

# The Next Generation Of Colorado Education

*“How do we prepare the kids for their futures – not our pasts?”*

**Results from a Series of Conversations  
With School Board Members and Superintendents  
August 2006**

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September 2006



Colorado Association of School Boards



# Summary

**W**hat should a high school diploma mean? How do we meet the educational needs of a new generation? What changes might we need to make to our educational system in order to meet these needs? These questions are receiving more and more attention as our economy evolves and the world becomes flatter, in the words of author Thomas Friedman.

Some evidence suggests a significant percentage of high school graduates in the U.S. are not prepared for their futures, based on perceptions from employers, college professors, and graduates themselves. In Colorado, nearly 30% of graduates entering post-secondary education require remedial coursework. Colorado employers rate high school graduates' preparedness for the workplace as a 3 on a scale of 1 to 10. Approximately 30% of Colorado's ninth-graders will not graduate from high school.

During the spring of 2006, there were a number of visible efforts to respond to these concerns, many of them focusing on efforts to align the K-12 system with the demands of the world beyond graduation. Perhaps most notably, Governor Owens appointed members of the Governor's Education Alignment Council and charged them with finding ways to better align the K-12 and higher education systems in Colorado. The Alignment Council has been informed by the work of the American Diploma Project, which urges greater rigor in the high school curriculum. Its preliminary recommendations call for specific and rigorous standards in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, assessment of these standards, and a statewide set of minimum graduation requirements.

It is clear that changes are coming to our educational system. The Colorado Association of School Boards is interested in leading these changes in ways that benefit our students, our communities, and our state.

In August 2006, CASB convened five discussion groups 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 that CASB could take these themes to its members during fall regional meetings throughout the state.

In the five discussion groups, CASB asked meeting participants to give us 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?

As might be imagined, 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 characteristics such as size, location, and access to resources. However, some very important themes emerged over and over again 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 heard over and over again that there need to 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, tended to be the most popular approach suggested by participants. Related to this theme was the expression of need for individualized student support.

When asked about our current standards, 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 also 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 had 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 that students would be entering after graduation. However, participants expressed frustration that the P-16 conversations that had occurred in Colorado tended to be "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 we talk about a P-16 system.

The conversations brought to light the many ways in which districts were 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.

These conversations helped sharpen the focus for CASB's regional meetings. As CASB staff travel to eleven regional meetings around the state during the fall of 2006, we will be using the results of our August conversations to engage school board members on the purpose and evolution of K-12 education in Colorado.

## Background – Why Have These Conversations?

As our economy and our expectations of education are changing, recent research from Colorado and nationwide has led some to question whether K-12 is effectively preparing its graduates for life beyond high school. The conversation in Colorado started with a bang in the winter of 2005, when CCHE released its annual remediation report with the title “Remedial Education: One-Third of Incoming College Students Unprepared by K-12 High Schools.” The report found that 29.6% of recent high school graduates entering two-year or four-year post-secondary education required one or more remedial courses before they were considered ready for college-level work. Students at two-year colleges were much more likely to need remediation, and most students who needed remediation required help with math.

CCHE staff concluded that the typical high school curriculum is to blame for this problem because of a lack of rigor. Almost concurrently, CCHE proposed new high school coursework requirements for admission into Colorado’s higher education institutions. As proposed, the new requirements would include four years of math, three years of science, and two years of a foreign language, among other courses. In fashioning its conclusions, CCHE drew heavily on research from ACT and the American Diploma Project, two national organizations.

ACT has conducted research correlating high school course-taking with ACT scores and success in college level courses. It recommends what it calls a “Core Curriculum” for high school that is very close to the admission requirements suggested by CCHE. ACT research shows that around 60% of all students nationwide take a core curriculum (and the number is lower in Colorado). Notably, minority and low-income students and students attending rural schools are less likely to take a core curriculum. ACT has also recently looked at the relationship between knowledge required for the ACT college entrance exam and knowledge required for success on ACT’s WorkKeys vocational readiness exam, and has concluded that the requirements are effectively the same. In other words, for success in college and in the workplace, students need access to a core curriculum that many of them do not have.

