophy put out there by P-20. We are very supportive of a seamless pipeline and one way to make that successful is to be visible to all segments of K-12.” ~ Limon participant

When asked why he agreed to be a co-host at the Loveland meeting, David Skaggs, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education stated, “I am here because we understand that K-12 and post-secondary need to have a relationship. Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones and I are bound and determined that this is a new era for a working relationship between our departments.”

What might such partnerships look like? As a start, representatives of higher education and K-12 must include each other in meetings, planning sessions and policymaking, according to regional meeting participants. This is already in the works. The Colorado Department of Higher Education and the Colorado Department of Education have set up a working group between the two departments. According to Skaggs, “Issues that come up all the time will be addressed by these groups.” Two of the advisory positions to The Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) will now be filled by representatives of the K-12 community so that K-12 representatives can advise CCHE on how the two groups can continue to work together in the future.

Local P-20 partnerships underway

Efforts are well underway at the local school district level as well. At the Denver regional meeting, participants learned that the Community College of Denver joined with Denver Public Schools to provide numerous programs including a career education center and a NASA grant between Metropolitan State College (Metro) and North High School. Metro also has a program that introduces the idea of college to public school students from families where no members have ever attended college. At the Limon meeting, participants learned that Morgan Community College has cooperative programs with 27 different school districts in eastern Colorado. Everyone agreed, however, that more work needs to be done.

Districts and higher education pledge to work together

Of key importance at all of the regional meetings was the pledge by board members and higher education representatives to work together in the future. Board members were encouraged to hear comments affirming partnerships with higher education such as:

- “Community colleges are very interested in working with school districts in meeting any graduation requirements the districts might create, especially if the districts don’t have teachers to teach the classes.” – Denver participant
- “We are slowly understanding issues the rural groups have with regard to meeting the HEAR (higher education admission requirements) requirements passed in 2003. Through these conversations, we can move forward with solutions and good partnership ideas and bridge the gap that has occurred in the past.” – Alamosa participant
- “Any opportunity that our community college has to work with local boards and superintendents is important – we want to develop that relationship to enhance the quality of education.” – Glenwood Springs participant
- “Postsecondary cannot exist alone. We want to know how we can work closer with our school districts to determine what students need.” – Loveland participant
- “Your students become our students. We are all in it together.” – Montrose participant.
- “We must work together to meet the needs of the most important people, the students. The better outcomes that we will have from all of us working together is working in this state.” – Lamar participant
- “We are all doing the same thing. We train the workforce. We are dependent on K-12. The issues you are facing are of strong interest to us.” – Pueblo participant
- “We recognize in looking back that we passed the HEAR requirements without enough dialogue from K-12. We now understand and we want to be in a partnership with you in going forward.” – Denver participant

State-level partnerships

Colorado legislators were also invited to co-host CASB’s 2007 regional meetings . Fourteen legislators attended the meetings, and some attended more than one. Legislators made it clear they were there to listen and learn how they might work together with Colorado’s education community.

Collaborating and forming relationships

- “Everyone says that we are not doing a good enough job in education. So, we write bills, but we want to have collaboration. Boards will establish the requirements, the state will just establish guidelines. We need to work together as a team.” – Loveland participant

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- “I want to build a relationship with the school district. I have a lot to learn about legislation and state school policy. I’m just here to learn.” – Loveland participant
- “I am here because everyone is working together in our town to help educate kids. I thought I needed to learn more about what people are thinking.” – Glenwood Springs participant

Listening and learning from each other

- “What can we do to make sure that our kids have jobs and are employable? I want to hear stories about your efforts in creating a better environment for education. I want to stop some of the reactionary stuff. I will always protect local control. If you ever hear that I am not doing this, give me a call!” – Loveland participant
- “You are at Ground Zero. You have to implement the laws that we pass at the state Capitol. I apologize if in the past we haven’t had a good relationship. Lots of people at the Capitol believe that four years of seat time is the only way to do what we need to do. I am here to learn from you all so we don’t have a bill that calls for more seat time.” – Denver participant
- “I am here to listen to some great school board members. We deeply appreciate your service.” – Denver participant

Raising standards

- “We must continue to focus on raising our standards. We aren’t going to agree on everything. Prove that you can do a better job than we did. I hope you can. It’s about the kids. I hope I can work in partnership with you all.” – Denver participant
- “It is very important that we are holding kids accountable while at the same time giving them tools to go in different directions.” – Denver participant.
- “I went to Taiwan last week. They have a 3 percent dropout rate, and 90 percent go to college. Many come to the U.S. for graduate degrees. All speak English. They are going to run circles around us unless we raise our standards.” – Denver participant.

