INTRODUCTION

Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows are a diverse group of general and special education teachers who teach in rural and urban areas across the state. We believe that educator, family, and student voices should be elevated in the conversation surrounding how quality schools are evaluated at the state and federal levels.

Our research has and continues to focus on student, family, and educator opinions regarding the effectiveness of Colorado's current school accountability system and if it adequately measures quality in schools according to stakeholder priorities. Currently, Colorado schools are evaluated based on five indicators as outlined by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)[1]:

1. Student achievement on state standardized assessments
2. Student growth on state standardized assessments
3. English language proficiency
4. High school graduation rates
5. State-chosen indicator, which is chronic absenteeism in Colorado

In 2022, Teach Plus initiated a research project to explore educators' perspectives on quality education and to assess the alignment of Colorado's school accountability framework with these views[2]. Teach Plus Fellows developed a set of nine school quality principles, drawing from the Aspen Institute's work on school quality federal and state regulations and educational scholarship. Titled "Principles to Advance an Opportunity Agenda through Public Education," they cover areas such as instruction and student experience, the learning environment, and the role of government.

Next, Teach Plus Fellows asked educators across the state to rank principles from most to least important. Colorado educators named the following three as the top principles of a high-quality school [3]:

1. A quality school provides all students with a safe and healthy environment that is conducive to academic learning.
2. A quality school provides all students with the opportunity to develop their character, talents and interests, while receiving support to address individual learning needs.
3. A quality school provides all students with access to caring adults with expertise in creating quality learning environments and experiences.

[1] One Hundred Fourteenth Congress of the United States of America. (2015, January 6). GovInfo. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-114s1177enr/pdf/BILLS-114s1177enr.pdf

[2] Aspen Institute. (2022, September). Opportunity to Learn, Responsibility to Lead. Education and Society. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Aspen-Ed-Soc-Opportunity-Responibility_v8-single.pdf

[3] Teach Plus Colorado. (2023, May). *Principles of High-Quality Schools: Recommendations from Colorado Educators*. Teach Plus. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from https://teachplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/TCO_Principles-of-High-Quality-Schools.pdf

The 2023-2024 Working Group followed up on the previous Fellows' efforts by gathering qualitative and quantitative data collected from Colorado focus groups during the fall of 2023 aimed to assist the Task Force To Study K-12 Accountability System, established by HB 23-1241[4], to better understand **all** stakeholder needs. Our research highlights student, family, and educator feedback on the role of education in Colorado and how this research might impact how the state measures school quality in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This study centered on three research questions:

1. What do students, families, and teachers see as the purpose of education and the responsibilities of schools and educators?
2. What role do students, families, and teachers believe schools and teachers should play in helping them achieve success?
3. What skills do students, families, and teachers see as most important for schools to teach?

We hosted a series of stakeholder focus groups across the Front Range in order to collect qualitative data through open-ended discussions, giving participants the space to expand on their responses from the initial survey. Additionally, this survey provided us with quantitative data to assess patterns and categories by grade level and geographic area, for example.

After leading focus groups, our research team analyzed the data to code responses and sort them into recurring and emergent themes. First, we did this individually, and then we collaboratively compared our findings to verify our final themes and next steps.

The sample size (n=65) included 19 students, 15 family members, and 31 educators. Students interviewed ranged from 7th-12th grade while families and educators discussed their experiences related to their students from Early Childhood Education through 12th grade[5].

FINDINGS

1. **The primary purposes of education are engaging students, preparing them for their goals for the future, and contributing to society.**

Students, parents, and teachers see the purpose of education as fostering life readiness beyond the school system. In addition, stakeholders hope these life readiness skills ultimately form students into contributing members of their communities. When asked what schools need to provide to help students reach their future dreams and goals, stakeholders discussed the importance of student

