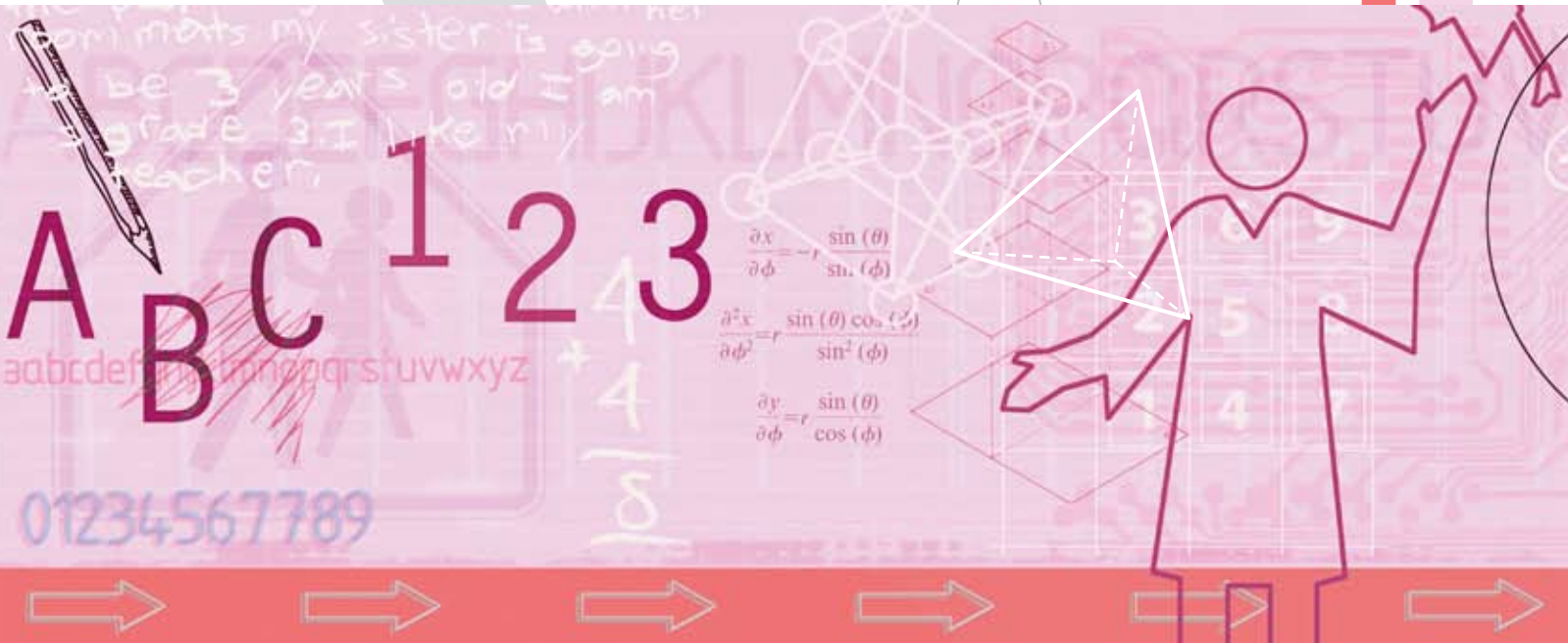


**COLORADO'S 2008 EDUCATION REFORMS:
WILL THEY ACHIEVE THE COLORADO PROMISE?**



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About this Report

This document grew out of conversations at the Piton Foundation following the 2008 Colorado legislative session, during which education initiatives took top billing.

We talked about how Colorado could maintain the momentum of education reform and improvement, and we wondered what advice others could offer our state.

We decided to convene a “virtual” panel of education experts from around the nation to review the Colorado education landscape and comment on how we’re doing and where we need to go. The panel was chosen by Piton staff in an effort to provide a diversity of views. Each panelist was provided with a detailed briefing paper on Colorado education statistics, programs, institutional structures and the work of the 2008 legislature. This briefing can be found online, at <http://ednewscolorado.org/images/HFdocs/pitonpanel-istinformation.doc>. Panel members responded by e-mail to both general and specific questions.

Their comments are presented on seven major education themes: Accountability and Data Use; At-risk Students; Early Childhood Education; Innovation Initiatives and

Charters; School Finance; Standards, Assessment and Alignment; and Professional Training and Development. Each section also includes a brief look at what’s happening elsewhere around the nation. Additional, more general comments from some members of the panel are at the end of the report.

This document isn’t intended to be a detailed report on the state of education in Colorado. It would require a book to cover that, and a wide variety of recent studies and papers by organizations, agencies and experts provide detail on individual challenges, issues and initiatives. Nor is this paper intended to provide any sort of detailed program of suggested next steps.

Rather, we hope it will help citizens, policymakers and educators to pause and step back to view the big picture of the condition and future of public education in Colorado, giving readers a broader perspective before they dive back into their own education tasks, projects, initiatives and plans.

Summary of Panelist Comments

While the panelists represent different philosophies and areas of expertise, some common themes emerged in their comments.

Data and accountability: Improved data systems with the ability to track individual students are vital to both student achievement and effective alignment of K-12 and postsecondary education. While Colorado has taken an important step with implementation of its Growth Model, much work remains to be done. It's important that data be available to independent researchers, although little useful study of data has been made yet in states with better systems. Accountability should be focused more on incentives and less on sanctions.

At-risk students: It's important to have and hold to high standards for all students. While there are some program models for success, a process of continuous improvement that tests new models and rewards those that work while discarding those that don't is necessary for overall improvement. At-risk students need to be identified early. There may be risk in undertaking multiple initiatives simultaneously.

Early Childhood Education: The quality of programs is vital, it makes the most sense to focus resources on at-risk children and it's important to remember that ECE is an investment that takes a long time to produce results.

Innovation Initiatives and Charters: There's a chicken-or-egg aspect to creating innovation schools – real innovation has to come from the bottom up but has to be encouraged and fostered from the top. It's also a process that takes time. And, research on other states' innovation schools efforts hasn't shown promising results.

