



# STRENGTHENING OUR WORKFORCE WHILE EXPANDING STUDENT OPPORTUNITY

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Recommendation from Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows



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# INTRODUCTION

It is vital to prepare students for life after high school. Colorado schools must equip young scholars with the tools and skills they need to succeed in college and future careers. By championing access to postsecondary workforce readiness (PWR), Colorado can provide equitable opportunities for all students, helping to pave the way for a brighter future and a more robust workforce. PWR is an essential measure of how well Colorado schools prepare students not only for graduation, but for success beyond it. Yet despite legislative momentum and strong district-led efforts, access to PWR pathways remains uneven across the state.

Postsecondary pathways, also known as “The Big Three” include:

- + **Postsecondary credit programs** such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), concurrent enrollment (CE), and dual enrollment courses (DE);
- + **Industry-recognized credentials** such as career and technical education (CTE), industry certifications, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), and trade schools.
- + **Work-based learning (WBL)** such as job shadowing, apprenticeships, and internships.<sup>1</sup>

Some Colorado school districts have made meaningful progress in expanding PWR pathways.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, recent legislation has aimed to strengthen the role of PWR in school accountability, and districts are beginning to explore new models for implementation.<sup>3</sup> Still, far too many students have limited access to postsecondary opportunities, and the benefits of these programs are distributed inequitably, which reinforces opportunity gaps.<sup>4</sup>

The state's current accountability system allows wide variation in how graduation requirements and PWR experiences are defined and measured. Many districts don't require students to complete any formal PWR opportunities to graduate, and there is a lack of transparent, statewide data that shows how students are accessing these experiences or how many could be taking advantage of them.<sup>5</sup>

We are a group of Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows and a diverse group of highly effective general and special educators who teach across the state. In this brief, we present findings on the state of PWR in Colorado and recommendations to ensure that every Colorado student, regardless of their zip code, has access to high-quality PWR pathways during their school years. We hope our recommendations expand access, as well as increase transparency and overall consistency of PWR implementation in our state.

# METHODOLOGY

In response to Colorado's evolving postsecondary workforce readiness landscape, our group employed a multifaceted approach to assess its current state. We reviewed and analyzed relevant state legislation and reports, researched current PWR data across 19 districts in Colorado, and engaged with organizations and other stakeholders working to expand access to postsecondary workforce opportunities for students.

We studied legislation from 2022 to 2024 to determine the most recent shifts related to postsecondary workforce readiness in Colorado, with a focus on state-level shifts rather than federal shifts. We also examined reports that came out as a direct result of legislation, including a financial study and a report of the current accountability system.<sup>6</sup> At the same time as this brief was written, two pieces of legislation were also in the legislative process, which we briefly reviewed but did not analyze to the same depth as legislation and reports from 2022-2024 due to time and capacity constraints.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, we completed a literature review of articles describing the most desirable PWR skills according to educators, students, and families. We read extensively about different states' school quality and student success indicators via the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and how these variations affected student achievement. We then used this knowledge to critically analyze student performance data associated with Colorado's current school accountability system.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, to gain deeper insights into Colorado's emphasis on "The Big Three," we held meetings with organizations such as CareerWise Colorado, Colorado Succeeds, and the Colorado Education Initiative to better understand their ongoing work related to postsecondary opportunities.

## Findings

1. Access to PWR offerings is uneven across the state, with rural areas having far fewer options for students than the urban centers.
2. Colorado has taken a commendable step to address the issue through legislation, but implementation remains uneven.
3. The current PWR performance indicator data (SAT scores and graduation, dropout, and matriculation rates) do not accurately reflect true college and career readiness across Colorado, as they fail to measure student access to and engagement in "The Big Three" PWR opportunities: postsecondary credits, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning.

## Recommendations

1. The state and districts must provide equitable access to PWR opportunities for all Colorado students, encompassing postsecondary credits, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning experiences.
2. Implementation of PWR-related legislation must prioritize transparent and high-quality access to postsecondary opportunities.
3. The updated PWR indicator should include data on student access to and engagement in postsecondary credits, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning opportunities, as well as data on the abundance or scarcity of these offerings—such as courses, certifications, and programs—across Colorado schools.

# FINDINGS

1. **Access to PWR offerings is uneven across the state, with rural areas having far fewer options for students than the urban centers.**

## ***Geographic Disparities Undermine Equity in PWR Access***

Location has an impact on the efficacy and accessibility of learning for many students, and it can pose an equity issue for students from rural or low socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> While some urban and suburban districts have built strong systems for delivering postsecondary credit, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning—"The Big Three"—many rural communities face barriers that limit both access and awareness.