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[4] *Task Force To Study K-12 Accountability System | Colorado General Assembly*. (2023, May 24). Colorado General Assembly. Retrieved April 28, 2024, from https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb23-1241
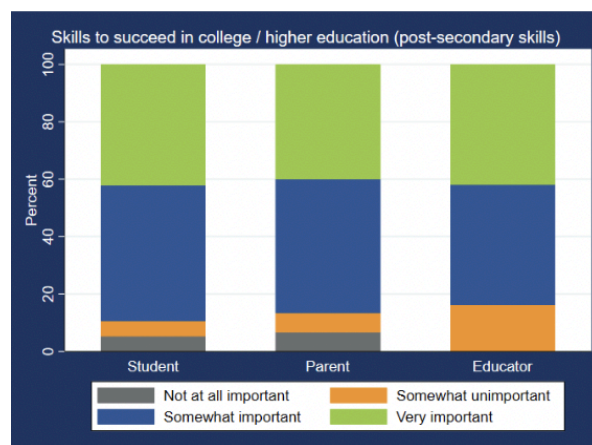[5] See Question 1 in the Appendix

engagement. Specifically, one family member said: *"The parts of school that have been most useful are the curricular programs that build upon each other in a way that my children are able to make a connection between something they are currently learning to something that they learned earlier in the school year or in a previous grade and when the school has a class or time of the day where there is a focus on social-emotional development."*[6] Participants also mentioned that engagement could be bolstered through consistent exploration of students' passions at school. They suggested offering electives, activities, and opportunities for students to authentically connect to their learning and to the educators who work with them.
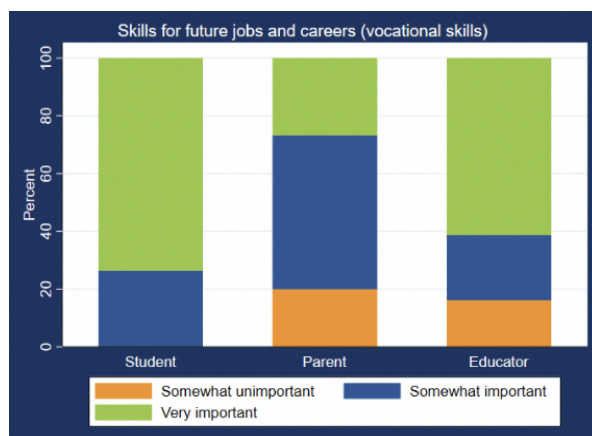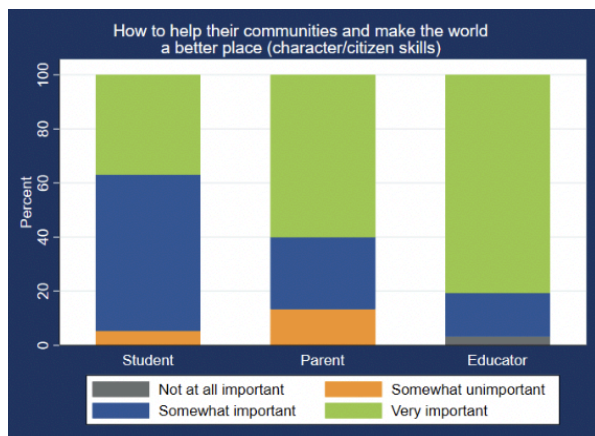
Furthermore, many stakeholders referenced some element of life-readiness, like critical-thinking or social-emotional (SEL) skills, as their top indicator of a quality school as compared to other indicators such as college-readiness. According to one participant, students *"will need opportunities to practice these skills, chances to connect with the broader community (exposure to these jobs/skills, exposure to different kinds of people, etc.), interdisciplinary classes, energized students and teachers who CARE about learning, and seeing students as a whole person."*[7]

Finally, stakeholders agreed that another purpose of schools is to foster a sense of belonging through creating responsive members of school communities. Almost half of all educators and family members expressed a goal of open-mindedness, equity, cultural mindedness, advocacy, and service, with the hope that current students would become contributors and difference-makers within their communities[8].


