



Strengthening Colorado's Workforce Pathways Through Equitable Implementation

Recommendations from Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows



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METHODOLOGY

We're a group of Teach Plus Policy Fellows who teach across diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and community contexts in Colorado and are focused on improving Postsecondary Workforce Readiness (PWR) for students in the state. As Colorado educators, we believe that all students deserve access to meaningful, high-quality pathways that prepare them for success beyond high school. When implemented effectively, strong PWR systems empower students to achieve at higher rates after graduation by connecting their learning to relevant postsecondary and workforce opportunities.

We conducted stakeholder interviews, reviewed existing research, and collaborated with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to better understand current policy and implementation efforts. In this memo, we present our findings and recommendations for policymakers to strengthen our state's PWR system.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Colorado has set an ambitious goal: by 2029, all high school graduates will complete one of The Big Three:

- + Earning either a quality, in-demand non-degree credential¹
- + Completing 12 college credits that count toward a postsecondary credential²
- + Participating in one high-quality work-based learning opportunity³

Although four-year graduation rates in Colorado exceed 85 percent, other data indicate that far fewer students are actually prepared to succeed beyond high school. Given declining enrollment and the fact that over 25 percent of Colorado students were chronically absent during the 2024-25 school year, Local Education Providers (LEPs) are under pressure to create relevant and engaging learning opportunities that get students excited and motivated to attend school and prepare them for their futures. Student participation in such experiences has positive short- and long-term effects, including improved attendance, increased student retention, and increased graduation rates.⁴

At a time when Colorado faces workforce shortages alongside widening opportunity gaps between rural and urban communities, SB25-315, which became law in 2025, attempts to offer a timely solution to align education and workforce preparation and help reach the 2029 goal.⁵ This legislation established a consolidated, streamlined pathway to better prepare students for college and career readiness,⁶ creating a PWR model built on three types of funding: Start-Up, Innovation, and Sustain.

However, that funding often is not enough. Some rural districts, including those on the Western Slope, have already expressed concern that the proposed funding is insufficient for the services they are intended to support.⁷ Additionally, districts such as the Poudre School District have noted that consolidating these funds has resulted in the loss of access to popular programs like ASCENT, in which students participate in concurrent enrollment (CE) the year after 12th grade to enroll in postsecondary courses and earn college credit at no tuition cost to them or their families.^{8,9} These concerns highlight the importance of monitoring how funding tied to participation may interact with existing district capacity and program infrastructure across the state. Ultimately, the effectiveness of SB25-315 will depend not only on funding consolidation but on whether implementation supports can sufficiently reduce capacity disparities across districts.

FINDINGS: Risks And Potential Consequences

While SB25-315 aims to simplify the funding strategy and make it easier to understand, the law may reinforce existing inequities without clear implementation guidance and capacity support.

SB25-315: Funding Streams

Start-Up Funding	Sustain Funding	Buckner Innovation Grant
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Began in 2025-2026 and continues in 2027-2028 + Launches and expands PWR programming + Formulaic distribution based on student data from 2025-2028 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Begins in 2026-2027 + Used to maintain and expand PWR programs + Performance funding; reimbursement to schools for students who attain one or more of The Big Three + Year 1 allocations: 20% Postsecondary Credit Attainment (PCA), 40% to Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRC), and 35% to Work-Based Learning (WBL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Begins in 2028-2029 + Provides limited-eligibility annual grants to support districts in improving outcomes measured by the PWR accountability indicator

Performance Funding and District Capacity Constraints

Implementation of the consolidated funding structure assumes that districts possess sufficient programmatic and staffing capacity to expand PWR opportunities equitably across geographic and resource contexts. Yet Colorado's rural school districts face major barriers to implementing high-quality PWR programming that ensures all students can access one of The Big Three experiences.¹⁰

The current weighted funding formula risks reinforcing gaps between suburban and rural districts. Some rural districts may need to pool funds year over year to initiate and sustain programming, whereas urban and suburban districts may be better positioned to develop pathways more quickly. Additionally, districts that struggle to develop pathways aligned to The Big Three may face compounding financial challenges over time.

Sustain funding is used to reimburse local education providers' expenses for students who, in the preceding budget year, successfully satisfied postsecondary credit, industry-recognized credential, or work-based learning requirements. Districts that struggle to get their programs running due to limited operational capacity will miss out on key funding at this stage, leaving less privileged or less resourced districts further behind peer institutions with robust programming. Tying Sustain funding to a district's performance in PWR programming may exacerbate challenges in districts with existing limited operational capacity.

Many districts lack dedicated staff to build external partnerships, support the implementation of Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAPs), and connect students to strong IRC and WBL pathways. In some cases, shortages of counselors leave schools without consistent postsecondary guidance.¹¹ Stakeholders have also identified the need for reliable postsecondary outcome data reporting, though expanded data collection requirements may increase administrative burden for districts with limited staffing.

Incentivizing Industry Recognized Credentials and Work-based Learning Without Clear Standards

Sustain funding currently prioritizes IRC and WBL development over concurrent enrollment initiatives. While CE operates within well-established state guidelines and oversight, IRC and WBL pathways remain underdeveloped. Limited capacity and funding in small, rural districts, combined with inconsistent statewide definitions, credit alignment, and quality standards for PWR experiences, may contribute to uneven access and outcomes for students.

