

The Next Generation of Colorado Education



**Colorado School Board Members
Speak Out on Transforming
Education for the 21st Century**



Colorado Association of School Boards

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Jenny is a former member and president of the Woodland Park Re-2 Board of Education and an advocate for local control.

Jane Urschel, CASB associate executive director, facilitated the August 2006 discussion meetings and the 11 regional meetings held throughout the fall of 2006.

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Introduction	2
Executive Summary	4
Background	6
CASB and its Membership	6
Recent Developments Affecting Public Education in Colorado	6
The August Discussion Meetings	8
The 2006 CASB Regional Meetings	10
The Emerging Consensus: Reform Led at the Local Level	10
Option One: Statewide Graduation Requirements Are Not the Answer	10
Option Two: Reasonable Accountability is Necessary and Welcomed	12
Option Three: Individual Paths to Excellence as the Best Solution	12
Option Four: Guarded Support for Exploring a “P ² ” System	14
A Fifth Choice: Combinations	15
Moving Ahead	16
Ideas for the 2007 Legislative Session	16
Challenges for the Long-Term Work	16
Conclusion	18
Appendix A: Regional Meeting Discussion Handout	19
CASB Board of Directors	20
Your CASB Team	inside back cover

Introduction

The design of a comprehensive, workable, preschool through post-secondary education system for Colorado is not just a fleeting project for the Colorado Association of School Boards. In fact, it was the chief focus of 2006 and will continue to be a major initiative for CASB in the years to come.

Ideally, CASB would have preferred twice as much time for our members to deliberate on the idea of an effective preschool through post-secondary education system to give CASB staff a legislative direction. However, the urgent need for educational renewal in a rapidly-changing educational and global environment called for immediate action.

This report is the result of a year of work from CASB Board members, staff and member districts. The timeline below reflects that work.

2006

January

At the January 2006 retreat, the CASB Board of Directors set three annual performance goals for the CASB staff:

1. CASB will equip boards to effectively govern their school districts to improve student achievement.
2. CASB will advocate for responsible change in public education that is consistent with CASB's mission.
3. CASB will provide programs and services that help members respond to districts' changing needs.

In the discussions that preceded the goals, the board expressed a great desire to focus on comprehensive education reform centering around a preschool through post-secondary system of education while allowing for local flexibility and creativity.

February

CASB supported legislation introduced in the Colorado General Assembly creating a 29-member P-16 Council to research issues related to a seamless system of education in Colorado. The bill was one of those recommended by the School Finance Interim Committee. This legislation set a process in place to consider a fully-functioning education system that expands access to early learning for children under five and improves their readiness for kindergarten; fosters greater collaboration among education professionals at all grade levels; aligns standards and curriculum across grade levels; promotes widespread parent, community and student understanding of goals and expectations; and significantly reduces the amount of post-secondary remedial work required after a student graduates from high school. The bill was vetoed by Governor Owens in May.

May

The CASB Board met in another retreat to further explore the concept of a "P-16" education system.

At the retreat, facilitated by Kelly Hupfeld of Public Sector Solutions, the board:

- learned about "P-16" concepts and implications, with a particular focus on high school graduation requirements;
- framed the question, "Why P-16?"; and
- agreed that an advisory committee of the board would be charged with developing an action plan for creating a dialogue among members on the issue.

June

The CASB Board advisory committee, along with CASB staff, created an action plan for engaging and informing the CASB membership about the challenges and opportunities presented by a preschool through post-secondary education system.

August

CASB convened five discussion meetings around the state. In these meetings, school board members and school district administrators shared their opinions around rigor in the high school curriculum, graduation requirements, standards-based education and a "P-16" education system.

CASB published an *Insights on Issues* newsletter on the importance of Early Childhood Education to a successful educational process.

September and October

CASB staff used August discussion meeting results to prepare a presentation for CASB's Regional Meetings. School board members at the meetings participated in table discussions focusing on four statewide educational alternatives (read discussion topics in Appendix A on page 19).

CASB published an *Insights on Issues* newsletter on a seamless education system.

Delegates at the October 2006 Delegate Assembly adopted a resolution that will guide CASB's 2007, and possibly subsequent, legislative agendas regarding preschool through post-secondary education (read below).

November

CASB dedicated the fall issue of its issues journal, *Prism*, to preschool through post-secondary education.

December

CASB's Convention, themed Lead Locally. Think Globally, focused pre-convention sessions, keynote speakers and breakout sessions on pieces of the preschool through post-secondary process.

CASB Resolution Guiding the P-16 Effort

4.18 Public education in the 21st century (adopted October 2006)

CASB urges state and local policymakers to forge a new working relationship in redesigning Colorado's public education system for the 21st century, with a focus on improving student achievement and holding each level of the system accountable, from preschool through post-secondary education, in a manner that:

- a) eliminates bureaucratic mandates and fragmentation so that multi-level communication and interaction can take place to enhance student academic success;
- b) offers all students a rigorous, developmentally-appropriate curriculum designed to provide opportunities and choice, regardless of the post-secondary path they choose;
- c) engages the assets of the full community;
- d) utilizes data and technology to individualize education for students and to incorporate new learning into the design;
- e) closes the achievement gap by focusing on quality teaching and learning opportunities;
- f) implements standards-based education fully in a seamless curriculum, so one level of the system builds on the next and the end result is known and understood from the beginning;
- g) provides sufficient resources at every level of the system to meet the challenge; and
- h) preserves the ability of local communities to address local needs and challenges in a creative manner.