The American Diploma Project established “benchmarks” for what students should know and be able to do by the end of high school. ADP arrived at these benchmarks through interviews with college professors and with employers who hire high school graduates for skilled jobs. ADP also surveyed employers, post-secondary faculty, and high school graduates nationwide, and found that two in five high school graduates believe that they were not fully prepared for college or the workplace. In short, while the majority of students are well-prepared for their futures, a significant minority are not. As more and more high school graduates go on to higher education, and as workplace requirements become more advanced and require higher levels of skills, we must pay attention to these findings.

Achieve, Inc., one of the organizations participating in the American Diploma Project, has begun assisting states around the country with evaluating and upgrading high school standards. In Colorado, Governor Owens formed the Governor’s Education Alignment Council, and designated that group to work with Achieve to make recommendations for ensuring that high school graduates in Colorado are prepared for college and the workplace. The Council’s final report is expected in October 2006. Its preliminary recommendations call for Colorado to revisit its high school standards to include more rigor, particularly in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades; to assess students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades to ensure that they are proficient; and to require the State Board of Education to set minimum graduation standards that would apply statewide.

Reaction to this research has been bipartisan. Speaker of the House Andrew Romanoff (D.-Denver) was interested in exploring the possibility of eliminating the senior year of high school in favor of greater access to preschool, due to a perception that the senior year is often “wasted.” Senator Ron Tupa (D.-Boulder) proposed a bill establishing a P-16 commission to better align K-12 and higher education. The bill passed both houses before it was vetoed by the governor.

## Background – Why Have These Conversations?

It is clear that policy actions concerning the rigor of the high school curriculum and high school graduation requirements are on the horizon. And research suggests that taking a hard look at current practices may be warranted. For these reasons, CASB decided to take the pulse of communities around the state so that it could provide leadership to its members about the best ways to address this coming change. Initially, CASB staff thought that the group discussions might lead to revisiting Colorado’s standards to make them more rigorous and infused with “21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.” Interestingly, the discussions led to the conclusion that our state’s standards are valid and rigorous – it is our application of those standards that needs to be improved, with implications for the traditional ways in which we operate our schools and districts.

**“We do need to ask what kids need to know and be able to do, but there’s not much debate about it. The real issue is that we haven’t reached the point of meaning what we say in terms of all kids, and being flexible.”**

## What They Said: Results From Our Conversations

This section will summarize themes that we heard as we asked superintendents, district officials, and school board members across the state about the ways in which Colorado schools are and are not meeting the needs of students.

What are we preparing students for? What should students know and be able to do when they graduate from our high schools?

This question asked participants to focus on the purpose of public education and how it might be evolving. Are we educating for the workforce, for democracy, for something else? For all of the above? We asked participants to reflect on what their district's high school diplomas should mean.

**“We need to get kids ready for the next step, not just for our community, but for the world. There's a difference there.”**

Pueblo participant

Not surprisingly, participants agreed that high school graduates should be skilled in basic literacy and mathematical concepts, and have the ability to apply those concepts. In other words, students need to know how to read, communicate, and “do math.” Several businesspeople who are school board members shared their concern that this basic level of education is not happening in some cases.

Participants also believed that K-12 students need to become prepared to be lifelong learners. As one participant in Telluride put it, “the most important thing is to teach kids the skills they need to learn how to learn.” In addition to mastering basic content knowledge, high school graduates must be able to engage in critical thinking. They need to be able to show initiative in anticipating next steps and solving problems. The implications of the rapid changes occurring in our economy and our world were brought up at several meetings. As participants put it, we simply don't know what kinds of jobs our high school graduates will be encountering ten or fifteen years from now: “We have to help kids understand how to learn and where to get information. Information doubles every few years. We don't know the jobs our kids will have.” As a result, we need to effectively prepare them to face anything with uniformly applicable skills such as communication, analysis, and creativity.