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[6] See Question 10 in the Appendix
[7] See Question 13 in the Appendix
[8] See Questions 15-17 in the Appendix

2. **The most essential roles and responsibilities of schools and teachers are cultivating the holistic development of the child, building a safe environment, fostering student development, and creating effective student supports and structures.**

A school's role is to help students develop social-emotional skills which include interpersonal skills, collaboration skills, empathy, kindness, and conflict-resolution strategies. Additionally, stakeholders named basic math and literacy, communication, and writing skills as important[9]. When asked "What kind of person do you want your child to be and what kind of character traits do you want them to have?", more than half of the students, families, and teachers said that these SEL skills are/were critical. A teacher stated, *"I want them to be creative problem solvers, to be compassionate, curious, and to believe in themselves. I want them to be brave, to have a community focus, and to stand up for what they believe is right."*[10] Stakeholders often mentioned the essential nature of building strong interpersonal relationships between students, peers, and their communities.

Secondly, a school's role needs to be identified as one that provides space for students and staff to feel supported. When asked "What does a great school look, feel, and sound like to you?", most stakeholders mentioned how schools must provide a safe space for students to learn. A parent reflected by saying: *"I see the purpose of education as providing a space for students to learn new information and skills each year that build upon one another to prepare them for a successful future. I think it is the responsibility of schools to provide a space for children to make mistakes and learn from these mistakes. This includes how people interact outside of school when working together at a job, navigating relationships, and taking on more responsibility and leadership."*[11] Time and again, respondents discussed how schools have to provide a place for students and staff to feel supported and accepted even when mistakes are made.
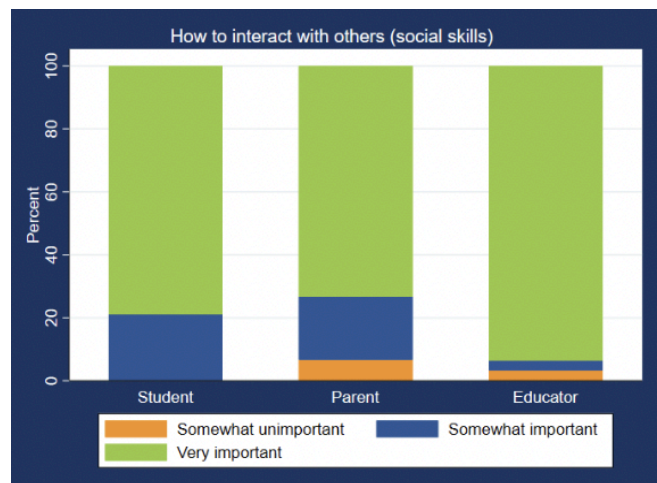
Furthermore, stakeholders had a collective belief that differentiation of curriculum and assessments, equity for multiple learning needs, and a diverse array of academics will lead to success. When asked "What do you need from school to help you achieve your dreams for the future", most students described how schools should provide an engaging and relevant curriculum to meet the complex and unique needs of our current world.

[9] See Question 12 in the Appendix
[10] See Question 7 in the Appendix
[11] See Question 7 in the Appendix

Lastly, a school's role revolves around prioritizing student fulfillment by honorings choice, passion, and engagement. Emphasizing these elements is crucial in empowering students to pursue their interests, make meaningful choices, and remain actively engaged in their educational journey. In response to the question, "What does a good life or success for (you) your child mean to you?," many respondents said that a good life or success starts with developing the whole child to become a kind, inquisitive, and caring member of society. When reflecting on "dreams for your students future," a teacher responded with, *"Independent, resilient, kind, open-minded, curious and healthy relationships. I want them to feel like they have the tools to be successful in whatever they choose and to navigate all the bumps in the [road.]"*[12]

3. **The most important skills participants want schools to prioritize are critical thinking, SEL, core subjects, and cultural competency are the most important skills participants want schools to prioritize.**