Rationale: While school districts are making progress in closing the student achievement gap, too many students still fall below the proficiency level. Often these gaps are known before children reach the schoolhouse door, yet the education system is not always responsive because of lack of communication, scarce resources and low expectations. Can the adults who make policies affecting the academic lives of students talk to each other? In an ideal world, schools would be organized around students' needs, starting at an early age, and designed to enhance success at the post-secondary level to meet the required skills and knowledge for students to be successful in the 21st century. The intent of this resolution is to set a framework for the dialogue about a next-generation system of education designed with the best interests of students in mind.

Executive Summary

During August 2006, CASB held five discussion meetings around the state. In these meetings, school district administrators and school board members had rich discussions around the topics of rigor in the high school curriculum, graduation requirements, standards-based education and a “P–16” education system.

CASB staff used the August discussion meeting results to prepare a presentation for CASB’s annual regional meetings held in September and October 2006. School board members and superintendents at the meetings were asked to participate in table discussions around these four alternatives:

- Should Colorado have statewide high school graduation requirements applicable to all districts across the state?
- Should Colorado districts request that the state provide sufficient resources for districts to accomplish the goals that have already been set for them, and otherwise “leave us alone?”
- Should Colorado districts accept a mandate for change and take active steps to renew and improve high school education and graduation requirements?
- Should the state and districts explore ways to better align education systems from preschool through post-secondary?

School board members across Colorado call for increased rigor and relevance in high school; improving all pathways to student success and improving alignment in Colorado’s public education system.

Regional Meetings Results

Discussions from these fall meetings were surprisingly consistent across the state.

There is no support for statewide graduation requirements applicable to every district in Colorado. This is based primarily on two perceptions:

- Colorado school districts are very different. Local school board members can better serve the students in their districts by adopting graduation requirements that meet the needs of the community and the students.
- There is a distinct lack of trust in policy makers at the state level to implement requirements that are based on what works for children.

There is virtually no support for asking the state to provide funding without accountability. This is based primarily on two perceptions:

- This approach is not realistic.
- This approach is not desirable — districts accept accountability in return for public funds.

There is very strong support for a re-examination of local district graduation requirements to ensure that these requirements prepare students for a variety of options in a changed world.

- Many school districts are already engaged in this process.
- There is a commitment to ensuring that all children have the academic background to make whatever choices are best for them. Students’ choices should not be limited based either on student background factors or on the location and wealth of the school district.
- There should be multiple paths to a high school diploma to accommodate differing student interests and community economic needs. Each path must be of equal rigor, given new evidence showing that the requirements of post-secondary education and skilled employment after high school are merging. However, equal rigor does not require identical coursework.
- In some districts, the senior year is very rigorous. In others, school board members admit the need for reviewing policies and practices. There is no support for eliminating the senior year entirely in view of its actual and potential linkage to the next stage of a student’s future.
- There is an important role for the state in providing guidance and support for school districts as they review high school graduation requirements.

There is guarded support for exploring a system that better aligns all parts of the education process.

- School board members approve the general idea of alignment, but are highly distrustful of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education's (CCHÉ) role and motivation in prior alignment efforts.
- Any exploration of an aligned system must include K–12 as a prominent participant, and must promote student preparation for options that include entry into the workforce and post-secondary training as well as entry into four-year colleges. Failure to recognize and promote student options in areas other than four-year colleges is short-sighted and offensive.
- School board members are wary of the term “P–16,” since it implies that the ultimate goal is completing a four-year college degree. They prefer a term that is inclusive of all student outcomes that lead to success, such as “P²” — preschool through post-secondary.

CASB Legislative Package

Based on the outcomes of the fall regional meetings, CASB is considering a comprehensive legislative package designed to accomplish the following:

- Increase rigor and relevance of high school coursework and the diploma while preserving local community decision making and opportunities for innovation
- Create structure/s to explore the alignment of educational systems along a P² continuum (preschool to post-secondary experiences) that fully engage all stakeholders, increase student achievement and respect all visions of student success
- Take immediate action to improve P² alignment through early childhood education funding and fifth-year programs for at-risk students
- Set up a public-private clearinghouse allowing districts and schools to learn from effective practices
- Create an interim committee to explore regulatory barriers to district innovation

CASB and its Membership

The Colorado Association of School Boards, established in 1940, represents Colorado school boards in advocacy and education efforts statewide. It also provides a variety of resources to its member school boards, including board training, legal advice and representation, legislative updates and services, policy information and services, assistance with community relations and a superintendent search service. All 178 school boards in Colorado are CASB members.

CASB's Mission: Advancing excellence in public education through effective leadership by locally elected school boards.

School boards serve as connections between communities and their public schools. School board members, elected on a nonpartisan basis, are members of the community charged with oversight of the schools within their districts. In Colorado, the role of the school board is especially important. Colorado is one of only a few states with a state constitutional provision mandating “local control.” Our constitution states that local school boards are to have control of instruction in their school districts. “Local control” means that a great many education functions and decisionmaking powers in Colorado occur at the local level rather than the state level.