Focusing on students

- “At the federal and state level, we need to recognize that kids need different time frames. We need to think in a different way. I will be asking for your help.” – Denver participant
- “We must be student-centered. We cannot lose this focus. We need to engage the communities. I am very proud to be part of this engagement conversation.” – Denver participant
- “Let’s remember all the different kinds of learning styles that are out there. Not all kids march to the same drum. Multiple pathways—let’s remember this. My mantra is going to be opportunities, not obstacles.” – Denver participant

Colorado school board members communicated to their senators and representatives that they welcome a partnership with the state in solving the problems of K-12 and higher education. What they do not want, however, is for the state to play the role of “super school board.” Board members agreed that the state has a legitimate interest in student achievement across Colorado because what happens in the classrooms affects the local and state economy. Board members also understand that because the state invests heavily in local school districts, the state should hold districts accountable for how they spend that money. However, informal comments made by participants indicated that many board members across the state continue to believe that their districts are overwhelmed and underfunded. Legislators pledged to continue to work on solving the funding issues.

While discussing the types of blueprint conversations they might have with their communities to design better graduation requirements, board members repeatedly explained to legislators why community goals could not possibly be the same throughout the state. Legislators and board members alike expressed strong support for the multiple and diverse pathways to diplomas outlined in HB 1118 as well as the emphasis on equal rigor for each of the pathways. The discussions seemed to lead board members to a renewed resolve to enlist the help of the business community in defining what these pathways might look like in their communities.

New partnerships

Multiple and diverse pathways to diplomas means that multiple and diverse partnerships must be created as communities develop their education blueprints. Meeting participants discussed how the “broad categories of student interests and economic needs” called for in HB 1118 might target segments of their local communities that have not been called upon in the past to help schools. Board members repeatedly expressed frustration that they were unable to fund vocational and agricultural programs that appealed to broad student interests. Many stated that the lack of such programs contributes to the dropout problem. Meeting participants brainstormed ideas for identifying untapped community resources with which they could forge new partnerships as they develop their blueprints for education.

A participant in Glenwood Springs said, “We have a nephew who wanted to be an auto mechanic, but there was nothing offered in school to explore this, so he dropped out.” This participant was hopeful that the community blueprint conversations might help uncover resources to fund much needed vocational courses in her district. Another Glenwood Springs participant echoed a similar sentiment when she stated “My husband is an agriculture advocate and wants to strengthen these programs in our district. We need kids that want to raise food for this nation. We need to keep these programs strong.” She said that since her community believes strongly that such agricultural programs are important to the local economy, the educational blueprint would reflect it.

In western slope communities where oil exploration is a major employer and source of revenue, board members felt strongly that they should enlist the aid of energy executives in advancing educational programs, not just so students could work on the rigs but so students could get a good enough education to run the companies some day. “We need to get the oil companies to come in and discuss why education is important,” said one participant. At a meeting on the eastern plains, several board members explained the complexities of running modern farming equipment. “What kind of education do kids need to be able to ride and work a combine?” a Sterling participant asked. This participant was encouraged that the educational blueprint conversations with his community could help answer this question.

Trust: The foundation of education

Trust and the local school board

“Colorado school board members used to be known as trustees,” noted meeting facilitator Dr. Jane Urschel. In some states, those that govern schools and institutes of higher learning are still referred to as the “Board of Trustees.” Communities elect local school boards and entrust them with their most precious possessions – their children. “It’s part of our history,” said a Cortez participant. “Way back, we decided that a public school could better educate our kids than the parents could at home. This works until something goes sour. Then there is a lack of trust.”