School Finance: A number of the panelists agreed that Colorado schools are under-funded. But, several also said the finance system needs to be more focused on individual students and that financial incentives need to be provided to both encourage innovation and ensure improved movement of students from K-12 schools to postsecondary institutions.

Standards, Assessments and Alignment: Panelists supported the goals of the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids and were encouraged by Colorado's effort to update and raise content standards. But various panelists cautioned that reforms have to be implemented correctly to be effective, should include incentives that will move students to postsecondary opportunities and that assessment should not be considered as the sole motivator of higher achievement.

Professional Training and Development: There was general agreement that Colorado needs to improve professional training and development, and to do that in a systematic way.

Other topics: Panelists felt that the state's goals of halving the dropout rate and doubling postsecondary completion are worthy aspirations but not realistic. And, they have a variety of lively comments on whether postsecondary and workforce readiness are the same thing.

Our Panelists



Christopher T. Cross

Christopher T. Cross is chairman of Cross & Jofthus, LLC, an education-policy consulting firm. He also is a consultant to the Broad Foundation and the C.S. Mott Foundation. He has been as a senior fellow with the Center for Education Policy and a distinguished senior fellow with the Education Commission of the States. He also has worked for the U.S. Department of Education and is a board member of the New Teacher Project. He has written on assessment, school leadership and standards-based education.

Detailed biography: http://www.edstrategies.net/christopher_cross.pdf



Paul T. Hill

Paul T. Hill is the John and Marguerite Corbally Professor at the University of Washington and also is director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which studies alternative governance and finance systems for public K-12 schools. Hill is an advocate for structural reform of school finance systems to make them less oriented toward institutions and more focused on the needs of individual students.

Detailed biography: <http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/authors/4>



Michael W. Kirst

Michael W. Kirst is Emeritus Professor of Education and Business Administration at Stanford University. Kirst was a member of the California State Board of Education (1975-1982) and its president from 1977 to 1981. While Kirst's earlier work focused primarily on K-12 policy and politics, much of his recent work has focused on college preparation and college success at broad access postsecondary institutions. He has closely studied the existing disconnects between K-12 and postsecondary education and advocates for significantly improved alignment in order to improve students' chances for success in college.

Detailed biography: <http://www.michaelwkirst.com/>



Michael J. Petrilli

Mike Petrilli is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, where he specializes in education policy studies. He is also vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, where he oversees the foundation's research projects and publications, including *The Education Gadfly*. He also serves as executive editor of *Education Next*. Petrilli is an expert in the No Child Left Behind Law and formerly worked at the U.S. Department of Education, where he oversaw grant programs that supported alternative certification, charter schools and other programs.

Detailed biography: <http://www.hoover.org/bios/petrilli.html>



Andrew Rotherham

Andrew Rotherham is co-founder and co-director of Education Sector, an independent national education policy think tank. Rotherham is also a member of the Virginia Board of Education. In addition, Rotherham writes the blog *Eduwonk.com*. He formerly was director of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute. The project worked to redesign American public education into a system based on universal access to high-quality instruction, public sector choice and customization, common academic standards, and accountability for results. He also served in the Clinton administration.

Detailed biography: http://www.educationsector.org/profiles/profiles_show.htm?doc_id=336126



Diane Ravitch

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University. She is a senior fellow at both the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. She has written on political correctness, multiculturalism and standards-based education.

From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H.W. Bush.

Detailed biography: <http://www.dianeravitch.com/vita.html>

The state's schools and colleges face significant financial constraints, serious achievement gaps, a changing student population and what's called the Colorado Paradox – the state has one of the most educated populations in the country but below-average rates of post-secondary attendance and completion.

As part of Gov. Bill Ritter's Colorado Promise, he has identified education as the state's "No. 1 priority" and set a 10-year goal of halving the state's dropout rate and doubling the number of postsecondary degrees and certificates awarded.

The 2008 Colorado legislature did major work on education issues, including early childhood education, school finance, updating and alignment of content standards and assessments and encouraging school innovation.

The most important legislation of 2008 was the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (Senate Bill 08-212), known as CAP4K. It mandates a four-year program of updating state content standards and expanding them to all grade levels; writing definitions of school readiness and of postsecondary and workforce readiness; choosing new assessments aligned to the new standards; aligning individual district graduation requirements with standards and definitions; and aligning state college admissions requirements with the new K-12 standards and definitions. Work on implementing the law has begun, but it will take four years.

The two other major pieces of 2008 legislation were:

Innovation Schools Act (Senate Bill 08-130) – Creates a standard process for schools, groups of schools and districts to apply for waivers from various state laws and regulations and union contracts. No applications have been filed yet.

Build Excellent Schools Today (House Bill 08-1335) – Creates a state system for funding school construction and renovation. The first grants are expected to be made in March 2009.

Secondary 2008 education legislation included expansion of the free-lunch program, appropriation of \$5 million in grants to help districts improve counseling services, creation of a pilot principal training program, reorganization of regional education service areas and a bill requiring a biennial survey of teachers on working conditions and funds small stipends for teachers holding national board certifications.

Significant work was done on education funding. Higher education received an 8 percent increase in tax support, while lawmakers were able to fund K-12 at levels higher than required by Amendment 23.

Lawmakers also were able to modestly increase per-pupil funding above required levels; increase support for low-income preschool slots, for full-day kindergarten and provide one-time funding for kindergarten facilities; increase funding for charter school facilities, and provide modest grants for planning of alternative teacher-pay systems.

Amendment 59, the proposal to amend the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights and Amendment 23 in order to provide a new source of funding the K-12 education, was defeated by voters in November. Now, lawmakers face the expiration of Referendum C and the partial expiration of Amendment 23 without a detailed plan in hand.

As 2008 came to a close, it looked like the major non-financial education issues in 2009 would include dual high school and college enrollment, proposals to address the dropout problem, modest changes in the teacher licensing system, efforts to encourage parental involvement in the schools and steps to improve education data systems.