As an association, CASB takes direction from its members. One of the most important ways CASB learns about member opinions is through its annual series of regional meetings. Every fall, CASB holds 11 meetings throughout the state in preparation for the upcoming calendar year and legislative session. This report addresses the results of conversations at CASB's 2006 regional meetings and their implications for Colorado's educational system.

Recent Developments Affecting Public Education in Colorado

Public education in Colorado and nationally underwent a sea change in the past decade. In the early 1990s, most states introduced content standards, designed to identify what students need to know and be able to do at different levels in a variety of subjects. Assessments, including the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), were introduced to measure how well students met the content standards. In 2000, Colorado created an accountability system that linked student performance on CSAPs to consequences for schools and districts. This standards-based accountability was supplemented further by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which requires schools, districts and states to show annual progress toward grade-level proficiency by virtually all students by the 2013–14 school year.

In addition, our national, state and local economies are changing dramatically. As discussed by Thomas Friedman in his book *The World is Flat*, the advent of technology has created an unprecedented international flow of commerce. It is no longer enough for schools to prepare students for a well-defined local economy. Instead, students need to be prepared for a variety of possible futures as businesses adjust to national and international competitive pressures.

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At the same time, technology and innovations changed the very content of the work we do. Computers and automated processes are omnipresent and introduced a level of sophistication into the workplace that was not present even 10 years ago. This is true not only of traditional white-collar office jobs, but also of jobs in technical fields such as manufacturing, construction and auto mechanics, as well as agriculture and health care.

As a result, the demands on public education are increasing to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for an ever-more challenging future. Achieve, Inc. conducted a nationwide survey of employers and faculty at two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions and concluded that all students need to take a rigorous course of study in high school in order to be prepared for whatever future they choose. (Achieve 2004) Meanwhile, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills developed a list of intellectual and social skills that will be needed as our economy transitions to this more sophisticated level, including innovation and creativity, information and communications technology, and adaptability.

Unfortunately, some research shows that a significant number of students are not well-prepared for the futures they will face. As a general rule of thumb, our public education system seems to be working fairly well for approximately 60–70 percent of students. However, the following findings have implications for changes in education:

- Achievement gaps in Colorado between white and Asian students and their Hispanic and black counterparts are consistently wide, across subjects and grade levels. (Colorado Department of Education)
- About two-thirds of Colorado tenth-graders read at or above grade level. (Colorado Department of Education)
- About three in 10 Colorado tenth-graders perform at or above grade level in math. (Colorado Department of Education)
- Approximately 72 percent of ninth-graders in Colorado will graduate from high school four years later. (*Education Week 2006*)
- Of students entering two-year or four-year colleges in Colorado after graduating from high school, nearly three in 10 will require remedial courses before they are considered ready for college-level work. (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2005)

These are Colorado statistics, but the same or even worse results hold true across the country. Perhaps most significantly, a large percentage of high school graduates themselves are concerned about their preparation. In a national survey, nearly half of those who went to college and nearly 60 percent of those who joined the workforce reported they were only somewhat well prepared or not well-prepared for their experiences. Eighty-six percent of those who went to college reported a gap in their preparation in at least one area. (*Achieve 2005*).

In many states, policy makers, educators and the business community are working together to revamp their education systems. In Colorado, several initiatives were launched in response to the Achieve data. Unfortunately, many within the K–12 education community felt their voices were not encouraged in these initiatives.

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For example, in 2005, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) developed draft requirements for admission into Colorado’s four-year institutions. These requirements, which included four years of mathematics and two years of foreign language, were derived from research by ACT and Achieve suggesting that this rigorous curriculum led to success in college. However, many in Colorado’s education community received the draft requirements with great concern. In particular, rural districts felt they did not have access to the resources required to ensure that their graduates could meet these new requirements. Others were simply offended by the perception that CCHE was looking to impose de facto high school graduation requirements without any input from K–12. Some districts enthusiastically adopted the draft CCHE requirements as their own high school graduation requirements; others began the process of examining how they might meet or adapt the new requirements within their own realities; and others devoted their energy to trying to change CCHE’s draft. The conversation is ongoing.

In 2006, Gov. Bill Owens appointed an Education Alignment Task Force as a result of the state’s partnership with Achieve. It was charged with implementing the recommendations of Achieve with respect to high school curriculum and graduation in Colorado. Many within the education community did not realize the connection between the task force and Achieve’s goals until well after the task force’s work began. In addition, K–12 was represented on the task force solely by three superintendents who were already leading advocates of Achieve-type reform. Again, the perceived lack of real dialogue alienated many within the K–12 community.

Finally, relationships between the Colorado Department of Education and school districts have been rocky for several years. As reported in *Education Week*, this spring Colorado’s superintendents presented an unprecedented white paper to the Commissioner of Education and the State Board of Education, calling for greater inclusion in decisionmaking, better leadership, more assistance to local districts and less bureaucracy. (McNeil 2006)

In an environment that combined a need for education reform with a lack of trust among the players in Colorado education politics, the CASB Board of Directors and staff decided to explore the willingness of CASB members to lead, rather than react to, education reform.