**“My business doesn't require exceptional skills, but I can't find independent thinking. We have become so focused on content, we are telling them what to think, but not how to think.”**

Pueblo participant

These same skills are also necessary for effective participation in our increasingly complicated democracy, participants pointed out. In the age of information overload, high school graduates must be able to evaluate and act on information in their role as citizens.

Several group participants mentioned the need to ensure that high school graduates possessed a work ethic and a sense of personal responsibility. This was considered particularly important (and difficult) as the mainstream culture seemed to be encouraging students to move away from these values.

The work of ACT and the American Diploma Project suggests that students need particular coursework to be prepared for today's college and workplace environments. In general, participants in the CASB discussions believed that students should be well-prepared to make their own choices about their pathways after graduation, and that choices should not be artificially limited by lack of exposure to needed coursework. However, there was a lack of consensus about how this would translate to a particular set of courses in high school. A majority of participants believed that students should be offered a variety of pathways to success, and that requiring courses such as advanced theoretical mathematics could easily prove to be an unnecessary obstacle for some students.

There was a lack of agreement on whether the requirements of the workplace were converging with requirements for post-secondary education. Some participants agreed that the requirements were similar:

**“The quality of education should not be any different from one student to the next – it should allow them to make any choice. But not differentiating programs may be a disservice. It says to kids that we are all the same, which is not true. ... We don’t need equality to have equity.”**

Pueblo participant

“The world of work is coming so close to the world of the university. Lots of our community doesn’t know that.” Several participants even suggested that it was more important to provide a comprehensive education to those students who would not be going on to college: “High school is actually more important for kids who don’t go to college. If a roughneck’s education ends in high school, we want to make it more rigorous – he won’t get another bite at the apple.”

However, some participants from rural districts seemed to view a college preparatory curriculum as something that their students didn’t need and their communities didn’t want. One participant described pressures from the community to encourage high school graduates to stay in the local workforce, pressures that often conflicted with preparing students for college. Rural districts were also less likely to see the requirements of the workforce and post-secondary education converging. As one rural superintendent put it, “there may be a worldwide economy in some places, but not in northwest Colorado.”

### What role do standards play in our system? Are our standards working?

**A**s noted above, CASB initially anticipated that the conversations might reveal a need to revisit and renew our state’s standards. However, while participants were very clear that standards played an essential role in education, they were also clear that taking a brand new look at our state’s standards was not a high priority for them in improving education.

**“High standards allow us to have consistent expectations. The bar is high, even while we are meeting individual needs. We don’t want other people to set the bar for kids – or for kids to set a low bar for themselves. There needs to be a one high set of standards.”**

Pueblo participant

Participants overwhelmingly supported standards, and generally thought Colorado’s standards were good ones. They believe that high standards as a state are necessary to set the bar appropriately high for all children. Although some referenced the overwhelming testing demands of CSAP, there also was recognition that CSAP gives the standards “teeth” – as one person put it, “CSAP makes us have the right conversations.”

**“The standards we have now are fine – the issue is that we have kids who are not acquiring that knowledge but are still making it through the system.”**

Rather than a need to renew our standards, the theme that came up over and over again in our conversations was the need to transition education to a true standards-based system. This transition is necessary, participants believed, to have an educational system where it is possible to simultaneously hold high standards and to meet the needs of all children as they strive to meet these standards. We heard about the conflict between a true standards-based system, in which students make progress based on proficiency, and our existing education system, which continues to progress children regardless of whether proficiency has been acquired.

## What They Said: Results From Our Conversations

**“We went to a lot of trouble to come up with standards, but we don’t link them to other areas, such as graduation or college admissions. We always go back to Carnegie units.”**

Participants envisioned an outcomes-based system in which students were allowed to progress at their own developmentally appropriate rates, supported by extensive monitoring and intervention structures that provided students with the support they needed. This combination of high standards and flexible progress, where learning is fixed and time is the variable, rather than the other way around, appealed to many participants.

