Memo

TO: Legislators and Staff
Colorado Youth Advisory Council Review Committee

FROM: Sarah E. Moss, MPA, Director; and Brenda Morrison, Program Manager
Colorado Youth Advisory Council

DATE: July 7, 2025

SUBJECT: 2024-25 policy recommendations

On behalf of the 2024-25 Colorado Youth Advisory Council (COYAC) students, we are pleased to submit this memo of student-created policy recommendations.

Committee members for July 15, 2025

On July 15, these five students will serve on the Colorado Youth Advisory Council Committee and call on their peers to help present the policy recommendations:

- Sophie T., Senate District 16, Environmental Committee
- Muqadas (Das), Senate District 22, Substance Abuse Policy Committee
- Sidd V., Senate District 25, Healthcare Committee
- Ailee D., Senate District 31, Education Committee
- Kate G., At-Large, Postsecondary Planning Resources Committee

2024-25 COYAC members

Bold = executive committee

- Leandra L., Southern Ute Indian Tribe Representative
- Connor E., Senate District 1
- Saanvi Y., Senate District 2
- Brandon M., Senate District 3
- **Alex F., Senate District 4**
- Amalia (Mali) S., Senate District 5
- Monique S., Senate District 6
- Kelsea K., Senate District 7
- **Makena J., Senate District 8**
- Ayush V., Senate District 9
- Helena (Lena) L., Senate District 10
- Sofia V., Senate District 13
- Julia Y., Senate District 14
- **Sophie T., Senate District 16**
- **Ranye E., Senate District 17**
- **Ashna S., Senate District 18**
- **Pragna Y., Senate District 19**
- Aiyana U., Senate District 21
- Muqadas (Das) S., Senate District 22
- **Peter H., Senate District 23**
- **Suyash S., Senate District 24**
- Siddharth (Sidd) V., Senate District 25
- **Cate P., Senate District 26**
- Deeksha A., Senate District 27
- Fatima N., Senate District 28
- **Rohan K., Senate District 30 and representative to the Colorado Suicide Prevention Commission**
- Aileen (Ailee) D., Senate District 31
- **Irene K., Senate District 32**
- Ainslie M., Senate District 33
- Micah G., Senate District 34
- Brooke H., Senate District 35
- Judah T., At-Large
- **Kate G., At-Large**
- **Adalee C., At-Large**



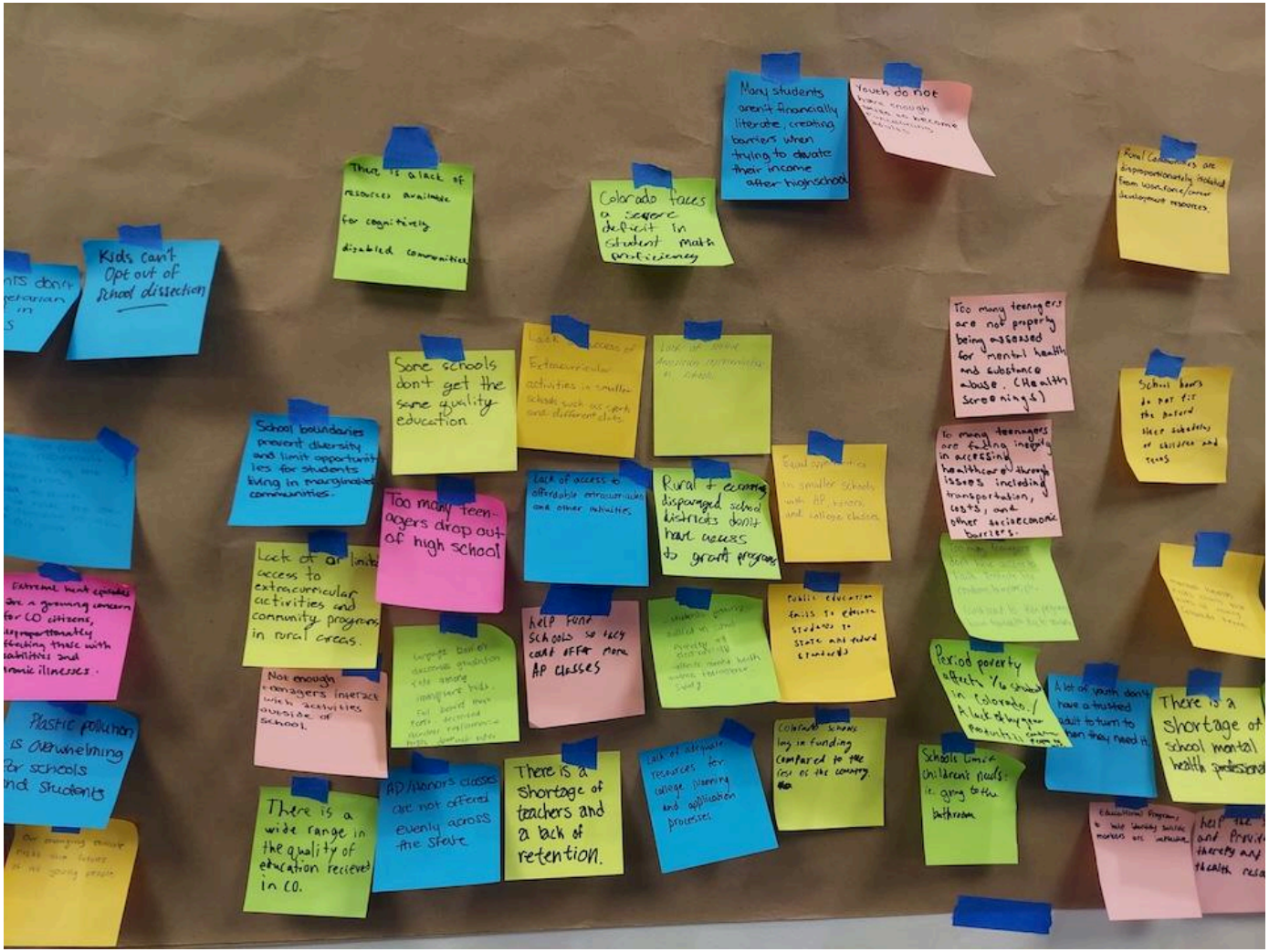
COYAC members pose at the August 2024 retreat