The August Discussion Meetings

In August 2006, CASB convened five discussion meetings around the state to talk about some of these fundamental issues. The meetings were held in Breckenridge, Telluride, Limon, Pueblo and Denver. Participants represented a wide variety of school districts and included school board members, superintendents and other district administrators. The intent of the discussion groups was to inform CASB staff and members about the promise and pitfalls of future directions in K–12 education, so CASB could take these themes to its members during fall regional meetings throughout the state. This section provides a summary of discussion group outcomes. (*A full report on the results of the August discussion meetings is available at www.casb.org.*)

In the five discussion groups, CASB asked participants to provide their opinions about these questions:

- What should your students know and be able to do when they graduate with a diploma from your district? What are we educating students for?
- Are the high school standards we have now sufficient?
- How do we gather evidence about what kids know? What is the role of local assessments?
- What should the relationship be between learning and time in our schools?
- What should the role of the state be in determining graduation requirements?
- Is the senior year wasted as some suggest?
- What are the pros and cons of a statewide P–16 system? Can a P–16 system be successful in a local control state?
- What are you doing in your districts to deal with these questions?
- Do you have any recommendations to the legislature?

The discussions were rich and lively. Participants shared the diverse challenges they faced in their districts, as well as inspirational stories of ongoing reforms. The districts CASB heard from could not have been more different in size, location and access to resources. However, some very important themes often emerged in each conversation.

First, discussion group participants uniformly echoed the need for high expectations and rigorous requirements for students. They shared the belief that students will rise to the levels we set for them; conversely, students will exert minimal effort if that is all we expect. Several participants shared their own personal stories of success made possible only by high expectations communicated to them by adults in their K–12 schools.

The groups also shared the belief that the K–12 education system should provide students with a strong grounding in basic subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics. In addition, K–12 should teach students how to think critically and problem solve, skills that participants identified as crucial to democracy as well as students' economic futures.

However, we repeatedly heard that there must be different pathways to student success. While participants tended to agree that a high school education should prepare students to make their own choices after graduation, they tended to disagree that rigor can only be expressed through a mandatory pre-collegiate curriculum such as that proposed by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. Rather, participants sought ways to infuse rigor into a variety of pathways — arts and music, technical career preparation, and preparation for college. Individualizing educational opportunities to the needs of students, while setting the academic bar high for all students, was the most popular approach suggested by participants. The need for individualized student support was a related theme.

Most participants were satisfied with the content of Colorado’s standards but not their application. We heard several times that the current system represents an uncomfortable and often conflicting compromise between the objectives of standards-based education and the traditional system of education based on Carnegie units. Many participants suggested that the system should evolve into a truly outcomes-based system, where students progress based on proven proficiency rather than as a function of age and seat time. This type of system would allow the focus to be on individual student learning and would place a measure of accountability on students for their own performance.

In general, participants supported the idea of “thinking P-16” — connecting the objectives of K-12 with student experiences and needs both before kindergarten and after high school graduation. Many districts initiated conversations and partnerships with their local employers and higher education institutions, and most were eager to learn more about the requirements of the world

students enter after graduation. However, participants expressed frustration that the P-16 conversations that occurred in Colorado were often “one-way,” experienced as directives from higher education to K-12. As a result, there was suspicion about the actual implementation of P-16 in Colorado, even as there was support of the overall objectives. Many conversations focused on the need to affirm the choices of students opting to enter the workforce directly after graduation, and to include these choices when talking about a P-16 system.

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The conversations brought to light the many ways in which districts are already taking steps to reform education to meet new needs. These changes ranged from increasing rigor in high school graduation requirements and throughout the curriculum to setting up systems to monitor individual student progress and provide timely interventions. Participants believed that the state could play a valuable role in providing information, guidelines and resources to support these initiatives, as well as sending a strong message about the need for high expectations in each district. However, they tended to be suspicious of the state’s ability to implement uniform laws and standards that would make sense for each district, and questioned whether state directives would be used to harm rather than help districts.

The 2006 CASB Regional Meetings: Support for Reform and Renewal

Results from the August discussion meetings were used to craft the programs for CASB's annual series of regional meetings of school boards throughout the state. These 11 meetings occurred in September through November 2006, reaching hundreds of school board members who were locally elected by their communities to oversee public education, as well as superintendents and other administrators.

The schedule of regional meetings was as follows:

September 6	Limon
September 25	Sterling
September 28	Colorado Springs
October 4	Steamboat Springs
October 5	Glenwood Springs
October 11	Alamosa
October 17	Loveland
October 18	La Junta
October 25	Denver
October 30	Montrose
November 1	Durango

“Individual student needs must be addressed, not by mandate, but by our responsibility to them.”

LaJunta participant

At each meeting, participants heard a briefing on policy and political developments affecting Colorado education. Audience volunteers were then asked to present four different scenarios for discussion. A copy of the scenarios presented at the regional meetings is included as Appendix A on page 19. In essence, participants were asked to discuss the pros and cons of the scenarios, and ultimately to indicate which, if any, they agreed with.