## ***Fragmented Partnerships and Tuition Agreements Create Barriers***

The burden of establishing and maintaining PWR partnerships often falls on already overextended teachers and administrators. Local education providers (LEPs) must negotiate individual agreements with each partner institution, which slows down expansion efforts, especially in districts lacking dedicated staff to handle these processes because developing and managing these partnerships often falls to existing CE/CTE teachers and high school administrators, alongside their regular duties.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, districts pay student tuition for CE courses at tuition rates that are individually negotiated between the school district and the community college.<sup>11</sup> The way these credits translate for high school and college credit is also part of this negotiation. Due to this individualized approach to CE, serious inequities and disparities exist. Without a unified approach, disparities may exist because the partnership process for CE generally depends on the proximity of a school to a local community college, as well as district representatives to create these agreements with LEPs. Because there are less community college opportunities in rural locations and since these districts are often smaller in size, the disparity can become more apparent. While interest from industry partners is growing, not all districts are equipped to meet this moment.<sup>12</sup>

## ***Shortage of Certified Educators Limits Student Access***

Staffing shortages also contribute to this disparity. There has been a decline in teachers pursuing the certifications required to teach CTE, CE, and DE courses due to additional costs and the time commitment required to obtain a master's degree.<sup>13</sup> Districts are responsible for hiring certified educators; however, rural and remote schools often lack the necessary funding or candidate pool to meet this demand. Although Colorado offers support for certification, opportunities are inconsistent and highly competitive.<sup>14</sup>

## ***Inconsistent Communication Hinders Family Decision-Making***

Communication with students and families about their postsecondary options also creates challenges. They are expected to piece together information about PWR opportunities from fragmented or outdated sources, which vary widely depending on district capacity. This lack of clear, consistent communication hinders students' ability to

make informed decisions about their postsecondary pathways, especially for students in rural or low-population schools who may not have the vast array of PWR options that are available in more densely populated areas.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Innovative Local Models Offer Promising Solutions***

Some school systems have developed innovative solutions. The Fremont County Multi-District Initiative (FMI) and Cherry Creek's team of full-time PWR coordinators show what's possible when districts invest in collaborative staffing and infrastructure. The FMI formed successful regional cooperative relationships that can serve as a model for other coalitions.<sup>16</sup> This initiative is a collaboration between Cañon City High School, Cotopaxi Consolidated Schools, Florence Junior and Senior High School, and Pueblo Community College. As of 2024, FMI served over 1,500 students by providing access to 21 shared courses and eight industry credentials.<sup>17</sup> Through this collaboration, the districts in Fremont County increase "The Big Three" opportunities for students through a cooperative use of resources.<sup>18</sup> Cherry Creek Schools has improved access to PWR opportunities through their PWR Coordinators. It has a team of four or five full-time PWR coordinators who build and facilitate partnership opportunities such as apprenticeships, CareerWise industry partnerships, and industry and nonprofit internships for students in the district.<sup>19</sup> However, without broader policy support, most districts, particularly those in rural areas, cannot scale or sustain these efforts independently, creating an uneven foundation for PWR that limits access across the state.

## **2. Colorado has taken a commendable step to address the issue through legislation, but implementation remains uneven.**

The Colorado General Assembly has taken steps to improve postsecondary workforce readiness by commissioning studies, forming task forces, and advancing legislation. House Bill 22-1215 established a task force to explore ways to expand and simplify high school students' access to college credit and career credentials.<sup>20</sup> In 2023, House Bill 23-1241 led to a new task force focused on strengthening Colorado's school accountability system, with a specific emphasis on reforming the PWR indicator.<sup>21</sup> The task force produced a report that includes provisions to add to and change the data used to determine Colorado's postsecondary workforce readiness school accountability indicator.<sup>22</sup>

More recently, House Bill 24-1364, known as the Education-Based Workforce Readiness Act, required a financial study examining the potential cost savings associated with expanding access to PWR programming.<sup>23</sup> This report provided detailed recommendations to improve both the implementation and funding of PWR across the state.<sup>24</sup>

Together, these efforts signal a growing legislative commitment to advancing equitable PWR opportunities for all students. Each initiative emphasized the importance of improving state longitudinal data systems (SLDS), expanding access, and measuring student engagement in "The Big Three." However, to realize these goals, Colorado must continue to examine current policies and focus on statewide implementation with an eye on transparent and high-quality access and engagement in postsecondary workforce opportunities.