In order to make this happen, participants said, we need to improve and align our curriculum; provide alternative but equally rigorous ways for students to determine proficiency based on abilities and interests; provide flexibility to meet the needs of individual students; and effective ways to monitor the progress of individual students and provide interventions as needed.

A number of participants talked about the need to find the rigor specific to each student’s interest. In other words, a student who was interested in theater could be provided with a rigorous education that integrates the student’s passion for drama throughout the curriculum.

**“The more you box us in about the path to rigor, the more difficult it will be for K-12 to help kids find their own rigor. There are basic things that all kids need to know – but kids need to be able to pursue their own rigor. There is rigor in all areas.”**

### What about high school graduation requirements? Is the senior year “wasted?”

**W**e also asked participants to respond directly to some of the preliminary recommendations from the Education Alignment Council. In particular, do we need 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade standards and assessment for those standards? Are high school seniors engaged, or just passing time?

It became clear that in some schools and districts, high school seniors are required to stay engaged in their schoolwork through a variety of means. In other districts, the decision about how much effort to put into senior year was essentially left up to the individual student. As a result, some motivated students stayed very engaged, taking AP, IB, and dual credit classes, while others were disengaged due to boredom, lack of parental expectations, or a perceived lack of relevance.

Some participants thought that the use of more specific 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade standards would be useful for encouraging student and parent motivation, although no one believed this change in standards was necessary. One participant suggested that we use the standards we have, but continue to assess students who are not proficient in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and use those assessments to provide remedial education.

**“If kids take the senior year off, it’s because they are telling us that high school is just a bunch of hoops.”**

Several participants lamented the “canyon” between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> year, whether graduates were planning to go on to college or not. Some students are not viewing their experiences in senior year as relevant to the next stage of their lives, but rather viewing it as the last obstacle to freedom. Many participants shared that their districts were actively working on ways to connect high school seniors with the next phase of their lives. These solutions will be shared in the section of this report that describes current district and school initiatives.

In discussing the specifics of high school graduation requirements, there were mixed feelings about what the term “rigor” means. As one participant put it, the concept of rigor does not just mean “more.” Some districts had begun adopting CCHE’s proposed admission requirements as their graduation requirements; others felt strongly that one set of requirements does not make sense for the individual needs of students or for districts.

In particular, participants tended to be critical of the requirement of four years of mathematics. Not only was the delivery of this coursework problematic for rural areas, but many believed that it unnecessarily set some students up for failure. It appeared that many participants would favor requiring students to take four years of math, as long as one path to this requirement included the type of applied mathematics relevant to career preparation rather than solely theoretical math. On the other hand, a few participants believed that there was intrinsic “stretching the brain” value in having students take advanced theoretical math. Again, this discussion tended to lead back to the theme of equal levels of rigor for all students, but flexibility to find that rigor in pathways that were relevant to student interests.

### Would a P-16 system help or hurt your efforts to improve education?

**A**s described above, there has been a great deal of interest in Colorado and nationwide to create an education system that operates as a “P-16” system – in other words, is aligned from early childhood education through post-secondary education to ensure that students are well-prepared for the next stage of education. We asked participants what they thought about this concept in Colorado.

This was an idea that participants embraced, with some caveats. Many said that a P-16 system is necessary to send a message of high expectations to students, parents, and schools. Others mentioned that a P-16 system could be consistent with the outcomes-based system that so many were interested in. With a true P-16 system, students would be able to move around in the system based on proficiency and interests, without being limited by artificial grade configurations.

**“A P-16 attitude means you’re expected to go on to college just as surely as you’re expected to go from 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade. This is a big paradigm shift. We in the system should expect that. Kids will give you what you expect.”**

Pueblo participant

However, participants also raised three major concerns. First, participants were very aware that the content of prior state-level P-16 conversations had focused on the transition between K-12 and post-secondary education. Where, they wondered, was the conversation about early childhood education? As one participant put it (echoed by others across the state): “If it’s really about P-16, we can’t send the message that half-day kindergarten is okay.” This lack of attention to early childhood education provided fuel for a widely-held suspicion that P-16 to date has been a cover for K-12 bashing by higher education, in particular, CCHE. It must be said that there is a great deal of animosity towards CCHE across the state. Several participants said that a P-16 system should not be allowed to serve solely as a mechanism for “13-16 telling everyone else what to do.”