1. Should Colorado have statewide high school graduation requirements applicable to all districts across the state?
2. Should Colorado districts request that the state provide sufficient resources for districts to accomplish the goals that have already been set for them, and otherwise “leave us alone?”
3. Should Colorado districts accept a mandate for change and take active steps to renew and improve high school education and graduation requirements?
4. Should the state and districts explore ways to better align education systems from preschool through post-secondary?

The Emerging Consensus — Reform Led at the Local Level

As with the August discussion meetings, the responses of participants at the fall regional meetings were surprisingly consistent. When asked to select which option they favored, participants overwhelmingly selected the third option: the charge for reform, led at the local level. The fourth option, an aligned “preschool through post-secondary” educational system, was a close second, and in fact, many discussion tables ended up combining the third and fourth choices. The second option of “leave us alone” received only a few votes, and statewide graduation requirements received no votes; however, certain aspects of these options were seen as useful. The next sections will discuss the themes that emerged as participants discussed each of the options.

Option One: Statewide Graduation Requirements Are Not the Answer

It is clear that there is no support among school board members for statewide graduation requirements applicable to every district in Colorado. While participants generally understand the need for improved rigor and the argument for a universally high bar for excellence, two factors were seen to outweigh any positive impact of statewide graduation requirements.

First, participants consistently pointed out the extreme variation among Colorado districts. Eighty-six of Colorado's 178 school districts serve rural and small communities, and 50 districts serve fewer than 300 students. These districts' circumstances are very different from those experienced by larger metro-area districts. In many cases, school board members pointed out previously-enacted policies that worked well for some districts and severely handicapped others. There is also a wide variety of student and community interests, making a “one-size fits all” solution unpopular.

On a related note, school board members noted that “one-size-fits-all” applies to students no better than it does to districts. Requiring a heavy load of courses directed solely at college preparation would eliminate the ability of districts to offer other types of courses. In many cases, participants felt, a mandated curriculum would actually harm some students by preventing them from participating in classes that truly engaged them. As we look for ways to engage students and create meaningful futures for them based on their interests and aptitudes, why would we prevent them from following their interests?, was an often-asked question.

Participants at several different meetings pointed out a mixed message sent by uniform high school graduation requirements. Colorado has been a leader in encouraging school choice options, from homeschooling to charter schools to public school choice. As school boards struggle to embrace choice and its implications, they are perplexed by other policies that appear to demand standardization and inflexibility.

Second, school board members across the state referred to a lack of trust in policy makers at the state level. Participants viewed state decisions as often made on the basis of political expediency, and not based on thoughtful views of what serves children best. State-level policy makers would do well to note this relationship breakdown with their local communities and take steps to mend it.

“Just moving all of us to a certain standard won’t solve the problem. We need fluid ways of changing and improving.”

Loveland participant

In discussing this option, however, participants also clarified that they would welcome state assistance in helping local districts understand whether and how to make changes to their current practices. The state could play an important role in providing information to districts about global and national trends affecting their schools, including sample graduation requirements and policies that improve high school rigor. Participants liked the goals of coordination and consistency that are implicit in this option, but ultimately felt it went too far.

Choice vs. Mandates

“In many ways, the state is demanding choice; but in some areas the state is demanding standardization: which is it?”

Steamboat Springs participant

“We have a clash of individualism and regulation.”

Alamosa participant

“On the one hand, we’re talking about choice, we need lots of choice. On the other hand, we’re talking about uniformity and everyone doing the same thing.”

Denver participant

Option Two: Reasonable Accountability is Necessary and Welcomed

The second option offered participants the chance to direct CASB staff to tell state policy makers to provide more money and “leave us alone.” This was a tempting proposition for school board members, many of whom feel that their districts are overwhelmed and underfunded. Simmering resentment toward the perceived heavy-handedness of state-level policy makers also contributed to the temptation to choose this option.

“There is a new reality of what local control is. We need to acknowledge change and work within it.”

Montrose participant

Ultimately, however, conversations about this option tended to follow the same path. As the option was brought up, participants smiled at each other and said, “We wish!” Almost immediately, someone at the table would then bring up the impracticality of the situation. After years of state standards and accountability systems, school board members appear resigned to the fact that they will not be left alone by the state, whether or not they wish to be.

Generally, the conversation then evolved to a third point. For the most part, school board members feel that the state has a legitimate interest in school performance. The quality of K–12 education affects the local and state economy, many participants noted. The state also invests huge sums of money in local school districts, and it is only natural that it would want to hold districts accountable for that money. As a result, the state should monitor district performance and expect excellence from its schools.

Many participants, while rejecting the isolationist approach of the second option, noted that it was the only option to specifically call for the state to provide adequate funding for education. School board members across the state, from districts large and small, rural and urban, expressed the belief that schools are underfunded for the outcomes they are expected to provide. In essence, participants might revise the second option to read: “Give us the money and don’t leave us alone.”

Option Three: Individual Paths to Excellence as the Best Solution

The third option presented to school board members called for local boards to accept the responsibility of improving their schools. This option presented real-world examples of rigorous improvements already moving ahead in some districts.