COYAC 2024-25 staff

- Director: Sarah E. Moss, MPA
- Program Manager: Brenda Morrison
- 2024 Summer Assistant: Meghan Taylor

Student-led work

Members brought dozens of problems to discuss at the August 2024 retreat. Members then divided themselves into policy committees to conduct research and outreach.



COYAC Timeline

Jul – Aug: New members!



July: Orientation

August: Two-day retreat

Training: What is nonpartisan?

Form policy committees

Sep – Oct: Training (all year)



Training on

- Research
- Outreach
- Public speaking
- Testifying at the legislature

Nov – Dec: Research



Research

- Reports & data
- Scholarly research
- Past Colorado bills & laws
- What other states do

Jan – Feb: Research/Outreach



Meet with

- People affected
- Researchers
- Schools & districts
- Government staff
- Advocates

Testify during the legislative session (January-May)

Mar – Apr: Outreach/Writing



Draft memos

- Problem
- Solution
- Systems thinking
- Outreach list

April: Day at the Capitol

May – Jun: Rehearse/Present



June: Awards & Senior Send-Off Dinner

Submit memos of recommendations

Present proposals to legislators

Students lead their own policy ideas.

COYAC's contracted staff supports the students in the same way the Legislative Council staff supports the legislators: nonpartisan and policy-agnostic. COYAC staff provides:

- Training on government roles and structures, the policy process, and research methods
- Discussions about nonpartisanship and civility
- Timelines, work plans, and leadership coaching
- Templates and examples
- Recommendations for research sources and outreach across multiple viewpoints
- Public speaking training and rehearsals
- Planning and logistics
    - Virtual meetings and training sessions
    - In-person meetings: a fall retreat, spring day at the State Capitol, and summer awards/senior send-off dinner

In 2024-25, COYAC students formed committees to:

- Review anonymized applications from prospective members
- Serve as small group leaders to welcome new members
- Lead COYAC as an executive committee
- Present to the Colorado Boys & Girls Clubs Youth Council and serve as youth representatives on the National Civic League's 2025 All-America City Award jury
- Research and address policy issues affecting youth in six policy committees



Lt. Governor Dianne Primavera poses with COYAC members during COYAC's 2025 Day at the Capitol

List of students' policy proposals

The COYAC members' 2024-25 policy proposals are attached and contain the students' own viewpoints, research, outreach, and writing.