State policymakers also were waiting for possible developments on the federal level after Barack Obama is inaugurated. The new secretary of education, the terms of any reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Law and realization of any Obama campaign promises on school funding could affect the decisions of both legislators as they consider new state laws and of state officials as they implement existing legislation such as CAP4K.

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

Accountability and Data Use

Where Colorado stands: With launch of the CSAP tests in 1997, Colorado was an early leader in use of statewide assessments for school accountability. A significant improvement in CSAP data was realized in 2008, when the Department of Education implemented the Colorado Growth Model, which allows longitudinal tracking of

A 2006 report found that Colorado met or only partially met six of the 10 essential elements of an effective student data system

students, schools and districts and which has attracted national attention.

But Colorado also is seen as lagging in the overall quality and usefulness of its education data systems. A 2006 report found that Colorado met or only partially met six of the

10 essential elements of an effective student data system, as defined by the Data Quality Campaign (<http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/>).

The Data and Accountability Subcommittee of the governor's P-20 Education Coordinating Council reported in November 2008 that "Much of CDE's information management work is being done in a 'piece-meal' fashion, building on an outdated architecture and lacking a long-term vision for data management and utilization. ... Managing these data is a monumental task, made even more difficult by an outdated architecture and the lack of resources and capability ... For example, the Office of Information Management Services at the CDE has a staff of 25. That is less than half the number employed by many Front Range districts and a third of the number in neighboring state departments of education."

House Bill 08-1364 created a Data Protocol Development Council that has started work on creation of a system for data exchange between agencies, with the goal of creating a P-20 data system that will include data from educational, human services, corrections and other agencies.

What's ahead for Colorado: The entire testing system will be reviewed under terms of the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids. By Dec. 15, 2010, the State Board of Education is to adopt new assessments for school readiness and for all grades P-12. The board and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education also are to choose assessments of postsecondary and workforce readiness.

Legislation proposing unique teacher and principal identifiers will be introduced in the 2009 legislature. But, the draft bill proposes only a pilot program. (Colorado already has unique student identifiers.)

The P-20's Data and Accountability Subcommittee is recommending that CDE prioritize its data projects to focus on the ones most directly affecting student achievement, provide more help to districts in data analysis and interpretation and begin planning a new data system.

What the panelists say:

Usable data systems are important, data should be available to independent researchers and accountability should focus on incentives more than sanctions.

Christopher T. Cross – "Try using incentives to bring results; don't always focus on sanctions. The incentives can be everything from rule waivers to money." He also notes the importance of having a data system that meets the 10 elements of the 10 criteria of the Data Quality Campaign.

Paul T. Hill – A good data system is "fundamental - little can be done without it. Also, a strong commitment to independent analysis of these data is needed."

Michael W. Kirst – "A P-16 data system is extremely important." He believes that a data system that tracks the progress of individual students from pre-K through college and accountability measures that link secondary and postsecondary institutions to student outcomes, like the completion of college, are two of the most important policy initiatives a state can undertake.

"Try using incentives to bring results..."

~ Christopher T. Cross

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

Michael J. Petrilli – “These data systems are critically important, and Colorado is on track to having one of the best in the country. Its value-added pilot (Growth Model) is many generations ahead of what’s possible under NCLB and should be embraced whole-heartedly.”

Andrew Rotherham – “Strong data systems are really important. But, equally important is doing interesting things with them on the research and policy side, and we’re not seeing so much of that. In other words, outside of Florida and to some extent Texas, Tennessee and North Carolina, there is very little research being done with all this data, and very few states use it in a creative way around accountability. You all need to make sure you’re building in incentives and policies around [data].”

Diane Ravitch – “Accountability should not be used as a punitive weapon to beat up on teachers, principals, and superintendents. Information and transparency are important. But we should not put educators in a position where they are reluctant to work in schools that serve low-scoring kids, for fear of being humiliated when the test scores are released. Make sure that your schools have life, spirit, soul, which they need as much as accountability. Make sure that they are places where intelligent adults enjoy working. Make sure they are lively and stimulating and collaborative places for teaching and learning.”

What other states are doing: All states, of course, are required by the No Child Left Behind law to have statewide assessments of reading and math and to bring all students to academic proficiency by 2014. However, the future of NCLB is unclear because Congress has not yet reauthorized the law.

Florida is generally considered to have the most complete education data system, and Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Louisiana and Utah have taken significant steps, according to the Data and Accountability Subcommittee.

At-risk Students

Where Colorado stands: Twice as many white middle and high school students score proficient or above than black and Hispanic students on most reading, writing and math tests. The gap is even wider on secondary math CSAP tests. Proficient and above CSAP test scores for whites are usually 30 percentage points above black and Hispanic scores and 20 percent to 30 percent above Native American students.

(Colorado Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap, 2005)

Education Commissioner Dwight Jones has set closing achievement gaps as a top priority, and his department received increased funding in 2008 to hire an achievement gap specialist.

Gov. Ritter has made halving dropout rates a central goal of his education policy, and a statewide dropout initiative coordinated by the Colorado Children’s Campaign is

working with selected local districts on projects to keep students in school and reduce dropout rates.

On a local level, particularly in the Denver metropolitan area, several charter and innovation schools focus on serving at-risk students with a variety of programs and curricula.

What’s ahead for Colorado: The initiatives listed above all were launched in 2008, so their results and impact won’t be known for some time. A November 2008 study by the CDE found some conflicts, and overall under funding, in some dropout prevention programs and laws and recommended legislative attention to the issue.

Legislation is expected to be proposed in 2009 to give CDE more resources to help districts with dropout prevention, perhaps expanding on current pilot programs. The governor’s office also is expected to propose legislation that would create a statewide dual enrollment program. A major goal of such programs is to encourage students to complete high school by giving them the incentive of taking college course before graduation. Taking such courses, of course, gives such students a head start on postsecondary work.