At the first few CASB regional meetings, the issue of trust emerged as such a strong component of the model blueprint conversations that CASB decided to further explore this issue. The model blueprint questions were modified accordingly, with intriguing results. The new questions revealed participants believed that trust was the foundation of education. Remove it from any level, and the entire system collapses.

Local school board members believe that their communities still trust them to educate children. There was some feeling among board members that the blueprint conversations required by HB 1118 would result in comments such as, “Why are you asking for our input? We trust you! That’s why we elected you.” But, the majority of participants believed that the community would welcome the opportunity to participate in the blueprint discussions. Board members across the state expressed the belief that it is crucial for their

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communities to “own” the education blueprints and that they can only do this if they take part in creating them. “The best ideas may come from outside the board,” a Limon participant explained. Board members seemed to agree with another Limon participant that HB 1118 affords districts an opportunity to “update our community on the changing face of education.”

Local control gives citizens a voice

Colorado board members almost unequivocally believe that local control continues to be the best way to accomplish education reform. They believe the people of Colorado feel connected to their locally elected boards because board members are visible in the community. People feel like they have a voice in the education of their children because when they have a concern, “they know where we live,” stated many rural-area board members.

Even in larger districts, board members shared the view expressed by a Pueblo participant who said, “In order to make a major change in the district’s goals, it won’t be successful unless the community is heard and feels that they are heard.” A Denver participant said, “We are an extension of the citizens and the community. People recognize that we are parents who mean well for their kids as well as our own.” A Loveland participant stated, “We are engaged in daily decision-making in education. It’s not done on a ‘sometimes’ schedule, like at the state Capitol.”

“We are an extension of the citizens and the community.”
~ Denver participant

These ideas and similar sentiments were expressed at all 11 meetings, by large and small districts, in both metro and rural areas. Board members continually voiced the belief that in Colorado, the further education is removed from the local community, the less the local people would trust it and therefore, the less effective it would be. Board members made it clear that it is their belief that state-mandated graduation requirements, diplomas or curricular programs, developed far from the local community, would not increase student achievement in Colorado .

Federal and state mandates signify lack of trust

A few legislator participants admitted that some of their colleagues do not trust the local boards to get the job done. In turn, some board members expressed their lack of trust in legislators who, they believe, often act out of political expediency rather than what’s best for educating children. Several discussions centered around the constraints put on school districts by federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its state-wide ramifications such as “adequate yearly progress,” “highly qualified teachers,” and CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program) tests. In Glenwood Springs, a board member said, “NCLB creates too much pressure. We are cutting out too many enrichment programs that used to keep the kids’ interests.”

A Limon participant commented that “highly qualified status” takes away local control in small districts that have difficulty attracting teachers . “We used to be able to waive requirements to get teachers and then work with them to develop them. Now, we can’t do this.” Another Limon participant shared how the PLACE exam (Program for Licensing Assessments for Colorado Educators) was an impediment to his district hiring new teachers. “It prevents young teachers from learning on the job and then taking the test. It makes college kids switch their majors and choose something other than teaching because they can’t even student teach without it.”(The Colorado Department of Education requires teachers to pass the PLACE exam prior to licensing. Most post-secondary teacher training programs, however, require students to pass the PLACE exam before student teaching.)

Some board members are frustrated that too many state mandates in education represent what is perceived as a lack of trust in the local board's ability to educate students. A board member from the San Luis Valley said, "The irony of state standards is that they prohibit us from offering things that we think we should – things that we want to offer."

Mandates from the state and/or federal government are clearly a hot button issue in Colorado. The only conclusion that resulted from discussing trust issues between board members and government officials was that no one totally trusts anyone. At least one legislator thought this was a healthy conflict, however, because it keeps everyone "on their toes."

Survival trumps trust

While discussing how they could reach all segments of the community for the blueprint discussions, the issue of uninvolved families was mentioned repeatedly. Participants concluded that a lack of involvement often leads to a lack of knowledge, which in turn leads to a lack of trust. Perhaps surprisingly, the answer to why many families are uninvolved is the same in rural districts as it is in the metro area: survival becomes more important than achievement.