The resentment towards CCHE is at least partially related to another theme that came through clearly, at all meetings. Participants across the state believe that we are running the risk of telling students that the only route to success and respect is through college. They feel strongly that we must be careful to send the message that going straight into the workforce is just as respectable as going to college. Many participants urged that a P-16 approach be thought of as P-12 plus the next four years – and wherever a graduate chooses to be during those four years is what that graduate should be prepared for. Some participants seemed to view CCHE’s aggressive policies as sending a message to schools and kids that it is not okay to go directly into the workforce – a message they see as elitist and ultimately harmful.

**“There needs to be a balance around the conversation. CCHE not having conversations with K-12 is not helpful. Everyone wants someone else to get the kids ready.”**

## What's working now?

One of the most valuable outcomes from our conversations was the opportunity to hear about what districts and schools are doing *now* to ensure that their students will be prepared for life after high school graduation. In our decentralized state, we don't often have the chance to share information about what's working. As the conversations continued around the state, participants spontaneously volunteered inspirational stories about new initiatives in their schools and districts. Eventually, we began actively soliciting these ideas and experiences. Here are some of the improvements participants shared with us.

<p><b>Early learning</b></p>	<p>Partnering with the community to build a new early childhood education center aligned with district early learning standards</p> <p>Expanding full-day kindergarten throughout the district</p>
<p><b>Curricular improvement and alignment throughout the grades</b></p>	<p>Regular curriculum “rigor” review, using standards from other districts, states, and countries.</p> <p>Every child is expected to be ready for pre-algebra in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This has implications in the early and higher grades.</p> <p>“Guaranteed viable curriculum” approach</p> <p>Using technology to supply wide range of world language options</p> <p>Improving written communication skills by requiring more written assignments through the curriculum</p> <p>Incorporating technology into classes</p> <p>Common assessments for non-CSAP-tested areas</p>
<p><b>Individual student monitoring and interventions</b></p>	<p>School-based “progress monitors” – responsible for tracking individual student progress and identifying ways to intervene and support students</p> <p>Extended learning time that focuses solely on skills kids are lacking</p> <p>Checkpoints for middle school students</p> <p>Creating portraits of each student through portfolios</p> <p>Providing out-of-school tutoring to allow for access to elective courses</p> <p>Individualized learning plans for all students</p> <p>Project teams that follow at-risk kids</p> <p>Using Sylvan Learning to supplement education</p> <p>Learning applications on the Internet</p>

<p><b>Promoting “life skills”</b></p>	<p>Requiring 8<sup>th</sup> graders to get life experience by filling out applications, making change, managing a checking account.</p> <p>Extracurricular activities that help with life skills</p> <p>Requiring personal finance coursework</p>
<p><b>Making high school and the senior year rigorous and relevant</b></p>	<p>Requiring students to take math and English classes in senior year to keep it “fresh” in their brains and to allow for remediation if necessary.</p> <p>Requiring seniors to take four core classes</p> <p>Asking high school students about what will keep them motivated in their senior year, and acting on information</p> <p>Sending every senior to community college in senior year for English and social studies</p> <p>“New Century Graduate” community engagement process, resulting in guidelines and assessments</p> <p>AP/dual credit opportunities</p> <p>Eliminating class rankings to encourage students to take electives</p> <p>Requiring all seniors to take government</p> <p>“Honors” diploma</p> <p>Integrated math courses for non-traditional math learners</p> <p>Piloting “academies” approach to high school</p>
<p><b>P-16 alignment</b></p>	<p>Having seven-year plans for students, starting in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The plan can change, but it provides a vehicle for talking about classes and expectations.</p> <p>Aligning 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades with plans for students’ futures, using a K-14 model.</p> <p>Having local conversations with business leaders and post-secondary institutions concerning expectations and alignment</p> <p>Aligning curriculum, requiring vertical articulation meetings</p>