“Strong data systems are really important. But, equally important is doing interesting things with them on the research and policy side...”

~ Andrew Rotherham

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

What the panelists say:

Stress high expectations for achievement; be careful about trying to solve too many problems at once.

Christopher T. Cross – “A major thing is having standards and holding to them.” Cross believes there are plenty of good examples of programs that address the problems, including work done by The Education Trust and the Mass Insight Education Trust and other groups in Massachusetts. Cross also notes the vital importance having skilled teachers working with at-risk students.

Paul T. Hill – “There is no proven instructional method or school design now. We must put ourselves in a position to develop better and better approaches,” which Hill believes can be done if schools adopt a process of continuous improvement as outlined in the December 2008 report, “Facing the Future,” which he coauthored.

Michael W. Kirst – Reflecting on the challenges of undertaking important education initiatives simultaneously, Kirst cautions, “You may not end up succeeding on any of them. ... Taking on dropouts is a huge undertaking. Achievement gaps are another gigantic undertaking. ... I would urge states to act serially on these. Pick one.”

Michael J. Petrilli – “The cornerstone of serving at-risk students is high expectations. We’ve learned from Massachusetts and other leading states that students, teachers, and schools will rise to meet high expectations. That’s why it’s important that Colorado revamp (and raise) its academic standards and create more challenging exams. Once that’s in place, efforts should focus around giving teachers the tools they need to be effective: a strong curriculum, smart use of technology, etc. No more expecting every teacher to make it up as they go along and to invent the wheel themselves. Think systems.”

“You may not end up succeeding on any of them. ... Taking on dropouts is a huge undertaking. Achievement gaps are another gigantic undertaking. ... I would urge states to act serially on these. Pick one.”

~ Michael W. Kirst

Andrew Rotherham – “In particular for these kids you can use data to devise good early warning systems to reach them early, make sure that there are good supports at key transition points (elementary to middle, middle to high) and make sure there are good alternative programs in place so that there is a place for these kids between the jail and the street.”

Diane Ravitch – “If you examine the approaches of successful charters, you will see that there are effective strategies. They don’t succeed with 100 percent of students but are worthy of careful application. Core

Knowledge schools are very successful. They have a coherent, content-rich curriculum that always includes arts, science, geography, history, math and lots of hands-on activities. CK schools have had outstanding success, and this is a model that should be in place everywhere. If you look at KIPP schools, they have a longer school day, Saturday classes, summer school, an emphasis on behavior and self-discipline. Most schools cannot afford to have the extra hours, but they could certainly develop clear guidelines for behavior and self-discipline, and a culture where hard work and achievement are lauded.

“Bear in mind that to the extent that you increase the proportion of students who stay in school, you will also have a wider spectrum of achievement, and larger numbers of students who are low performers and struggling academically.”

What other states are doing: Dropout rates, achievement gaps and the needs of at-risk students are a frequent subject of legislation in states around the country. Noteworthy 2008 laws include a comprehensive dropout prevention act in Louisiana, a Maine requirement for a biennial survey of students to better identify those at risk and a Washington state program to create special learning opportunities for 11th and 12th graders in danger of not meeting graduation requirements.

“The cornerstone of serving at-risk students is high expectations. We’ve learned from Massachusetts and other leading states that students, teachers, and schools will rise to meet high expectations. That’s why it’s important that Colorado revamp (and raise) its academic standards and create more challenging exams.” ~ Michael J. Petrilli

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

Early Childhood Education

Where Colorado stands: Early childhood education was a major priority for Gov. Ritter and for the 2008 legislature. Significantly increased funding was provided for the state preschool program, which serves low-income children, and to expand full-day kindergarten. Denver launched a tax-supported program to provide assistance to families with preschool costs.

What's ahead for Colorado: Increasing attention is being paid to the quality of preschool programs and teachers. The state Department of Education released a report in November 2008 detailing best practices for P-3 education. Funding prospects for further expansions are clouded by economic conditions. Appropriations for full-day kindergarten facilities has been frozen, expected declines in state revenues may limit funds available for further expansion and a pending lawsuit challenges a property-tax law that freed up state money for the preschool and kindergarten programs. The P-20 Education Coordinating Council's P-3 subcommittee, chaired by Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien, is not making recommendations to the 2009 legislature.

“Early childhood education will get you somewhere, but it doesn't guarantee postsecondary success.”

~ Michael W. Kirst

What the panelists say:

Focus efforts on children with the greatest needs; be prepared to wait for results.

Christopher T. Cross – “Early childhood education is extremely important. ... There's a lot of good evidence on that.”

Paul T. Hill – The effects of early-childhood education on the longer-term problems of dropouts and postsecondary completion are unproven, Hill says.

Michael W. Kirst – Early childhood education “will get you somewhere, but it doesn't guarantee postsecondary success.” In discussing this topic, he again notes again the difficulties states face in attempting multiple education reforms at the same time (see above.)

“Doing [ECE] right is to focus massive resources on relatively few kids in order to make a difference.”

~ Michael J. Petrilli

Michael J. Petrilli – “It's important but only if done right, and Colorado (like most states) isn't doing it right. Doing [ECE] right is to focus massive resources on relatively few kids in order to make a difference. Truly high quality preschool programs can cost \$20,000 per year, as they pay teachers professional wages and give at-risk kids lots of attention. Rather than spread the money around, Colorado should focus its Pre-K dollars on a small group of very needy children.”

Andrew Rotherham – “It's huge, so long as it's not daycare and is actually high quality with a school readiness curriculum. That's not to say that the social components don't matter, just that school readiness has to be intentional as well.”

Diane Ravitch – “ECE is a good investment. It is a very long-term investment; so you won't be able to judge the return for at least 15 years or more.”

What other states are doing: Several other state legislatures were active on ECE issues in 2008. Louisiana created a program to phase in universal access to a state early childhood program, Hawaii established a statewide early childhood program, Minnesota set standards for ECE educators and Washington launched a study of a statewide Head Start program.