Trying to raise children as a single parent and coping with unemployment become more important than attending the local school board meetings. "It's not like in the past where everyone cared about education; we have many of the same challenges as metro districts – social ills, jobs, divorce, death, people that don't have insurance," said a Limon participant. One group of participants referred to this as the "rural fallacy" —that rural communities do not suffer from the same social woes encountered in metro-area school districts.

Board members across the state shared the sentiments of a Denver participant who said that many struggling families "don't have time to get involved but just send their kids to school anyway, hoping for the best." These families are following cultural and social patterns that have characterized them for generations. Boards hope the blueprint discussions might lead to innovative ways of reaching out to such families in order to begin overturning this culture of lack of trust in the schools. Boards believe they will have to prove themselves trustworthy to such families by educating them as well as their children. "How can we know they trust us? Maybe we can find out when we work on developing the blueprint," said a Lamar participant.

One challenge unique to rural schools is what rural boards referred to as "flight." After receiving their diplomas, many students leave the community and go where the money is—to Denver or out of state. "The economic situation in the San Luis Valley is poor," said one participant. A board member at the Sterling meeting stated, "We train our best students to leave the community," and a Limon participant asked, "Where are the kids going to go after high school? Will they come back to our community or go where the money is? Our kids are leaving. Who will even be left to care about the blueprint?" Although a poor economy is out of a school district's control, the local board is forced to deal with its impact. Rural schools are hoping blueprint conversations with their communities will lead to some answers.

Challenges: It *does* take a village

Board members at the regional meetings were encouraged that the blueprint discussions might help rally support for the continuing challenges faced by school districts in Colorado. The following challenges were ones that were discussed most often during the 11 regional meetings:

“I’m here because my partners are here – the Pueblo City Schools, the county – we are all part of the Pueblo Education Consortium. We all work together. We run together.” ~ Pueblo participant

Funding

- funding for programs, including vocational and agricultural programs
- funding for building improvement
- maintaining a safe environment
- expanding early childhood education
- recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers
- providing adult education
- dealing with declining enrollment and school choice

Standards and student achievement

- revising academic content standards/ reducing the number of standards
- improving accountability
- increasing rigor and relevance in all course offerings, including career and vocational classes
- providing multiple pathways to a high school diploma
- establishing competency levels

P-20

- aligning curriculum P-20
- improving transitions between high school and postsecondary education
- making sure the senior year in high school is meaningful
- reducing the need for remediation at the postsecondary level

Social support

- providing social support for students with dysfunctional family structures
- dealing with the unique challenges of rural schools
- dealing with the unique challenges of metro-area schools

These challenges are ongoing. Some already have been touched upon as part of the action, partnership and trust sections in this report. Board members were hopeful that the blueprint discussion process would go beyond merely identifying these challenges to conversations about how to solve them.

Dropouts: A category of its own

The issue of high school dropouts was of major concern to meeting participants. Several attendees lamented that even one dropout is too many. School districts have been worried that state-mandated graduation requirements and curricular programs would increase the dropout rate, so they were relieved to learn that HB 1118 specifies multiple pathways to diplomas and graduation guidelines that “accommodate differing and broad categories of student interests and economic needs.”

“We should care about dropouts not because of economic issues but because of the impact on the lives of the kids.” ~ Montrose participant

Several model discussion questions at CASB’s regional meetings focused on the dropout problem – why are we losing students and what can we do about it. Additional questions posed by participants included:

- How can we educate families and students as to the importance of an education?
- How can we support families so that students remain in school?
- How can we enlist the community’s help in solving the dropout problem?
- How might other educational stakeholders assist us with the dropout problem?
- How can we maintain relevance so that students do not drop out of school?
- How can we prevent the “class dropout” problem—those students that graduate but lack competencies in key individual subjects such as math, English and science?

Board members felt it was important to make a distinction between “losing kids” and “dropping out” because school districts “lose kids” over things like declining enrollment, transient populations and school choice (charter schools, online programs, alternative education programs and homeschooling) but they are not dropouts. Students pursue school choice for a variety of reasons: course offerings, athletics, location, safety issues and bullying, religious reasons, desire for parental autonomy, etc. An Alamosa participant also pointed out other ways that students drop out. “In rural areas, there are no malls or activities for kids during the day, so they stay in school and get their diplomas – yet they are not always educated.”