Without clearer credentialing and reporting frameworks, there is a risk that the value of different pathway experiences will vary significantly. Establishing clearer definitions and quality standards will reinforce the message that the knowledge, skills, and experiences that accompany workforce pathways are essential, rigorous, and linked to long-term postsecondary success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As Colorado moves forward with implementing SB25-315, we propose the following recommendations to ensure student readiness and equitable outcomes across the state.

1. Establish Clear, Statewide Quality Standards for The Big Three.

The CDE should move beyond The Big Three categories to more targeted definitions of success for Industry-Recognized Credentials, Work-Based Learning, and college credit attainment.

To improve IRC, the CDE should review the current registry and include specific criteria in that process to ensure districts and families can choose programs based on demonstrated labor-market value and real-world relevance. The CDE should commit to a regular review process using specific criteria, such as portability, third-party validation, and occupational alignment, to sunset credentials that no longer meet industry needs.¹² Additionally, the CDE should communicate the registry through two separate resources: one that focuses on accountability for high-quality IRCs and another that provides frameworks for LEPs, including guidance for each career cluster regarding secondary course sequencing, connected WBL opportunities, and related information to help families choose IRC programming aligned with student goals and interests.^{13 14}

To improve Work-Based Learning, the CDE should define what constitutes “meaningful” WBL experiences that also allow students to earn high school credit. These can be achieved, for instance, through work-based partnerships with community partners, e.g., through shadowing various professions. Research through Advance CTE found that students who participated in internships—rather than one-off site visits or general career exploration—consistently demonstrated stronger academic performance in college and improved employment outcomes.¹⁵ However, equitable access to these more rigorous forms of WBL remains inconsistent, especially for underrepresented student populations such as Black, low-income, and first-generation students. These gaps are exacerbated when WBL opportunities do not offer credit, which can encourage LEPs to prioritize IRC and college courses instead.

To improve access to college credit, further alignment with higher education could strengthen connections across The Big Three in Colorado. For instance, adopting a “Gold Standard” model similar to the Florida Department of Education’s statewide articulation agreements would ensure that any industry certification on the approved list is tied to specified numbers of guaranteed postsecondary college credits.¹⁶ This approach prevents students from earning credentials that do not transfer to further degree programs and increases transferability from region to region.¹⁷

2. Provide Tiered Guidance for Equitable Funding Use.

The CDE should provide tiered spending guidance for districts, including recommendations aligned with various funding levels across districts. In most places, current funding will not cover new buildings, specialized equipment, or highly qualified staff, so districts need guidance on smaller investments that build sustainable PWR opportunities over time.

Tiered guidance would be particularly valuable for rural and small districts.¹⁸ These districts enroll fewer students and must allocate more per-pupil funding to cover overhead costs, leaving limited administrative capacity to research and develop PWR programming independently. Because nearly half of Colorado's districts (48 percent) enroll less than 500 students, prioritizing their access to resources is essential. Given the variation in funding across the state, districts need models for investing in PWR at multiple funding tiers.

3. Encourage Districts to Leverage Regional Partnerships.

The CDE should continue to encourage districts to leverage partnerships with organizations working to facilitate students' success in attaining one or more of The Big Three. Colorado's Homegrown Talent Initiative and the Colorado Rural Alliance continue to facilitate regional collaboration that improves individual school and district outcomes through shared programming and resources.^{19 20}

These partnerships illustrate the value of community-based models, especially in small districts where maximizing minimal funding allocations is critical. In communication with districts, the CDE should highlight these strategies as effective uses of Start-Up and Sustain funding and consider incentivizing inter-district and cross-sector partnerships, especially for districts that have previously received little or no funding.²¹

4. Use an Implementation Period to Collect and Report Data Before High-Stakes Accountability.

Before tying PWR metrics to high-stakes accountability outcomes or school performance ratings, the CDE should allow an initial implementation period to gather data and identify challenges. This transition period would allow districts to develop and refine PWR programming without immediate penalties, consistent with guidance from The Institute of Education Sciences.²² Additionally, early data analysis may reveal additional inequities not accounted for prior to the implementation of SB25-315.

Allowing time for districts to establish programs and partnerships will support stronger long-term outcomes. During this period, PWR indicators can still serve as a metric of success on the performance framework and contribute to schools' existing improvement plans, while avoiding premature funding or accountability consequences. Data should be reported to the CDE and monitored by LEPs to ensure a strong roll-out.

CONCLUSION

SB25-315 is intended to consolidate the fragmented PWR initiatives into a more cohesive, effective system. With a goal of 100 percent completion of one of The Big Three by 2029, the policy aims to ensure that students graduate with meaningful experiences that prepare them for postsecondary success in college and the workforce.

However, potential inequities remain, particularly for rural communities facing funding constraints and capacity challenges. Moreover, unclear standards for The Big Three may compromise consistent implementation across districts. Data transparency will also be critical for monitoring outcomes and ensuring the policy delivers on its intended goals.

Equity must remain central to future funding decisions to ensure that no district is left behind. As SB25-315 is implemented, policymakers, educators, and community members must ensure that funding structures, program standards, and implementation supports work together to expand equitable access to meaningful postsecondary and workforce pathways for all Colorado students.

ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student 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



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ENDNOTES

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