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

Innovation Initiatives and Charters

Where Colorado stands: Nearly 57,000 students, about 7 percent of students enrolled in public schools, attend more than 140 charter schools. School districts, especially larger ones, offer a variety of magnet programs, schools with specialized curricula, online classes and other non-traditional programs. Denver is beginning to authorize “new” schools, and Aurora has a pilot schools program.

The 2008 legislature passed the Innovation Schools Act, designed to streamline the process of obtaining waivers from state laws and regulations. The goal of the law is to give schools and districts more freedom to design their own programs to improve student achievement.

What’s ahead for Colorado: Procedures for implementing the Innovation Schools Act still are being developed, and the Denver and Aurora programs are in their infancy. There are discussions, including among members of the P-20 Education Coordinating Council, about expanding the Innovation Act in 2009, perhaps by making waiver requests easier and by extending its provisions to start-up schools.

Observers see little pressure or prospects for major changes in charter school laws or policies. The major priority for charter school advocates is gaining greater funding for facilities.

“Innovation needs encouragement and nurturing from the top, but it comes from the bottom. If you want charters to contribute to continuous improvement of the whole system they must face a level playing field. Moreover, all schools must be held accountable for performance in the same way.”

~ Paul T. Hill

What the panelists say:

Successful innovation needs careful preparation and support.

Christopher T. Cross – “I would start with a voluntary waiver program so that you have some control over who and what. Down the road, you need to move to a streamlined system” to increase the number of innovation schools.

Paul T. Hill – “Innovation needs encouragement and nurturing from the top, but it comes from the bottom. If you want charters to contribute to continuous improvement of the whole system they must face a level playing field. Moreover, all schools must be held accountable for performance in the same way.”

Michael W. Kirst – Research on previous innovation efforts, including South Carolina and some other states in the 1990s, found “it didn’t do much ... not many flowers bloomed at all,” says Kirst. “It assumes there is all this innovation capacity waiting to be unleashed.” Legally easing regulation “doesn’t lead to real innovation.” Rather, successful innovation needs technical support and advice and perhaps a state agency to advise school districts and foster innovative programs. “It’s not in itself a silver bullet.”

Michael J. Petrilli – “The Innovation Schools Act is a very creative way to cut some of the red tape that keeps school leaders from managing effectively. But rather than require an application, Colorado might consider ‘earned autonomy’ - schools that perform well (say, meet AYP under No Child Left Behind) would automatically earn these exemptions. That provides a strong incentive for schools to boost achievement and keeps regulators focused on schools that need the most help.”

“Legally easing regulation ‘doesn’t lead to real innovation.’”

~ Michael W. Kirst

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

Andrew Rotherham – “First, the innovation districts will not happen at any scale on their own. The basic idea of just removing the constraints - or providing a path to remove the constraints - has been tried before and not much happens. So, I’d urge you all to think about how you can build some capacity for this to happen elsewhere through a ‘consultancy’ housed in one of the [education] groups or some other arrangement. I’d urge you all to think creatively about where you are on charters and how you could make a big play there. A lot of the networks [charter groups] are not in Colorado much - are there some incentives that could bring them in? And what can be done to open a new wave of charters? That helps both with outcomes for kids (if they’re good) and also changes the politics.”

Diane Ravitch – “The easier it is to charter a school, the more you will have unsuccessful charters. If you are giving the state’s stamp of approval to charters, they should be able to meet rigorous tests for quality. If you lower the bar, you will have lots of churning, lots more failures. National studies of charters have shown that there is a wide variety - from those that get excellent results to those that are abysmal. The state must assure that the weak ones are closed quickly or never opened. We also see from national studies that there is precious little “innovation” in charters, that the best of them look like great public schools from the 1940s and ‘50s, with a strong curriculum, high expectations, a culture of learning.”

What other states are doing: California passed a funding law for charter school facilities, Delaware imposed a one-year moratorium on new charters, Tennessee prohibited private schools from sponsoring charters, Georgia created a state charter commission, Wisconsin required state certification for charter teachers, Utah amended its charter school caps.

School Finance

Where Colorado stands: State government will spend \$3.4 billion on K-12 education in 2008-09, with local districts contributing another \$2 billion from local property and vehicle ownership taxes. Through formulas that include cost of living, district size and percentage of at-risk students, the state calculates state aid and local contribution individually for each district.

School support increased 5.8 percent in 2007-08 over the prior year, and the current fiscal year amount is 5.7 percent increase.

Traditional education advocates say Colorado ranks 44th in the percentage of taxable income spent on education or is 49th in spending for teacher salaries based on personal income or is 40th overall in spending per student. More conservative, choice-and-voucher researchers rank Colorado 26th in the nation in overall education spending.

It is safe to generalize on three points: Colorado K-12 spending is below average compared to other states. When calculated as a share of state personal income, Colorado spending is even further below average. Colorado’s restrictive financing system limits policymakers’ flexibility.

What’s ahead for Colorado: State policymakers will have to address school finance at some point during the next two legislative sessions because two major funding laws expire or change in 2011. Referendum C, the five-year timeout in TABOR refunds that gave state government extra revenue to spend, will end. Certain provisions of Amendment 23, which requires minimum annual spending increases for K-12 education, will sunset. An adverse Supreme Court ruling on the property tax freeze (see above) also would affect education funding.

Lawmakers are left with a ticking clock, no detailed plans on the shelf and the constitutional requirement that any tax increases have to be approved by voters. In addition, there will be debate on whether Colorado needs a more student-focused finance system (see below).

But, there is commitment by some legislative leaders and interest among other legislators in starting to address the two issues during the 2009 session.

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

“Yes, Colorado does need more money. No, it should not be allocated without some specific goals and an accountability mechanism. The state needs a school finance system that aligns spending with student needs.”

~ Paul T. Hill

What the panelists say:

Colorado schools need more financial support, but any new system needs to align funding more clearly to individual student needs.