Board members, representatives of higher education and legislators were unanimous in the reasons that they cared so much about high school dropouts:

- Dropouts mean we failed
- Dropouts have a negative impact on society and often commit crimes and end up in prison
- Dropouts have a negative impact on our global economy
- We want to have an educated populace
- It’s our job to care about children; no child should feel we did not care
- Children are our future

Regional meeting participants identified the following reasons for dropping out of school:

Social/cultural/economic reasons

- Family does not value education; low expectations
- Student does not see the long-term value of a high school diploma
- Economic need—students need to work
- Discipline issues sometimes lead to dropping out
- Family problems at home
- Drugs and alcohol
- Pregnancy
- School is not cool
- Gang involvement

Who is considered a Colorado Dropout?

By Colorado law, a dropout is a “person who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completion of a high school diploma or its equivalent, and who does not transfer to another public or private school or enroll in an approved home study program.” A student is not a dropout if he/she transfers to an educational program recognized by the district, completes a G.E.D. or registers in a program leading to a G.E.D., is committed to an institution that maintains educational programs, or is so ill that he/she is unable to participate in a homebound or special therapy program.

The Consensus – Action, Partnerships, Trust, Challenges, Dropouts

Educational reasons

- Students feel that no one cares whether they succeed
- Students are not engaged early enough; lack of early intervention
- Boredom
- Increased class size leads to lack of personal attention; children fall through the cracks
- Too many requirements for students not college bound, so they give up and drop out
- Not enough alternatives for high-risk students

Can or should a school district do anything about the social/cultural/economic reasons for dropping out of school? What should they do and how should they do it? Board members are hoping that community blueprint discussions will help answer these questions.

Can or should a school district do anything about the educational reasons for dropping out of school? The answer to this question is easier: yes – it is the business of education and it is the reason behind HB 1118.

Legislators reminded meeting participants that the governor’s P-20 Council will also be grappling with the dropout issue. One of the Council’s charges is to address “methods for engaging and retaining all students, thereby reducing the number of students who drop out of high school.”

Conclusion

As an advocate for local boards at the state level and as a resource for local boards, CASB pledged to help its members take on the challenge posed by HB 1118, community by community. HB 1118 puts a workable process in place to accomplish the major goal of developing guidelines for high school graduation at the state level that will be considered as each local board of education revises its own local graduation requirements. The new state law provided the direction. CASB provided the tools. Stakeholders are now responsible for making the process work.

“Collaboration and cooperation with business and civic leaders and stakeholders in your community will help bring an understanding of the needed direction for education.”~ Deanne Elliott, 2007 CASB President

At the 2007 regional meetings, CASB began this work by modeling blueprint discussions boards might conduct in their own communities. Board members believe they must act, partner and plan for the future to improve achievement for students. They know they must develop, maintain and strengthen trust in all segments of their communities. They understand that many challenges remain to be solved but they are convinced that for students to compete globally, reform must be initiated at the local level. Colorado school board members plan to continue to lead locally, think globally.*

* This was the theme of the 2007 CASB Annual Convention, held at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs from November 30-December 2, 2007.

To further assist boards with their community-based process to develop a blueprint for education in the community and to determine the skills community members think students will need to be successful after graduation, CASB developed a toolkit, available on the CASB Web site at www.casb.org. The toolkit contains resources to help boards understand effective community engagement as well as tools to walk boards through the entire community-based process.

The 2007 Regional Meetings: Advocacy In Action

The 2007 schedule of regional meetings was as follows:

September 5	Steamboat Springs
September 25	Montrose
September 26	Cortez
October 2	Loveland
October 4	Glenwood Springs
October 10	Denver
October 24	Lamar
October 25	Pueblo
October 29	Limon
October 30	Sterling
November 1	Alamosa

At each meeting, participants heard an update on important political developments affecting Colorado education in the past year. Participants then viewed a video produced by the Donnell-Kay Foundation titled *Conversation 2007* prior to engaging in discussions that modeled the types of blueprint conversations boards might conduct as they define, community by community, what students must learn to be successful in a 21st-century global economy. A copy of the model questions is included as Appendix C on page 20.