- Education Committee
  - Access to preparation materials for SAT, ACT, and AP Tests
  - Funding for civic education programs

- Environmental Committee
  - Pollution from plastic waste, air quality issues, and water contamination
  - Unequal enforcement of environmental mandates

- Healthcare Committee
  - Public health and environmental hazards
  - Access to equitable healthcare and medical options in rural areas

- Postsecondary Planning Resources Committee
  - Resource gaps for young adults with intellectual disabilities to transition into postsecondary institutions
  - Independent living skills for young adults
  - Statewide platform for Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAP)

- Substance Abuse Policy Committee
  - Promoting tobacco transparency & intervention services to students

- Teacher Retention Committee
  - Addressing Colorado's teacher shortage

Education Committee

Problem 1: Colorado high school students lack access to sufficient preparation materials for SAT, ACT, and AP Tests.

Background

- **Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)** – A standardized test assessing high school students' readiness for college, focusing on reading, writing, and math skills, used by many U.S. colleges for admissions decisions.
- **American College Testing (ACT)** – A standardized test evaluating high school students' academic skills in English, math, reading, and science, with an optional writing section, used for college admissions in the U.S.
- **Advanced Placement Test (AP Test)** – Exams corresponding to AP courses that allow high school students to demonstrate mastery of college-level material and potentially earn college credit, depending on their scores and college policies.

Despite changes in the college admissions process, standardized testing still plays an important role for many students in Colorado. More than 80 percent of colleges and universities have adopted test-optional policies,[1] which means students are not required to submit scores from exams like the SAT or ACT when applying. However, these tests remain important for students who use them to qualify for scholarships and financial aid. For many families, the cost of attending college, whether in-state or out-of-state, can be a major barrier, and strong test scores may open doors to financial support that makes college more accessible.[2]

[1] FairTest. (2024, February 21). *Overwhelming majority of U.S. colleges and universities remain ACT/SAT optional or test-blind/score-free for fall 2025*. FairTest. https://fairtest.org/overwhelming-majority-of-u-s-colleges-and-universities-remain-act-sat-optional-or-test-blind-score-free-for-fall-2025/

[2] College Board. (2024). *The benefits of SAT: Creating your path for the future*. BigFuture. https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/plan-for-college/apply-to-college/benefits-of-sat

In addition to standardized testing, some students choose to take Advanced Placement courses at their high schools (when available). These courses allow students to challenge themselves academically, and high scores on AP exams can result in college credit at some institutions.[3] This can help reduce tuition costs by shortening the time needed to complete a degree. While the role of standardized tests in admissions may be changing, they continue to serve as important tools for expanding educational opportunities.

However, AP, SAT, and ACT tests can be expensive. The SAT currently costs $68 per test[4] and the ACT ranges from $65 to $94 depending on the selected options.[5] AP exams typically cost between $99 and $147.[6] Although fee waivers are available, they are usually limited to students who meet specific low-income criteria.[7] For those who do not qualify, the cost can become a barrier. Because of these financial constraints, some students aim to take each test only once, increasing the pressure to perform well on their first attempt. This makes access to high-quality, affordable test preparation materials essential to help students succeed without the need for costly retakes.

In Colorado, student performance on standardized tests varies depending on the specific exam. Comparing these scores to national averages helps provide a clearer understanding of the results. In the 2023–2024 school year, 86.4 percent of Colorado students took the SAT, with an average score of 978 out of 1600,[8] which is below the national average of 1024.[9] This high participation

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[3] College Board. (n.d.). *Getting credit and placement*. AP Students. https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/getting-credit-placement

[4] College Board. (2024). *Digital SAT student FAQ: Pricing and fees*. SAT Suite. https://satsuite.collegeboard.org/sat/help-center/students/pricing-fees

[5] ACT. (2025). *Fees*. ACT. https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/registration/fees.html

[6] College Board. (2025). *AP exam fees*. AP Central. https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/exam-administration-ordering-scores/ordering-fees/exam-fees

[7] College Board. (n.d.). *SAT fee waiver student brochure*. SAT Suite. https://satsuite.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/sat-fee-waiver-student-brochure.pdf; ACT. (n.d.). *Fee waiver eligibility requirements*. ACT. https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/FeeWaiver.pdf

[8] Colorado Department of Education. (n.d.). *2024 PSAT and SAT total score state summary results*. https://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/2024_psat_sat_totalscore_statesummaryachievementresults

[9] *Average SAT® test score by state 2024*. (2024, November 30). OntoCollege. https://www.ontocollege.com/average-sat-score/

rate is largely due to the SAT being a statewide requirement for graduation, making it a more comprehensive measure of overall student performance.[10]

In comparison, only 8 percent of Colorado students took the ACT, but those students achieved an average score of 24.7 out of 36,[11] which roughly translates to a 1190 to 1220 on the SAT scale[12] and is significantly higher than the state's average SAT score. This suggests that ACT test-takers may be a more college-focused group as they are choosing to take this test.