Christopher T. Cross – “Yes, Colorado does need more money. No, it should not be allocated without some specific goals and an accountability mechanism. The state needs a school finance system that aligns spending with student needs.”

Paul T. Hill – The state should “eliminate arbitrary constraints on uses of funds by funding students, not programs, administrative structures or teacher slots. Experiment with many different ways of educating students, including some not controlled by school districts. ... Closely track results and link them to uses of funds and adopt a continuous improvement mentality that constantly abandons less effective schools and programs. Allow students, teachers, and funds to flow from less- to more-effective programs; make the existence of schools and even of districts contingent on performance.” (Hill is a co-author of the December 2008 study, “Facing the Future: Financing Productive Schools,” from the School Finance Redesign Project. It advocates major overhaul of current finance systems and creation of systems in which funding follows individual students and gives individual schools much more flexibility in use of resources.)

Michael W. Kirst – His focus is higher education, and Kirst points to such financial problems as the need to better calculate the costs of remediation and to create incentives for both high schools and colleges to better prepare students for college. He also suggests better financial aid programs for part-time and community college students.

Michael J. Petrilli – Tying state aid to individual students “is essential.”

Andrew Rotherham – “My sense is that you all spend too little. That may be a reason the state isn’t attractive to some of the [charter school] networks; it’s hard to really deliver at that cost without a lot of additional help. I’d urge you to think creatively about to link efforts to increase funding to policy solutions. That can create some broader coalitions and also bring some folks to the reform table who might not otherwise be there.”

Diane Ravitch – “I don’t know what the ideal education budget should be, but it sure does appear that teachers in Colorado are underpaid. The state is imposing more and more demands and regulations, but it is not going to get the kind of teachers it wants unless it finds a way to raise average salaries, entry salaries and top salaries.”

What other states are doing: While Colorado spending and tax limits are among the tightest in the nation, K-12 spending is cushioned by Amendment 23. In several other states, harder hit by the economic downturn, budget cuts already are looming for both K-12 schools and for higher education. In just one example, a \$16 million program to improve standards in Connecticut high schools has been shelved for two years because of the economy. Hawaii, facing \$70 million in education budget cuts, is considering closing schools.

Snapshots and Perspectives on Key Education Issues

Standards, Assessments and Alignment

Where Colorado stands: The Ritter administration's central education initiative, and the major education legislation of 2008, was the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K). Passage of the law set in motion a four-year process of drafting descriptions of school and post-secondary/workforce readiness, expansion and updating of state content standards, selection of new state assessments, alignment of local district graduation requirements with state standards and adjustment of college admissions requirements. The new system will be fully in place for freshmen entering high school in the autumn of 2012.

What's ahead for Colorado: It will be a busy year for CAP4K planners in 2009. The departments of education and higher education hope to have a preliminary description of post-secondary and workforce readiness finished by summer, following a series of meetings around the state. In the spring, selected districts will be trying new kinds of high school assessments. A group of subcommittees soon will begin updating state content standards. The year will end with the State board of Education adopting new standards and board and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education jointly adopting the description of postsecondary and workforce readiness.

Paul T. Hill – (Didn't comment on this issue, saying it wasn't his area of expertise.)

Michael W. Kirst – Improved standards and alignment are very important, Kirst believes, but such a system needs financial incentives for schools, requires building up teacher capacity to meet new demands and won't succeed unless high school and college teachers work together to align courses.

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~ Michael J. Petrilli

Kirst also thinks that adding a secondary-school-improvement element in the No Child Left Behind reauthorization might spur faster and more inclusive improvement.

"Now states have an incentive to keep secondary school assessments below college level because more students will be able to become proficient by 2014. A differential federal policy could reward states with college-level assessments by extending the federal proficiency deadline beyond the required date of 2014."

Michael J. Petrilli – "It appears that the Achievement Plan could make some inroads. Particularly hopeful is the commitment to update Colorado's (weak) academic standards. I would hope that, as a part of that process, Colorado would commit to higher expectations for students to "make the grade" under the No Child Left Behind Act. ... Colorado's "partially proficient" standard (used for NCLB purposes) is the lowest in the country.

"Colorado's intention to link high school graduation requirements with college readiness standards also is good."

Andrew Rotherham – "Virginia does end-of-course [exams], other states exits, others none. I wouldn't look for any specific thing as the answer. And, the bigger problem here is that most states have moved to a system of accountability for kids before they've created one of accountability for the adults. That's a problem."

"I'm glad there is a plan, but Colorado is way late in all of this! You can hardly expect to meet international standards if even the basic steps are not in place."

~ Christopher T. Cross

What the panelists say:

Updating standards and alignment is vitally important, but both have to be executed carefully.

Christopher T. Cross – "I'm glad there is a plan, but Colorado is way late in all of this! You can hardly expect to meet international standards if even the basic steps are not in place." Cross also notes that new curricula and assessments need to be aligned with teacher preparation and support.

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~ Andrew Rotherham

Diane Ravitch – “I think that standards and accountability are important, but you should not believe for a minute that any state or district can test its way to higher performance. Kids don’t learn more just because they are tested more. Tests should be used diagnostically, to figure out what kids need and how to help them do better in school.

“Colorado should give serious attention to the possibility of measuring student test performance by scale scores rather than proficiency rankings. We have learned over the past several years that definitions of proficiency are extremely vague and easily manipulated. Scale scores, which have comparative value over time, will be more valuable in gauging the progress of students over several testing periods.

“Not only should students be prepared for college and the modern workplace, they should also see school as a place where learning is motivating and inspirational. This will not happen if the state attempts to micromanage every aspect of the educational process. Make sure that your standards and your vision incorporate attention to creativity, imaginative activities, the arts, and interpersonal connections between teachers and students. Pay attention to the quality of the place where children are learning. Make sure that it is not a factory that turns off kids who don’t buy into the state’s pre-packaged criteria.”