Core classes and electives were mentioned the most in the context of students' learning needs. This encompasses a wide variety of courses encouraging opportunities for application to real-world problems. More than two-thirds of families surveyed remarked that academic skills were a high priority in which schools should focus. In contrast, fewer educators and students included them in their responses. While academic skills have historically been the focus of schools, students and educators now believe that this is but one variable in the larger

equation of student learning needs. An educator noted that they *"do think core subjects are very important because students will need to transfer their skills in reading, writing, math, and science to their daily lives."*[13]
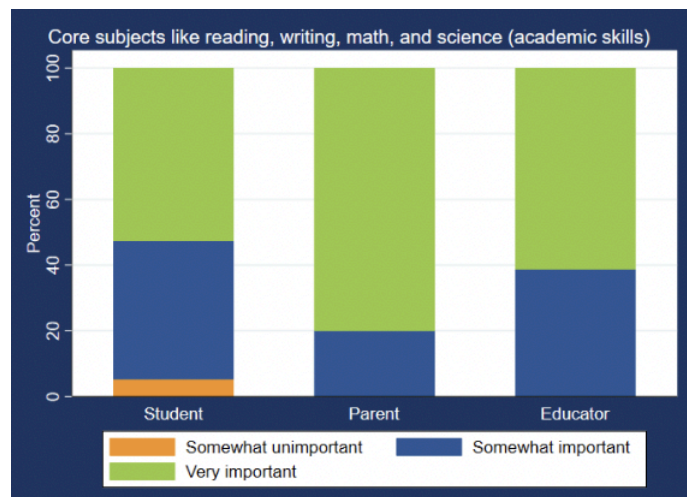
In addition, most participants listed critical-thinking skills as necessary for schools to teach. This finding generated the most consensus among the three groups interviewed, with nearly all saying this was somewhat or very important. One student remarked, *"I think critical-thinking skills are the most important because school is a safe space to fail ."*[14]

Likewise, data showed that stakeholders wanted courses to be aligned to the specific needs of their school communities. *"My school and teachers do a great job of preparing us for college in a community*

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[12] See Question 9 in the Appendix
[13] See Question 10 in the Appendix
[14] See Question 13 in the Appendix

that is grounded in core values," was how one student described their learning experience[15]. We acknowledge that Colorado has a great diversity of needs amongst its communities, and individual school districts should seek to connect their students authentically to the places they call home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Schools should seek to diversify their models of curriculum instruction to better integrate critical thinking, SEL, core subjects, and cultural competencies.** Districts must allow decisions to be made at the school level so that the needs of the community are met.

Schools must continue to support academic learning, and further diversify course offerings, electives, and curricula. Balancing academic learning with skills-based opportunities that can be applied to students' daily lives is imperative. Given the widely recognized importance of critical-thinking skills, schools should commit to integrating best practices that weave these abilities throughout every part of the school day by:

+ Allowing students to reflect on their learning, make responsible choices, choose paths related to their passions, and take ownership over their education while providing standards-aligned choices of what to study.
+ Promoting stronger teacher training to incorporate SEL and critical-thinking skills into lessons, funding for more whole-child supports such as counseling and building capacity for more electives.

In order to respond to the need for more cultural competency, school districts should seek to build bridges between their learners and the members of their communities by:

+ Offering opportunities such as guest speakers, internships, sponsorships, creative problem solving, and other modes of authentic engagement to strengthen learning opportunities for students and to prioritize the investment of the local school community.
+ Colorado's schools should continue to study and observe other districts around the country that have more deeply integrated critical thinking, social emotional learning, cultural competency, and core academic subjects into their standards and curriculum. New York or Indiana could provide a model/guidance because of their focus on student achievement, opportunities for teacher collaboration, and strong family-community ties.
+ Providing opportunities for students to engage with real-world creative problem solving that prepares them to accomplish their own goals for the future, such as project-based learning, service learning, and creative and performing arts.

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[15] See Question 15 in the Appendix

2. **Create a new indicator of "whole-child development" or substitute it with "chronic absenteeism" within the state and national school accountability systems established by ESSA.**

As stated above, our current school accountability system measures school quality based on five indicators. We propose changing Colorado's state chosen indicator **from *chronic absenteeism* to *whole-child development*** or adding whole-child development as a sixth indicator**.** This is an effective first step in addressing stakeholder priorities explained in our findings. Measurable components to be implemented in Colorado schools could include:

+ Ensuring all schools have access to a social-emotional curriculum that is culturally responsive and sustainable and focuses on the skills highlighted in our findings, including such as problem solving, collaboration, leadership, financial literacy, work ethic, and resiliency..
+ Providing thorough training to all educators on how to best implement this curriculum within their classrooms to ensure student well-being.
+ Developing guidelines regarding staffing requirements. For example, look at the student-to-teacher ratio of the school's mental health team and mandate the hiring of specialized service providers to monitor implementation of whole-child development practices schoolwide.
+ Creating a statewide student survey to measure the extent to which students feel supported in their environment, connected to their learning, and are active participants in their own learning. This survey could be modeled after surveys already in use in many districts and schools.