On Advanced Placement exams, Colorado students scored an average of 3.14, slightly higher than the national average of 3.06,[13] demonstrating strong performance among those who take AP tests, despite ongoing disparities in access across different schools and demographic groups.

However, access to test preparation materials and tutoring varies significantly across the state, leading to inequalities among high school students. In Denver Public Schools, students benefit from free SAT tutoring during their junior year,[14] while those in more rural areas frequently have limited or no access to in-person tutoring or preparation resources. For students with reliable internet access, there are several free online test prep options available, which can help level the playing field to some extent.[15] Unfortunately, students without consistent internet access face greater challenges, as paper-based materials are often costly and difficult to obtain. Public libraries may carry test prep books, but these are frequently outdated and do not reflect the content or structure of the most recent versions of the exams, limiting their usefulness.

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[10] Jeffco Public Schools. (2025). *PSAT & SAT*. https://www.jeffcopublicschools.org/learning/assessments/psat-sat

[11] Macy, H. (2024, September 4). *2024 average ACT® test score by state*. OnToCollege. https://www.ontocollege.com/average-act-test-score/

[12] The Princeton Review. (n.d.). *The truth about ACT to SAT conversion*. https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/act-to-sat-conversion

[13] College Board. (n.d.). *AP national and state data*. AP Central. https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/about-ap/ap-data-research/national-state-data

[14] Denver Public Schools. (2023). *Free SAT prep for 11th graders*. https://www.dpsk12.org/page/freesat

[15] Khan Academy. (n.d.). *Maximize your score with free official digital SAT® prep*. https://www.khanacademy.org/digital-sat

Solution 1: Colorado should create a grant program for districts in rural or under-resourced areas to purchase/update test prep materials, host free-to-students tutoring sessions, create peer tutoring programs, etc.

To address disparity in standardized testing scores across Colorado, the state should establish a grant program specifically for rural and disadvantaged school districts. The program would provide districts with the funding necessary to purchase or replace standardized test preparation materials, provide free-to-students after-school or weekend tutoring sessions, and establish peer-to-peer tutoring programs. Grants would be made by a competitive yet equitable application that considers district population, available resource levels, and demonstrated need. Schools may use funds to train tutors, purchase online learning subscriptions, or cover travel for students to attend sessions.

The Colorado Department of Education would have guidelines for permissible spending and accountability elements in tracking student progress in test scores. School districts that participate would report each year what had been done with money and tangible results on student achievement, i.e., gains in assessment performance, on-time graduation rate, or admissions rate to institutions of higher learning. Evidence from tutoring initiatives like Tutored by Teachers shows that consistent, well-structured tutoring can close learning gaps and build student confidence in regards to standardized testing, particularly when tutors are well-trained and sessions are tailored to student needs. Through a direct investment in rural and disadvantaged school districts, Colorado would create a fairer playing field for students who have historically lacked access to test prep support services.

This grant initiative would not merely improve short-term academic performance but also improve long-term educational balance across Colorado. By providing local districts with the capacity to tailor tutoring and test preparation programs to the specific requirements of their neighborhoods, the state would promote locally driven, self-sustaining education innovation.

Systems thinking

Unintended consequences that we've considered include:

- Not all schools or areas have equal need for the grant program; some schools have greater need for grant funding. Thus, this solution establishes an application process that considers many factors to ensure that grants are applicable and needed.

- Students will likely require funding for a range of needs to support higher learning (e.g. access to reliable internet, test prep materials, devices for online tutoring sessions). Because all potential funding needs cannot be precisely predicted, the solution allows schools to allocate funds as necessary to improve student test scores.

- However, there is a risk that some schools might misuse the flexibility in how funding is allocated. The nature of flexible funding creates the possibility of some schools abusing funding for purposes other than improving student test scores. Thus, part of the solution requires the demonstration of how funding has improved student performance in these tests.