**3. The current PWR performance indicator data (SAT scores and graduation, dropout, and matriculation rates) does not accurately reflect true college and career readiness across Colorado, as it fails to measure student access to and engagement in “The Big Three” PWR opportunities: postsecondary credits, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning.**

Colorado's current PWR indicator, which includes SAT scores and matriculation, graduation, and dropout rates, does not fully reflect the real-world readiness of Colorado students for college or career pathways. Although the current performance data is valuable, it does not reflect a research-informed measurement of college or career readiness after graduation, and Colorado should create a separate PWR sub-indicator that is not directly associated with state assessment scores and graduation/dropout rates.<sup>25</sup>

While existing data points offer insight into academic outcomes, they do not measure the depth or quality of students' readiness to succeed beyond high school. For example, a student may graduate or achieve a satisfactory SAT score without having had meaningful exposure to career pathways or early college credit. There is a strong correlation between participation in postsecondary courses, credential programs, and authentic workplace experiences and greater student postsecondary success, which can boost overall economic development.<sup>26</sup> Yet, Colorado's current system does not reflect this reality in its performance framework.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the current reliance on instructional time, also known as seat time, to measure engagement in PWR opportunities is problematic.<sup>28</sup> Students, especially those from rural or low-income communities, often face transportation barriers that limit the time they spend in alternative-learning environments. This penalizes participation in these high-value experiences and distorts the data used to evaluate PWR access and impact.<sup>29</sup>

By separating academic outcomes, such as SAT scores and graduation requirements, into a PWR-specific sub-indicator that reflects students' engagement in high-value, career-connected learning experiences, the state can ensure that all students have access to and engage in high-quality PWR opportunities.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **1. The state and districts must provide equitable access to PWR opportunities for all Colorado students, encompassing postsecondary credits, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning experiences.**

Colorado's current shift to focusing on increasing student access to postsecondary courses, credential programs, and work-based learning experiences aligns with research showing that those opportunities have significantly positive outcomes for students after graduation, especially students in rural areas that do not generally have the same access to these opportunities as students in more urban areas.

A recent report by Colorado Succeeds explains the impact of funds from the Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) Education Fund, Rural Coaction Grant, and Opportunity Now on postsecondary workforce readiness opportunities in rural communities. In the past five years, these grants have created 550 business partnerships and have funded state-of-the-art mobile cross-district learning labs.<sup>30</sup> This collaborative infrastructure model continues to craft real pathways for students and communities to fulfill more educational and economic opportunities, which creates conditions for work to endure beyond the life of any single grant or person.<sup>31</sup>

In urban districts like Cherry Creek and Denver Public Schools, innovation campuses are valuable options for students. Cherry Creek offers CE, CTE, and DE through its Cherry Creek Innovation Campus, where postsecondary credits can be obtained as well as industry credentials.<sup>32</sup> In Denver Public Schools, its CTE department sports many opportunities like school-based programs and explore-pathways programs (getting students “on the job” outside of school).<sup>33</sup> No matter where a school is located, students deserve access to “The Big Three” programming. Below are solutions for how to continue pushing toward more equitable access to meaningful opportunities.

### **Create Unified Statewide Agreements**

A more unified statewide agreement for concurrent enrollment, including standardized tuition rates and shared partnership processes, would remove key access barriers for students, especially in rural districts. A more streamlined process could expedite the implementation of college and career readiness goals for Colorado students across multiple districts. The current staffing burden could be partially mitigated by implementing this state-level uniform and straightforward process, rather than having each district create and utilize its own agreements.

### **Expand Access to PWR Educator Certification Pipeline**

To address the shortage of certified educators for CTE, CE, and DE, Colorado must expand access to affordable, regionally available certification programs. Programs outlined on the Colorado Department of Education website, such as the Educator Recruitment and Retention Program, are highly competitive and do not necessarily meet the needs of schools providing postsecondary coursework programs, work-based learning experiences, or industry-recognized credentialing programs.<sup>34</sup> A dedicated

Opportunity Fund could provide financial incentives to community colleges to offer low-cost certification programs and support rural educator participation. This would reduce costs for both schools and educators, while building a statewide pipeline of qualified instructors.<sup>35</sup>

### **Improve Students and Families' Access to Information on PWR Opportunities**

In addition to expanding opportunities, students and families need clear, centralized access to information. Allowing students and their families to compare options at various high schools and make more informed educational decisions based on program offerings is essential. A modern, interactive webpage that is user-friendly and comprehensive, with a clear focus on connecting students to available programs, is vital. Louisiana's dual enrollment webpage serves as an example of a modern, one-stop resource for students and families to discover, explore, and compare dual-enrollment options.<sup>36</sup> Students can search an index of all courses offered statewide and filter by distance, institution, subject area, type (e.g., virtual, hybrid, in-person), and semester. Costs and contact information are transparent, and the webpage is user-friendly with accessibility features built in. The website receives approximately 1,000 visits per day and is cited as a contributing factor in Louisiana's steady increase in dual-enrollment participation for the third consecutive year, with a 13 percent increase in participation in the 2022-2023 academic year.<sup>37</sup>