HB 1118

HB 1118 marks the beginning of the work school boards must embark upon regarding high school graduation requirements. The roadmap for this bill came from CASB's 2006 report, *The Next Generation of Colorado Education: Colorado School Board Members Speak Out on Transforming Education for the 21st Century*. In this report, local school boards called for increased rigor and relevance in high school, multiple pathways to student success and improved alignment in Colorado's public education system.

HB 1118 establishes a process for developing guidelines for high school graduation at the state level that will be considered as each local board revises its own local graduation requirements. The new requirements for high school graduation will apply to freshman entering high school in 2009. The following timeline addresses each step in the process:

August 1, 2007 – the State Board began to receive public comment on the adequacy of existing state model content standards in core academic areas.

February 1, 2008 – the State Board reports to the Senate and House Education Committees and any successor committees, on the adequacy of existing state model content standards in mathematics, science, reading and writing.

May 1, 2008 – the State Graduation Guidelines Development Council (Council) develops and recommends to the State Board, a comprehensive set of guidelines for the establishment of high school graduation requirements, recognizing and addressing multiple pathways to diplomas. The Council must use the expertise of school district personnel and education experts to develop the guidelines; conduct at least six public meetings throughout the state to hear testimony regarding the state guidelines for high school graduation; and seek recommendations from and work with school districts, educators, parents, students, representatives from postsecondary education, business persons and members of the community representative of the cultural diversity of the state.

July 1, 2008 – the State Board adopts a comprehensive set of guidelines regarding high school graduation requirements to be used by each school district board of education when developing local high school graduation requirements. The local school board retains the authority to develop its own unique graduation requirements as long as they meet or exceed any minimum standards or basic core competencies or skills identified in the guidelines created by the State Board.

When creating the guidelines, the State Board cannot identify specific courses a student must take or the level of proficiency that a student must achieve. The State Board must develop the guidelines using recommendations of the State Graduation Guidelines Development Council and must:

- a) Consider recommendations from the 2006 report of the Colorado Education Alignment Council;
- b) Work with CCHE to ensure that the State Board's guidelines and the admission requirements for postsecondary academic admissions standards are aligned for students entering a four-year public or postsecondary education institution on or before August 1, 2012;
- c) Recognize and address multiple and diverse pathways to diplomas offered by school districts. The guidelines must consider differing student interests and economic needs, but must ensure that while the pathways to graduation may be diverse, they will be equally rigorous;
- d) Use standards-based education as the framework for the development of the guidelines, and ensure that state model content standards are sufficiently rigorous and will prepare students for the workforce or postsecondary institutions;

- e) Recognize and acknowledge the importance of obtaining core competency skills and standards to succeed in the 21st century, including proficiency in math, science and written and verbal communication; and
- f) Take into account the importance of pre-high school and postsecondary career planning that provides pre-high school students with awareness of the district's high school graduation requirements.

By July 1, 2009 – local school boards must undertake a community-based process to develop a blueprint for the education system in the community and to determine the skills students will need to be successful after graduation. School boards must seek input from the community at large, which may include students, parents, business persons, neighboring school districts, and BOCES.

School boards must use this blueprint, along with guidelines for high school graduation requirements developed by the State Board, to establish high school graduation requirements applicable to students enrolling in 9th grade beginning July 1, 2009. Each school board must report its blueprint and its new or revised high school graduation requirements to the public through the accreditation process as determined by the State Board. In its report, the school board must demonstrate how its high school graduation requirements meet or exceed any minimum standards, core competencies or skills identified in the Guidelines for High School Graduation Requirements.

Fall of 2012 – CCHE must work with the State Board of Education to align the higher education academic admission standards with the guidelines for high school graduation requirements. The revised standards must be implemented no later than the selection of the freshman class of fall 2012.