## What's working now?

<b>Moving to a proficiency-based system</b>	<p>Performance-based graduation policy</p> <p>Allowing students to show proficiency in technology</p> <p>Applying rigorous extracurricular activities to credit requirements where students can show standards have been met</p> <p>Applying advanced middle school coursework to high school credit requirements</p> <p>Middle school promotion policy based on proficiency, being developed with committee that includes parents, students, teachers</p> <p>Proving proficiency in ways other than CSAP</p>
<b>Tracking system outcomes</b>	<p>Tracking graduate outcomes through the Student Tracker for High Schools, a product of the National Student Clearinghouse</p> <p>Using multiple sources of data – CSAP, demographics, perceptions, parent surveys, student exit surveys, follow-up surveys of graduates</p>

We heard a surprising amount of agreement on the purpose of education, on the need for high expectations and flexible options for meeting those expectations, and the need to connect K-12 education with life after graduation. We then asked: what's getting in the way of making these improvements. There was a wide variety of answers, ranging from funding to the attitudes of adults in the system to low parental and societal expectations.

Many participants, whether from rural or urban districts, brought up lack of funding as a very real problem. Moving from a "seat-time" based system to a proficiency-based system brings up huge logistical and organizational change issues: "Transition is expensive – you can't do it if you don't have the money." Another participant put it this way: "Standards have changed our thinking about who is going to be successful – but we haven't changed people's thinking about the time and resources necessary." In particular, participants pointed out that meeting the needs of individual students, as is anticipated by a true standards-based system, costs additional money: "We haven't funded standards-based education. We are funded for some kids, not all kids ... Some kids need a lot of intervention before they get to physics and calculus."

**"I want kids to have core rigor, become thinkers, and engage their passions. How do we do that in our current state of finance?"**

Rural communities lamented their perceived inability to offer the same array of opportunities as less isolated districts. Attracting teachers is a real problem, affecting the ability to offer a wide range of classes. "Rural areas don't have the same advantages. How are we going to give our kids the same advantages? Money is an issue."

**'We spend all year up to February talking about what we can do for kids, then after February, we talk about where we can cut the budget.'**

Denver participant

Many districts were facing funding losses as a result of declining enrollment. This leads not only to a lack of funds for new initiatives, but to a real loss of morale. As one participant put it, "we work so hard to keep everyone on board – and then we have to say, whoops, we have to cut another art position."

On the other hand, some participants suggested that the education system has created some of its own financial and time crunches by holding on to traditional educational structures and practices: "We educators never throw anything away. We keep everything and then we keep adding to it. We're spinning too many plates."

Some participants felt that the attitudes of some adults in the system get in the way of change. There was a great deal of discussion about the ability of adults to think outside the box and beyond their own experiences. One participant suggested that some teachers, principals, and superintendents think that every child learns the same way they do. Several people mentioned the need for all teachers to think of themselves as teachers of reading and writing, and the recalcitrance that some high school teachers have towards that idea. One participant reported that he had been told that only honors classes need to address critical thinking. Teacher tenure was mentioned as an obstacle to improvement, as were labor negotiations in districts with histories of labor disputes. Changing adult attitudes and practices was seen as essential to change.

**"All teachers are teachers of reading, writing and thinking. We need to convince teachers of this."**

Telluride participant

## What's getting in the way?

Participants in all groups reported difficulty with parent and student motivation. Many mentioned a desire to see some mechanism for student accountability so that CSAP scores matter to students – for example, requiring that 10<sup>th</sup> grade CSAP scores be reported to colleges. Some families opt out of CSAP; others encourage their children to “kick back” in their senior years. Some simply are not connected to school and their children’s education in any visible way.