This option emerged quite definitively as the consensus across the regional meetings. As was often expressed, the third option is the only solution that calls for real reform yet preserves local control and flexibility. In many cases, school board members spontaneously volunteered specifics on how they were in the process of implementing this type of change. Other participants were eager to learn about these reforms and how they were being accomplished, leading to a real sense of excitement and possibility at many discussions. The “innovator” districts often expressed concern about being derailed by state-level mandates that would not benefit their students.

As was expressed in the August discussion meetings, school board members participating in these regional meetings were concerned about the need to individualize education for their students’ needs and interests. Colorado’s school board members come to their positions from a wide variety of backgrounds, occupations and motivations. As a result, they provide a snapshot of the diversity of Colorado’s population, including its workforce. They are comfortable with the understanding that there are a variety of pathways to success. While obtaining a four-year college degree is certainly one pathway, participants discussed the importance of technical training programs for those students who are more interested in hands-on work than traditional academics. Making these options available and attractive to students who want them would lead to more overall success, participants felt, than trying to shoehorn students who are very different into the same mold. As a Steamboat Springs participant put it, effective options require the “rigorous application of a diverse curriculum.”

Many conversations focused on the importance of preparing students well for any future they may encounter. Participants noted that today’s employees change jobs regularly. Others pointed out that given the rapid advance of

technology, it is difficult to know exactly what jobs we are preparing the class of 2018 for. In addition to basic skills in reading, writing, and math, participants emphasized the importance of 21st-century job skills, such as communication, critical thinking and analysis, problem solving and adaptability. Like participants in the August discussion meetings, school board members at the regional meetings wrestled with how best to prepare students to be thinkers and problem solvers, regardless of the content with which they worked.

In this option, the role of the state is viewed as critical. Several participants saw the state's role as setting the "vision," and then assisting local districts as they implemented the local version of the vision. Smaller districts in particular expressed the need for state assistance in actually making changes, including but not limited to adequate funding.

"We're raising great test-takers. We need to move away from that."

Alamosa participant

A few participants expressed doubt that the state would "let" local districts lead reform. In some cases, this was viewed as a legitimate concern. As one participant stated, "Number 3 is my ideal, but why isn't everyone there?" On the other hand, another participant stated, "We wouldn't be on school boards if we weren't committed to improving education." This honest discussion revealed that participants felt ready to take the reins on this important reform.

Reform Underway: Ideas from Innovator Districts

- Partnering with the community to build a new early childhood education center aligned with district early learning standards
- Expanding full-day kindergarten throughout the district
- Conducting regular curriculum "rigor" review, using standards from other districts, states and countries
- Using technology to supply a wide range of world language options
- Expecting every child to be ready for pre-algebra in 6th grade, and addressing the implications of this expectation in the early and higher grades
- Developing common assessments for non-CSAP-tested areas
- Providing extended learning time focusing solely on skills kids are lacking
- Using school-based "progress monitors" — staff responsible for tracking individual student progress and identifying ways to intervene and support students
- Using individualized learning plans for all students
- Using standards-based report cards
- Providing out-of-school tutoring to allow for access to elective courses
- Requiring three years of foreign language
- Requiring students to take math and English classes in the senior year to keep it "fresh" in their brains and to allow for remediation if necessary
- Providing AP/dual credit opportunities
- Using volunteers to support students taking dual credit courses in applying for college and making plans for the workplace
- Using an "academies" approach to high school
- Conducting a "New Century Graduate" community engagement process, resulting in guidelines and assessments
- Sending every high school senior to community college for English and social studies
- Creating seven-year plans for students, starting in 6th grade. The plan can change, but it provides a vehicle for talking about classes and expectations.
- Aligning 11th and 12th grades with plans for students' futures, using a K-14 model
- Implementing a performance-based graduation policy
- Creating a "district-certified" diploma for students who take rigorous coursework
- Holding local conversations with business leaders and post-secondary institutions concerning expectations and alignment
- Serving on advisory committees for local teacher preparation programs
- Tracking graduate outcomes through the Student Tracker for High Schools, a product of the National Student Clearinghouse

Option Four: Guarded Support for Exploring a “P²” System

The final option presented to school board members involved the establishment of what has been referred to as a “P–16 system.” A P–16 system aligns all aspects of the educational system, from preschool and other forms of early childhood education through graduation from a four-year college. This alignment makes academic expectations transparent at all levels of the system, so students can be better prepared as they move through the system. Incorporating suggestions from the August discussion meetings, CASB staff presented this option as a “P²” system, meaning preschool through post-secondary. The term “post-secondary” is general enough to encompass any post-secondary experience that students may want, whether in higher education or in the workforce.

Many school board members said this sounded like a “good idea.” A few tables chose this option as their first choice. As one participant in Glenwood Springs commented, “This is the most comprehensive way. It tries to cover all the issues.” In Montrose, some participants questioned the need for options 1–3 if a true P² system were in place. Many discussion tables combined options three and four, viewing a P² system as a good way to accomplish the individualized and rigorous preparation envisioned in option three.

**“All players need to come to the table
and take the time to do it right.”**

Glenwood Springs participant

Yet, there was a great deal of concern about this option. In fact, a few tables in rural areas rejected it outright. It is an understatement to say that school board members tend to mistrust CCHE and its motives. This lack of trust has caused suspicion of CCHE’s actions on many fronts, ranging from the establishment of test

scores for remediation requirements to the proposed admission requirements. Any alignment effort that is seen to be led by CCHE or designed primarily to benefit higher education is unlikely to be trusted by K–12. Rural school districts will not support alignment efforts that do not take their unique needs into account.