3. **Conduct more focus group research to answer the following questions and better inform policy makers:**
   + *What life-readiness skills should schools teach to students?*
   + *How can schools best prepare students to better contribute to their communities?*

Although a notable number in each stakeholder group referenced some element of life-readiness as an indicator of a quality school, the types of skills mentioned were often broad. Skills such as problem solving, collaboration, leadership, financial literacy, work ethic, and resiliency were suggested, but many respondents simply explained that students needed to be ready for the "real world.[16]" Additionally, unpacking the specific elements of a global mindset and what it means to be a contributor to a community would help states and schools better understand necessary shifts in standards and curriculum. In order to effectively suggest next steps for schools, more research is needed to discern which life-readiness and global-mindset skills are most important to students, families, and educators. The original sample size lacked diversity in demographic variety and geographic representation, which should be remedied in future work. Additional time and resources for more research would allow for a

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[16] See Question 8 in the Appendix

more representative sample size of each stakeholder group and would strengthen the validity of the data. From there, we can better interpret the priority intersections of each stakeholder.

CONCLUSION

Teach Plus Colorado's research underscores a compelling shift toward a more holistic approach to education. Through extensive focus group conversations across Colorado, the diverse perspectives of students, families, and educators coalesce into a unified call for schools to empower students as agents over their own futures. The findings reveal a collective vision for school accountability that transcends traditional academic achievement metrics, highlighting the need for schools to prioritize life-readiness and personal development alongside academic skills.

Within the state's accountability framework, "whole-child development" should serve as a core indicator, emphasizing the importance of social-emotional learning, critical thinking, and cultural competency. This study not only highlights the evolving educational needs and priorities of Colorado's communities, but also sets a forward-thinking agenda for future educational policy and research, aiming to align school curricula with the broader, essential skills that students need to thrive in a complex, interconnected world.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Name, email, descriptor (parent, teacher, educator?), grade, school, city
2. How would you describe your child(ren)?
3. Who and/or what are the most important people and/or things in your child(ren)'s life? Why?
4. What makes your child(ren) happiest? Why?
5. When you think about your dreams for your child(ren)'s future, what kind of life do you want for them as an adult 10 or 20 years from now?
6. When you think about the life you want your child(ren) to have, what do you see them doing for work as an adult 20 years from now?

7. What kind of person do you want your child(ren) to be?
8. When you think about all these dreams for the future, what will your child(ren) need to learn and do to achieve these dreams?
9. What do you see as the role of education and schools in helping your child(ren) achieve success?
10. What will your child(ren) need from school to help them achieve your/their dreams for the future?
11. What will your child(ren) need from their teachers to help them achieve your/their dreams for the future?
12. You'll see a list of different skills you'll be asked to rate by how important they are for schools to teach. Those skills are:
    a. Academic skills like reading, writing, math, and science
    b. Skills for future jobs and careers
    c. Skills they will need to succeed in college
    d. How to think for themselves
    e. How to interact with others (social skills)
    f. How to help their communities and be good citizens
    g. How to manage their emotions and mental health
13. Which of the above skills do you think are most important? Why?
14. Are there other things you think schools should be teaching students that weren't mentioned? Why?
15. When you think about the kind of schools and teachers your child(ren) need to help them be successful, how well do you think their current school is doing? What could be better?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your dreams for your child(ren)'s future, your hopes for their school, or their current experience in school?
17. Do you have any feedback on what it was like to answer these questions? Are there any questions you think should be changed, added, or removed?