Another example of an interactive website for students and families is in Rhode Island, which features its PWR programming and CTE options, including a searchable index.<sup>38</sup> This index allows users to search by career field, CTE program name, program location (region), and school name. Rhode Island's search tool and the enrollment website have resulted in an increase in new student participation in CTE programs and a rise in students earning a college credit and/or industry credential by 33 percent in only six years (from 15 percent in 2014-2015 to 48 percent in the 2020-2021 academic year).<sup>39</sup> When students can easily compare options—by region, delivery mode, or cost—they are more likely to enroll in and complete programs that align with their goals. This is especially important for students in low-population areas with fewer in-person options.

To ensure all Colorado students can access high-quality postsecondary and workforce opportunities, the state must streamline postsecondary and workforce readiness processes, strengthen educator certification pipelines, and modernize how PWR information is communicated. National models demonstrate that when students have clear, centralized, and user-friendly tools for comparing options, participation rates rise, especially among underrepresented populations.

## **2. Implementation of PWR-related legislation must prioritize transparent and high-quality access to postsecondary opportunities.**

Colorado has taken meaningful steps to strengthen the infrastructure and accountability of postsecondary and workforce readiness through recent legislation. With the passage of the updated Public School Finance Act and 2025 bills, such as SB 25-315 and HB 25-1278, the state is poised to expand access to postsecondary credit, industry credentials, and work-based learning.<sup>40</sup> However, these legislative efforts must be intentionally implemented to close opportunity gaps, especially in rural and under-resourced districts.

To ensure this legislation leads to meaningful impact, grant funding offered through SB 25-315 should be distributed using transparent criteria that prioritize regions and schools with demonstrated gaps in access to PWR opportunities. The rulemaking process must also include direct input from rural collaboratives, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), and districts serving historically marginalized communities to ensure funding mechanisms are both locally relevant and sustainable. Supplemental funds available through the new Colorado school finance formula should be used to support the hiring and certification of CTE, CE, and DE educators, which directly increase the number of students able to participate in high-quality PWR pathways and improve long-term postsecondary and career outcomes. Finally, the implementation process must be accompanied by clear and public progress tracking, including updates to the state's school accountability dashboard and longitudinal data system. These updates should include disaggregated data on access, engagement, and success in PWR programs, enabling Colorado to monitor progress toward more equitable outcomes.

Colorado's legislative progress provides a strong foundation. Now, the state must ensure these policies translate into real, measurable access for all students, not just those in well-resourced, large districts.

**3. The updated PWR indicator should include data on student access to and engagement in postsecondary credits, industry-recognized credentials, and work-based learning opportunities, as well as data on the abundance or scarcity of these offerings—such as courses, certifications, and programs—across Colorado schools.**

Data collection around postsecondary workforce readiness should be intentional and systematic. Although the current data on graduation, dropout, and matriculation rates, and SAT scores provide valuable information, they do not reflect a research-informed measurement of college or career readiness. A more comprehensive student and school portrait is necessary to properly assess whether Colorado's students are receiving and whether schools are providing adequate resources and instruction related to PWR skills. The updated PWR sub-indicator should tell which PWR opportunities students had access to and the duration of their engagement. Ideally, students would have access to at least two opportunities, including postsecondary credit programs and the option of work-based learning or industry-recognized credentials. The duration of student involvement in PWR programs can indicate their efficacy.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

There is bipartisan interest in continuing to strengthen our workforce through embedding more PWR programming in Colorado schools.<sup>42</sup> We must move away from measuring PWR success with test scores, and graduation, dropout, and matriculation rates; instead, we must pivot our focus to collecting student-progress data about "The Big Three:" postsecondary credit, industry-recognized credentials, or work-based learning experiences.<sup>43</sup> Using the recommendations above, Colorado can more equitably allocate PWR resources to students in all districts. The Colorado Department of Education's current data sets and measurement indicators do not fully capture the authentic success of a school's PWR programming, and it is time to start investing as much time into student career paths as we do into their college-bound potential. Both paths are important, and an accountability system must reflect that. To champion post-graduate options for all students and continue to strengthen our state's economy, we must continually seek input from students, families, and communities to further develop PWR skills and opportunities within all Colorado schools.

## ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning for students. Learn more about Teach Plus Colorado: [teachplus.org/co](https://teachplus.org/co)



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