On the other hand, the majority of school board members across Colorado expressed the view that if K–12 was a true participant in the process, and if a wide variety of post-secondary options for students was acknowledged and encouraged, then this approach had great promise. School board members appear eager to better understand what will be required of their students in the future so they can better serve their students.

As participants discussed the role of the senior year, many stated their ideal would be to treat the senior year as a transition year — one in which seniors are able to begin to move into their future of choice even as they are still in school. For example, many districts have students enrolled in dual credit courses with local higher education institutions. Several participants thought that senior year would be an ideal time for students choosing to go into the workforce to complete internships with local businesses. Many participants viewed lack of resources as a barrier to these types of opportunities.

In some cases, participants brought up the importance of bringing in stakeholders outside education. As a Loveland participant put it: “I would like the governor and the legislature to convene meaningful, non-political conversations involving issues around families, business and communities and their effect on education. Until we have that, we will be dealing with little pieces. We have so many families who are broken.”

A Fifth Choice: Combinations

Consistent with the theme of individualizing, at several meetings, participants decided to add to or combine the choices available to them. In particular, participants at several tables expressed the view that each option had its own strengths, and they would prefer to see aspects of each in an ultimate solution:

OPTION	FAVORABLE ASPECTS
1 – Statewide Diploma	Recognizes state interest in high-quality education. Promotes coordination, consistency, “not reinventing the wheel.”
2 – Increase Funding, Leave Us Alone	Recognizes enormous need for funding to accomplish changes. Gives districts time and space to make changes.
3 – Districts Step Up	Combines push for change with flexibility and local control.
4 – P ² System	Promotes coordination, alignment, efficiency and recognition of mutual responsibilities for student outcomes.

“Number three is our utopia. To come into the 21st century with our kids, that should be our goal. But we can’t do it under the current system. There’s not enough money, there’s not enough time. Where will the help come from? How can we move forward if we can’t make the changes we need to make?”

Denver participant

Ideas for the 2007 Legislative Session

Both political parties have expressed a great deal of interest in making significant education reforms. Based on input from the fall 2006 regional meetings and a resolution adopted at the CASB Delegate Assembly in October, CASB will support legislation that represents a comprehensive and balanced approach to increasing rigor and relevance in our high schools and explores the benefits of a P² system. Key components of a legislative package include the following:

- Directing the State Board of Education to include all stakeholders in devising guidelines for high school graduation requirements that address multiple pathways to diplomas. These guidelines would provide much-needed assistance to local districts as they review graduation requirements, but still allow local districts to be flexible and innovative.
- Directing the State Board of Education to set up a process to review Colorado’s 9–12 content standards to ensure that they are specific and relevant.
- Providing funding for districts that require extra assistance in meeting new goals.
- Formation of a P² Commission to explore opportunities for aligning the education system to improve student outcomes.
- Increasing incentives and opportunities for school districts to collaborate productively with other partners in the education system.
- Setting up an information clearinghouse to allow districts to share information about what works.
- Creating an interim legislative committee charged with reviewing potential barriers to district innovation.

Challenges for the Long-Term Work

The need for transformation has been accepted by Colorado’s school boards who are willing to demonstrate leadership at the local and state levels. However, as those responsible for educating Colorado’s students move forward on this path of change, we would do well to remember challenges and concerns raised in these discussions. Our success will depend on our ability to overcome these challenges.

Educating our Communities

Some participants expressed concern about potential conflicts between the direction of reform and the preferences of local communities and parents. This seems to fall into two categories: conflicts faced by communities in decline who want to keep graduates in the community; and parents and community members who may not have high expectations for students.

Towns on Colorado’s Eastern Plains are in a tragic bind. Populations are declining due to substantial out-migration, with very few people moving into the communities. Some school board members feel under pressure to “keep the kids in the community.” In a few cases, districts are even told not to prepare students for college, because there is the likelihood these students will move away after graduation. When this opinion comes directly from local employers and prominent community members, educators and board members are caught between a rock and a hard place.

“There aren’t too many calculus teachers in Phippsburg.”

Steamboat Springs participant

The futures of rural students cannot be compromised by a deliberate failure to expose them to the education they need in hopes they will be trapped in the local workforce. On the other hand, the need for economic development opportunities in small communities must be addressed in meaningful ways. We cannot place this burden entirely on the shoulders of the local K–12 schools. And we cannot be oblivious to the unique pressures faced by rural school boards.

While this particular pressure seemed to be unique to rural schools, a wide variety of school board members expressed concern over the ability to radically transform expectations for students in family and community environments that did not expect student success. While this situation is not insurmountable, it should be recognized as we transform education. It is essential that we also bring along our families and communities in understanding the need for change. Reform will not succeed without the support of families and communities.

Multiple Paths, Equal Rigor

School board members were virtually unanimous in their belief that there must be multiple pathways to student success, and that we cannot communicate to our students that they have failed if they choose not to attend college. However, they were also unanimous in their belief that we must have high expectations for our students, no matter which pathway they choose.