“Not only should students be prepared for college and the modern workplace, they should also see school as a place where learning is motivating and inspirational. This will not happen if the state attempts to micromanage every aspect of the educational process.”

~ Diane Ravitch

What other states are doing: Some 37 states have established P-16 or similar groups. Some progress has been made in aligning high school and college standards. Some states use end-of-course exams, others high school exit exams. Other states have “seat-time” requirements (so many English classes, so many science courses, etc.). Only 15 states have a definition of college readiness, and only three (New York, Rhode Island and Texas) require all students to finish a college-preparatory curriculum to graduate. “Further, the hard work of getting secondary-school teachers to work with their higher-education counterparts on subject-matter course articulation between the 10th grade and sophomore year in college has barely begun,” says Kirst.

Professional Training and Development

Where Colorado stands: Teacher preparation was not a major part of 2008 education legislation. Lawmakers did create the pilot program for principal training, mandate an every-other-year survey of teachers on working conditions and provide modest stipends for nationally certified teachers.

What’s ahead for Colorado: Prospects for legislation in 2009 are unclear. The Educator Subcommittee of the P-20 Council believes the state’s current educator licensing system is “outdated and poorly aligned” and is suggesting a number of reforms, including of alternative teacher licensing. The Teacher Quality Commission is recommending creation of a pilot program on unique teacher and principal identifiers. A November 2008 study by the Public Education & Business Coalition, “The Time Is Now: Improving School Leadership,”

urges a major focus on leadership development, including improved recruitment, effective principal preparation, accountability systems designed to help rather than hinder principals, greater autonomy for principals and investment in district leaders.

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What the panelists say:

Colorado needs to improve professional training and development.

“It depends on how it is done. New training for an old system (no school independence, no performance accountability, civil service hiring) is a step backward.”

~ Paul T. Hill

Christopher T. Cross – “You need a major principal training program, not a small pilot effort. A very thorough professional development program needs to be implemented that meets the needs of teachers in their areas of weakness. Build professional learning communities.”

Paul T. Hill – “It depends on how it is done. New training for an old system (no school independence, no performance accountability, civil service hiring) is a step backward.”

Michael W. Kirst – (Didn’t comment on this issue, saying it wasn’t his area of expertise.)

Michael J. Petrilli – “What still appears to be missing, however, is a direct focus on the ‘black box’ of the classroom itself. I understand that Colorado is a ‘local control state,’ but that shouldn’t keep it from tackling key instructional issues. Florida, for example, has made great progress thanks to its early reading initiative, a precursor to the federal Reading First program. It ensures that all elementary

school teachers understand the fundamentals of teaching reading. Would Colorado consider something similar?

“Likewise, Massachusetts has been a leader in raising standards for teachers. For elementary teachers this means ensuring that they know the science about reading instruction. For other teachers it means a focus on content knowledge. And for all teachers, it means a rigorous certification exam that

allows only well-educated people to pass. Is Colorado considering raising standards for teachers similarly? Honestly, most teacher and principal professional development is awful.

“I actually can’t think of *any* good principal professional development programs, and for teachers, I would mostly point you to Reading First programs that have done a great job for this specialized area ... teaching little kids to reach.”

Andrew Rotherham – “I think Colorado is ripe to take on the human capital issue. I’d link any effort to pay teachers more with measures to pay them differently and see what you can do to expand the alternative compensation schemes beyond more than just a few districts.”

Diane Ravitch – “I don’t see the value of a state principal training program. The best principal training is ‘on-the-job’ training - apprenticeship with experienced principals.”

What other states are doing: Georgia created a legislative committee to study teacher training and certification, Minnesota and Missouri set up alternative licensing procedures Oklahoma mandated licensure for Teach for America teachers. Many other state legislatures were active on teaching issues in 2008.

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Other panelist comments

Panel members also made additional comments about Colorado reform efforts, including whether dropout rates can be halved and postsecondary completion rates doubled in a decade, and whether postsecondary and workforce readiness are the same thing.

Christopher T. Cross – To double postsecondary completion rate, Cross said, “I think the problem you’re going to run into is as much a resource one as anything. It requires an incredible investment” in higher education to achieve that. Halving the dropout rate is “less problematic ... primarily because of the fiscal situation.”

On whether postsecondary and workforce readiness are the same thing, Cross said, “I don’t think they are actually.”

“What was passed by the legislature looks like spaghetti was thrown against the wall just to see what sticks!”

~ Christopher T. Cross

Postsecondary readiness “implies things that are almost entirely academic,” while employers are looking for personal attributes – ability to organize work, teamwork, etc. “No public institution pretends they’re doing this things correctly.” While there is overlap, “You have to parse the differences carefully.”

Cross also has questions about Colorado’s overall approach. “I really don’t see a strategy or a

coherent theory of action. How is it all put together? What is the capacity of the [Department of Education]? How does the department provide guidance and support to low-performing districts and schools? How is leadership developed and supported? What was passed by the legislature looks like spaghetti was thrown against the wall just to see what sticks!”

Paul T. Hill – “It’s a good aspiration but not likely to be met. The kids who will drop out of high school 10 years from now are already behind.”

“... a job that pays enough to support a family of four needs the same kinds of skills as college.”

~ Michael W. Kirst

Michael W. Kirst – Discussing postsecondary and workforce readiness, Kirst said policy makers needs to consider specifically the kinds of jobs high school graduates will be entering. Menial and semi-skilled jobs don’t require the same skills as college, but other kinds of jobs do. For example, he said, a job that pays enough to support a family of four needs the same kinds of skills as college.

“But people are quite right in saying ... there are a huge number of jobs that don’t need college skills. ... The framing of it is oversimplified.”

Michael J. Petrilli – “For over a decade, Colorado has been a leader in education reform. It was one of the first states to embrace standards-based reform. It has one of the most vigorous and respected charter school programs in the nation. Denver’s pay-for-performance initiative is heralded as the first of its kind. And now, with the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids act, the Rocky Mountain State appears to be leading once again.