Model Discussion Questions Used at Regional Meetings

1. What will students need to know or be able to do in 5 to 20 years?
2. Why do students go to school and why do some not go to school?
3. What might our students say is working or not working with regard to their education?
4. Why do we have school districts?
5. Why do people send children to school in our district?
6. What is the purpose of education in our district?
7. Why do people in our community trust us as leaders of the local school district to educate our children (or why don't people trust us)?
8. Why is it important to work with our community to develop an education blueprint to determine the skills students will need to be successful after graduation?
9. You are back in the boardroom after asking these questions of your community. Take what you have heard and turn it into a declarative sentence beginning with:
We will work with our community to develop an education blueprint by . . .
10. Why are we losing kids?
11. Why do we care about losing kids?
12. You are back in the boardroom after asking these questions of your community. Take what you have heard and turn it into a declarative sentence beginning with:
We care about losing kids because . . .

In early February 2008, CASB surveyed its member school districts on their progress in gathering community input to build a local “Blueprint for education,” as required by HB 1118. Nearly one-third of school districts responded, informing CASB on how they are gathering community input.

CASB applauds these districts for carrying out efforts involving their communities in discussions about what students should know and be able to do when they leave high school. CASB encourages you to continue these conversations throughout your communities to stimulate continuous discussion about community values and to strengthen your communities’ connection to the district.

If you haven’t yet begun your community meetings, visit CASB’s Web site at www.casb.org, to download the HB 1118 Toolkit. The toolkit will provide you with a description of HB 1118 and detailed tips and instructions on how to implement this community engagement process in your school district.

Below are examples of ways Colorado school districts engaged their communities to stimulate discussion and ultimately create a blueprint for education.

Center Consolidated Schools (Approx. 600 students)

Center held about 15 Board of Education Round Table Meetings as part of a “revisioning” process. Four meetings included the board of education, community and staff. Others were led by administrators. They kicked off these meetings with the PowerPoint presentation by Howie DiBlasi (Durango Schools) called “Did You Know,” prompting members to think about future challenges students face. They then gathered input from participants regarding how they felt about the future and what steps the district and community needed to take to ensure their children know what they need to prepare them for this future.

Park R-3—Estes Park (Approx. 1,200 students)

Park R-3 is developing a new vision and mission statement. They’ll begin this process by meeting with administrators, teachers, students and the community over the next few months. Their high school advisory committee is creating an open-ended survey to get community members’ opinions on graduation requirements. Survey results will guide initial conversations with district stakeholders. District staff will then publish the survey on the Park R-3 Web site and with local media channels.

“Your community needs to feel they are partners with you in education. You need to be willing to listen to their concerns and be able to work towards solutions to district issues together. While you may hear things you’d rather not - you need the support of your community and that only comes when they feel they’ve been heard and have the opportunity to understand the Board’s perspective.” ~ Adams 50 board member

Steamboat Springs Re-2 (Approx. 2,000 students)

Steamboat Springs Re-2 created a PowerPoint about 21st-century skills to inspire community members to think about important skills that should be taught in school. They plan to show the PowerPoint to local civic groups and gather comments from each group regarding what they think students will need to know and do to succeed in the future. They will then ask if individuals are interested in meeting further to discuss the topic in more depth.

Delta County Schools (Approx. 5,500 students)

Delta’s community meetings were two-tiered. First, staff at local school buildings held monthly meetings with parents and community members. Second, the district held quarterly meetings with representatives from each of the schools within the district and two at-large members. The superintendent, school board members, teachers, administrators and support staff participated in these meetings. Through group discussion,

APPENDIX D

district representatives introduced a particular topic of community interest for small groups to discuss. These discussion topics included: facility updates, student achievement, school safety, school climate/culture, board policies, and student/school surveys. They expect the discussions to result in a more thorough understanding of the community's feelings about what students need to be successful adults.

Pueblo No. 70 (Approx. 8,800 students)

Pueblo No. 70 scheduled three community meetings for the winter and spring to gather information related to state standards. They will be held in high schools in three distinct communities within District 70. The school district extended an open invitation, with a detailed agenda, to the communities via newsletters, local press and flyers.