**“We’re the whipping boy for a society that has low standards.”**

Limon participant

Finally, the larger society was in some cases seen as presenting obstacles to change, in ways that ranged from lowered standards for behavior to a lack of support generally for children. As one Breckenridge participant put it: “We’re the only country in the world trying to use education alone to close learning gaps.”

**A**nticipating legislative action on at least a few of these issues during the 2007 session, we asked participants to tell us what they would like to have legislators do that could actually improve education. Not surprisingly, some participants suggested that the legislature do nothing: “Give us time to get better at what you’ve told us to get better at. Stop moving the targets.”

In a variation of that theme, many participants encouraged the state to take a larger role in improving education, not by enacting new policies and mandates but by supporting districts and schools in local improvement efforts.

**“We don’t need more regulation – we need support and education. Help districts understand that there are successful practices that are working. The answer won’t be the same from district to district.”**

Participants wanted state help in understanding the evolving purpose of public education, in helping provide the tools that allow students to meet raised expectations, and in providing increased flexibility so that districts can better serve individual students’ needs. Some specific ideas for actions that could help serve these goals included:

- Leadership without mandates:
  - ◆ Guidance from the state about the purpose of public education
  - ◆ Funding for community conversations about quality education
  - ◆ Recommended minimum standards for high school graduation
- Access to information and resources
  - ◆ Information about what’s working across the state
  - ◆ Funding for pilot projects for promising ideas
  - ◆ Common assessments for subjects beyond those tested by CSAP
  - ◆ Information about core courses in post-secondary education to help K-12 understand expectations
  - ◆ Address funding problems for districts with declining enrollment
- Assistance in moving to proficiency-based system
  - ◆ End social promotion
  - ◆ Eliminate barriers to creative uses of time
  - ◆ Create incentives for districts to move to proficiency-based system
  - ◆ Require and fund Individual Learning Plans for all students
- Support for P-16 approach
  - ◆ Provide sufficient post-secondary financial aid so that students know they can afford to go to college
  - ◆ Create single forum for P-16 leadership
  - ◆ Authorize funding for Sheridan/Lincoln fifth-year program
- Support student accountability
  - ◆ Tie CSAP scores to things that matter to students
  - ◆ Have colleges ask for CSAP scores
  - ◆ End social promotion

**“When you look at education, it’s like looking at a dysfunctional family, but you keep working on the house and not the family.”**

Limon participant

## CONCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS FOR CASB

These conversations were convened by CASB with an understanding that they could point to a major rethinking of our current K-12 education system. And indeed they did, although not exactly in the way staff originally envisioned. In order to meet the educational needs of a new generation, the majority of participants across the state supported moving to a truly standards-based system in which movement through the system is based on demonstrated proficiency, in which students find a variety of pathways and support systems to meet their unique needs and interests, and in which high expectations are held for all students regardless of background or future intentions.

**Possible policy actions** that might arise from this recommendation include:

- Supporting legislation and/or State Board action that provides leadership on high school coursework and high school graduation, such as:
  - ◆ Setting recommended (not required) high school graduation requirements
  - ◆ Providing models of alternative pathways to a rigorous high school diploma
- Supporting legislation and/or State Board action that supports the transition to a standards-based system, such as:
  - ◆ Eliminating regulatory barriers to outcomes-based education
  - ◆ Providing guidance and incentives to districts who want to move to an outcomes-based system
  - ◆ Creating model common end-of-course assessments
- Supporting a P-16 system through:
  - ◆ Advocating for a P-16 leadership structure
  - ◆ Advocating for increased funding for early childhood education
  - ◆ Advocating for increased funding for post-secondary financial aid and “fifth-year” programs in districts
- Supporting CDE in creating a “best practices” network for districts

**Other actions** that CASB might take based on these conversations include:

- Supporting and facilitating community conversations among K-12, post-secondary, and employers to create mutual understandings of what we are preparing students for
- Providing “how-to” kits for districts looking to introduce rigor and relevance into career preparation pathways