“Yet a critical question for Coloradoans is this: For all of the reform activity taking place in the state, why are results so paltry? A few years ago, those of us at the Fordham Institute graded the states on the degree to which they were embracing reform and showing gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In terms of reform, Colorado did fairly well, ranking 14th in the country. (It would have done better were it not for its lackluster academic standards, its low definition of “proficiency”

under the No Child Left Behind act, and the absence of an exit exam for high school graduation.)

“For all of the reform activity taking place in the state, why are results so paltry?”

~ Michael J. Petrilli

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“What’s most striking about that evaluation, however, is how little progress Colorado has made on the NAEP. As of 2006, neither African-American students nor Hispanic students nor low-income students made any statistically significant gains in student achievement in fourth-grade reading, eighth grade math, or eighth grade science. Meanwhile, other reform-minded states, such as Massachusetts and Florida, were making huge gains across the board.”

Are Colorado’s dropout and postsecondary goals realistic?
“Not really, but that’s OK. Shoot for the moon.”

Are postsecondary and workforce readiness the same thing?
“If you’re talking about decent paying jobs, they all require some postsecondary training.”

“... that you don’t disadvantage kids by giving them the ‘college prep’ curriculum in the first place argues for making that the default.”

~ Andrew Rotherham

Andrew Rotherham – Asked if the dropout and postsecondary goals are realistic, Rotherham said “Yes, if the state brings the other pieces into alignment to make that happen.”

On postsecondary and workforce readiness, he said, “When you unpack the skills needed for post-

secondary and the skills that you need for further training for jobs, they’re actually pretty similar. That, coupled with the fact that you don’t disadvantage kids by giving them the ‘college prep’ curriculum in the first place argues for making that the default.

“But, in terms of communicating it publicly, the college-for-all rhetoric is counterproductive because people intuitively get that college for all doesn’t make sense, so framing around ‘opportunities beyond high school’ or something like that is a better frame.”

Diane Ravitch – “First of all, policymakers should bear in mind that school achievement is strongly linked to demographic factors. When the state’s child poverty rate is increasing, you can expect that the graduation rate and possibly achievement are likely to decline. When the proportion of any low-scoring group increases, so will the achievement gap. The dramatic increase in child poverty [in Colorado] is alarming and will have an impact on school achievement. Thus, policymakers might find it useful to think about taking specific measures to reduce poverty among school-aged children and their families, which will have the beneficial consequence of improving the children’s academic performance and persistence in school.”

“...policymakers might find it useful to think about taking specific measures to reduce poverty among school-aged children and their families”

~ Diane Ravitch

Are Colorado’s dropout and postsecondary goals realistic?
“Probably not, but it is a goal that is worth pursuing - as long as it does not push the state into a posture of lowering standards just to keep kids in school so as to meet the goal. That is a real danger. Be careful what you wish for.”

Are postsecondary and workforce readiness the same thing?
“No! College readiness involves the ability to read a complex text; to spend hours engaged in complex studies and abstract symbols. Workforce readiness involves application and hands-on activities and self-discipline, knowing that one must show up every day on time and have the stick-to-it-iveness to complete what one has started, as well as the ability to use technology to solve problems and the ability to work alone and in groups with others.

“There may be some overlap, but there are distinctly different skills and knowledge associated with these paths.”

A Note on Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

In addition to responses and material provided by the panelists, information for this report was gathered from the Education Commission of the States, the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado General Assembly, the Piton Foundation, the Colorado School Finance Project, the Colorado Children's Campaign and the archives of Education News Colorado.

Here are some online resources for further materials on the seven issue areas discussed in this report:

Accountability and Data Use

CDE information about improving information management
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/scripts/reforms/detail.asp?itemid=911889>

The Colorado Growth Model
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/growthmodel.html>

(State Education Data Systems: How Does Colorado Measure Up?
(Colorado Children's Campaign, 2007) <http://www.cde.state.co.us/artemis/go41/go4112d262007internet.pdf>)

At-risk students

2008 "Kids Count" report by the Colorado Children's Campaign
<http://www.coloradokids.org/includes/downloads/kidscount2008.pdf>

November 2008 dropout report by CDE
<http://ednewscolorado.org/images/HFdocs/dropoutreport1108.pdf>

Early Childhood Education

2008 report on the Colorado Preschool and Kindergarten Program
http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeprevention/download/pdf/2008_legislative_report_complete.pdf

"P-3 Successful Practices" report
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/download/PDF/20081113p3report.pdf>

Innovation Initiatives and Charters

Background on Innovation Schools Act of 2008
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdegen/SB130.htm>

School Finance

"Financing the Future: Financing Productive Schools"
http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/251

Colorado School Finance Project
<http://www.cosfp.org/>

Standards, Assessments and Alignment

CDE details on implementation of CAP4K
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/scripts/reforms/detail.asp?itemid=648922>

Professional Training and Development

Information on teaching Colorado from the Alliance for Quality Teaching
<http://www.qualityteaching.org/index.cfm/Welcome>

Additional education reform information from CDE
<http://www.cde.state.co.us/scripts/reforms/>

Full 2008 subcommittee recommendations from the P-20 Education Coordinating Council
<http://ednewscolorado.org/images/HFdocs/p20proposalsnov08.pdf>

Citizens, policymakers and educators who are interested in learning what other states are doing on education issues should take advantage of the deep resources available on the website of the Education Commission of the States (www.ecs.org). On the home page, click on the Education Resources link. Choose the issue you're researching on the next page that comes up. There's a link to What States Are Doing at the left of each issue page.



About the Author

This report was researched and written for the Piton Foundation by Todd Engdahl, Capitol Editor of Education News Colorado (ednewscolorado.org), the only news service devoted exclusively to coverage and analysis of Colorado education news and policy. A veteran newspaper and Internet journalist, including more than 30 years at The Denver Post, Engdahl also wrote the Foundation's January 2008 report "Many Voices, Many Views: Education Policy Making in Colorado."



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