Poudre R-1 (Approx. 23,600 students)

The Poudre school board developed its district mission policy based on several months of public engagement with more than 200 people. Following up on the mission policy they created, the board is conducting expert panel sessions with 12-15 members of the public around areas of civic engagement, creativity, thinking skills, career preparation and academics. These sessions will provide board members with information to develop ends policies in these areas. Additionally, the district is holding meetings with primary employers through a partnership with the Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce. These meetings provide an opportunity to outline essential workforce skills employers are seeking.

Words of Wisdom and Encouragement from School Districts

In the CASB survey of school districts' HB 1118 efforts, some school district officials offered "gems" of wisdom for those districts that have not yet started engaging their community. Here are some of their comments:

- *"It is never easy to undertake such a big project. If you go at it with a plan in mind, you will be successful and have some very insightful conversations about education."*
Park R-3 (Estes Park)—Region 4
- *"Use these meetings to open dialogue between the school and the community, but don't allow it to become a platform for demanding curriculum changes."*
Archuleta-Hinsdale 50 JT (Pagosa Springs)—Region 9
- *"Thoughtfulness, passion and commitment to excellence best describe the process. And everyone involved came away feeling they were valued stakeholders in planning their community's educational program."*
Meeker Re-1—Region 7
- *"Center the conversation on the question that asks what students need for future success. This helps to focus and guide the conversation."*
Fremont RE-1 (Canon City)—Region 6
- *"Our process is extremely useful. It provides a positive forum for board members and the representatives from the local schools to interact and exchange ideas relating to students and the school process. It is one of the most positive things we do each year."*
Delta County 50J—Region 8
- *"Be brave! It is scary to face a group that is not together often, but they want to contribute and want the district to succeed. So be patient and listen."*
Holyoke School District Re-1J—Region 1

"Make sure you include students in the conversation. Find new ways to encourage people to come talk to you."
~ Jane Barnes, 2008 CASB President

- *“Use existing structures and committees as one system for gaining input into graduation requirements. Include students, colleges and employers.”*
Cherry Creek Schools—Region 5
- *“Be open to new ideas and a different way of thinking.”*
Otis Public Schools—Region 1
- *“Without a framework for discussion, the input may become unmanageable.”*
Roaring Fork Re-1 (Glenwood Springs)— Region 7
- *“Use any means necessary to get people to come. We used e-mail, parent groups, phone calls and personal invitations to produce interest and generate discussion topics. Dedicate time and energy to the process.”*
Clear Creek Re-1 (Idaho Springs)—Region 5

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State Board Liaison

Pamela Jo Suckla

Ken DeLay
executive director
kdelay@casb.org

Jane Urschel, Ph.D.
deputy executive director
jurschel@casb.org

Jennifer Reeve, APR
assistant executive director
jreeve@casb.org

Randy Black
director of member relations
rblack@casb.org

Linda Buckalew
business manager
lbuckalew@casb.org

Renée Combs
executive assistant,
conferences and communications
rcombs@casb.org

Debbie Flynn
executive assistant
dflynn@casb.org

Julie George
director of government relations
jgeorge@casb.org

Alan Hentschel
receptionist; executive assistant,
member relations
ahentschel@casb.org

Jeri Hodgson
director of policy services
jhodgson@casb.org

Jessica Kinghorn
director of communications
jkinghorn@casb.org

Lauren Kingsbery
of counsel
lkingsbery@casb.org

Ana Navratil
executive assistant,
government relations
anavratil@casb.org

Virginia Panzer
paralegal/ executive assistant,
policy, legal & advocacy
vpanzer@casb.org

David Price
director/lead counsel,
CASB Legal Services Program
dprice@casb.org

Kathy Shannon
director of member legal resources
and policy counsel
kshannon@casb.org

Kathleen Sullivan
attorney; associate director,
CASB legal services program
ksullivan@casb.org

Nancy Weiss
director of conferences
nweiss@casb.org

Susan Zamudio
director of executive &
administrative services
szamudio@casb.org

Special Projects Consultants

Bob Cito
superintendent search service
bbcito@comcast.net

Vera Dawson, Ed.D.
educational services
veradawson@aol.com

Lynne Hunt
policy services and Prism
lynnehunt@qwest.net

Jim Weigel
Policy Governance® service
jjweigelsprint@earthlink.net