Much of the excitement in the discussion tables stemmed from sharing information about new technical and career preparation programs. Unfortunately, “vocational education” has a bad reputation among many education analysts. In too many cases across the country, students are tracked into dead-end vocational classes free of any academic rigor, based on misperceptions about interests and abilities. In too many cases, these tracking decisions were made on assumptions stemming from family income and racial background rather than actual student needs and interests.

Our challenge in setting up multiple pathways to success will be to ensure two equally important outcomes. First, all students must have equal access to high-level preparation for college, should they choose to attend. This must include offering the necessary college-preparatory coursework, as well as ensuring that students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds understand that college is a viable choice for them. No student should be discouraged from seeing college as an option for any reason that is within the control of schools.

School board members across the state expressed frustration at the disconnect between the improvements they wanted to make in their schools and the resources available to them.

Second, all students must have equal access to high-level preparation for the workforce, should they choose this outcome. Students should not be discouraged from career and technical preparation because of adult messages that it is a “second-class” choice. Correspondingly, schools must ensure that career and technical preparation is in fact not a second-class choice by guaranteeing that these courses meet Colorado’s academic standards in equally rigorous, if different, ways.

The Need for Resources

School board members across the state expressed frustration at the disconnect between the improvements they wanted to make in their schools and the resources available to them. Districts have a chicken-and-egg problem. They need to attract students in order to have the funding to improve services, and they need to improve services in order to attract students. This frustration was particularly evident in districts experiencing multiple years of declining student enrollment. Simply taking the time to assess the needs of the district and planning appropriate reforms will cost some districts money they do not have.

Just as Colorado’s districts are varied in size and location, they vary in terms of what they need to improve student outcomes. Rural districts need help in attracting and retaining teachers, and in providing a varied curriculum with

limited staff and resources. Many districts are too isolated to easily connect with local higher education institutions, and do not have communities that can offer enrichment activities and internships for students. These districts need better ways to connect with outside resources and the funding to support these connections.

Other districts have better access to community resources, but have large numbers of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. These districts need the ability to provide individualized intervention services for their students, to ensure that students will be able to take advantage of rigorous high school experiences. This requires additional staffing and extended time for instruction.

If we as a state want to encourage traditionally underserved students to consider college as an option, we need to increase the number of adults who can help counsel them about their choices. This can be accomplished through increasing the number of counselors or expanding the role of teachers, but both of these options require funding. College preparation courses such as AP or IB courses are extremely valuable, but they require funding for training teachers and making adjustments to the rest of the curriculum.

To paraphrase the words of Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, lack of adequate resources to make the changes we need to make cannot be an excuse for doing nothing. However, it must be viewed as a reality as we move ahead.

Conclusion

CASB's statewide presence gives it a unique perspective on reforming public education in our state. CASB staff are regularly part of state-level discussions about the very real changes that must be made if our state and students are to thrive in the future. At the same time, CASB brings the perspectives, challenges and innovations from local communities that are often lost when policy is made at a state level.

Our conversations around the state showed that local communities agree with state-level policy makers, that it is time to take our educational system to the next level. We must have higher expectations for our children and give them the opportunities, challenges and support they need. We all have common goals, despite the incredible diversity of Colorado's communities. Our best outcomes will be realized in a process where state leadership affirms these common goals and provides direction and support, while local communities provide the diverse innovations and adjustments that make sense for their students. CASB looks forward to working with state and local leadership to create the next generation of education and preparing Colorado's students for their futures.

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At CASB's fall 2006 regional meetings, participants heard a briefing on policy and political developments affecting Colorado education. Audience volunteers were then asked to present the four different scenarios below for discussion.

Choices

1. **We must have the state set minimum graduation requirements so a high school diploma means the same no matter where a student goes to school.**
 - Local control often equates to low expectations and excuses.
 - CCHE has already effectively set graduation requirements. There isn't much we can do about that if we want our graduates to go to college.
2. **The state just needs to get out of our business. Just provide the necessary resources and leave us alone.**
 - Our teachers are working as hard as they can—it doesn't do any good for the state to keep piling on.
 - We spend all year up to February talking about what we can do for kids, then after February we talk about where we need to cut the budget.
 - Give us time to get better at what you've told us to get better at. Stop moving the targets.
3. **We understand there is a need to improve student achievement—our board has accepted the challenge.**
 - We've taken a hard look at our own graduation requirements.
 - We've worked out a great program with a local community college to offer career-tech programs.
 - Every child is expected to be ready for pre-algebra in 6th grade. This has implications in the early and higher grades, which we are addressing.
 - Our goal is to have individualized learning plans for each student.
4. **It is time to support a comprehensive examination of what it would take to have a Preschool through Post-secondary policy succeed in Colorado. We need an integrated, comprehensive framework of programs, services and supports.**
 - Why can't the adults who run bureaucracies and make policies affecting the academic lives of students talk to each other?
 - We need to organize schools around student needs, not adult needs.
 - What if higher education sent their professors "below" to work with and learn from teachers in K–12 and K–12 teachers went to college classrooms?
 - If it's P–16, everyone needs to be involved. It can't just be 13–16 telling everyone else what to do.

(Referenced on page 3 and 10)

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