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

- State
    - Colorado Department of Education: Amara Hobbs, Legislative Liaison (scheduled for July 2)
- Local
    - Adams 12 Five Star Schools: Ashyln Hausman, AP Teacher of Thornton High School
    - Adams 12 Five Star Schools: Charles Arellano, Principal of Thornton High School
    - Adams 12 Five Star Schools: Chris Gdowski, Superintendent
    - Animas High School: Libby Cowles, Dean of Enrollment and Community (scheduled for July 1)
    - Aurora Public Schools: Marissa Vasquez, Middle School Operations Manager
    - Cherry Creek School District: Christopher Smith, Superintendent
    - Elizabeth High School: Dan Snowberger, Superintendent

    - Elizabeth High School: Bret McClendon, Principal
    - William Smith High School: Chelsea Audin, Assistant Principal
    - William Smith High School: Kristin Wiedmaier, Principal

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Brighton Youth Commission: Tawnya Russell, Youth Manager #
- City of Denver: Dominick Moreno, Deputy Chief of Staff (and former state legislator)
- Colorado Association of School Boards: Matt Cook, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy (scheduled July 7)
- Colorado Association of School Executives: Elizabeth Rosen #
- Colorado Children's Campaign: Madeline Ashour, Director of K-12 Education Policy (scheduled for July 7)
- Colorado Education Association: Meghan Rayes, Director of Government Affairs (scheduled for July 2)
- Colorado Rural Alliance: Frank Reeves, Interim Executive Director #
- Tutored by Teachers: Rahul Kalita, Co-Founder; Mimi Newton, Data Science
- Denver's Mayor Youth Commission: Mikhail Vafeades, Leader of Mayor's Youth Commission
- Greeley Youth Commission: Dominique Padilla, Rodarte Community Center Supervisor #
- Lone Tree Youth Commission: Maddison Wiseman, Communication Specialist

Other subject matter experts

- Colorado Academy: Max Delgado, Principal

Legislators

- Abbie Marksbury, Legislative Aide to State Senator Matt Ball, Senate District 31
- Senator Dafna Michaelson Jenet, Senate District 21 (scheduled for July 14)
- Colton Arciniaga, Senior Legislative Aide to State Representative Jennifer Bacon, House District 7
- State Representative Eliza Hamrick, House District 61
- State Representative Dusty Johnson, House District 63 (scheduled for July 2)

Problem 2: Colorado civic education programs lack consistent access to funding.

Civic education plays a vital role in preparing students to become informed and engaged participants in a democratic society. It equips young people with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to understand government institutions, evaluate information critically, and participate meaningfully in their communities.[16] It's important for students to learn the differences among school boards, town/city councils, the state legislature, and Congress. Yet, Colorado currently lacks a stable, dedicated funding stream to ensure equitable access to high-quality civic education across all school districts.[17] Inconsistent funding results in significant disparities in the availability and quality of civics instruction, particularly between urban and rural areas or between well-resourced and under-resourced schools.

Since 2007, the Colorado Department of Education has required public schools to teach U.S. and Colorado history and civics, including the contributions of minority groups.[18] Yet, the implementation of these requirements is often inconsistent and heavily influenced by a district's financial resources and local priorities.[19] This inconsistency undermines students' equal access to the foundational knowledge necessary for democratic participation.

A 2021 report published by iCivics, a nationwide organization that seeks to enhance civics education, highlights that states with dedicated funding for civics have seen measurable improvements in curriculum development, teacher training, and student engagement.[20] In contrast, many programs in Colorado depend on short-term grants or philanthropic support, making them vulnerable to budget cuts and difficult to sustain.

Nationwide, civic education remains insufficient. Survey findings from two national studies, the 2020 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey and the 2018 Nation's Report Card, highlight a bipartisan consensus on the need for civics education, finding that one out of every two

[16] Winthrop, R. (2020, June 4). *The need for civic education in 21st-century schools*. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-need-for-civic-education-in-21st-century-schools/

[17] Colorado General Assembly. (2021). *Strengthening civics education*. Colorado General Assembly. https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb21-067

[18] Colorado Department of Education. (2015). *Teaching of history, culture, and civil government (CRS. 22-1-104)*. https://www.cde.state.co.us/cosocialstudies/civcsgradreq

[19] Colorado Department of Education. (2015). *Teaching of history, culture, and civil government (CRS. 22-1-104)*. https://www.cde.state.co.us/cosocialstudies/civcsgradreq

[20] Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. (n.d.). *Guardian of democracy: The civic mission of schools*. https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-guardian-of-democracy-the-civic-mission-of-schools.pdf

Americans cannot name all three branches of government and one in five Americans are unable to name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.[21] It was also determined that three out of every four American students are not proficient in civics.[22] While this data reflects national trends, it is likely representative of similar gaps within Colorado. According to the 2021 report published by iCivics, students who receive effective civic learning are more likely to vote and discuss politics at home and are more confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives.

A commitment to sustained and equitable investment in civic education is essential to preparing the next generation of leaders and voters who can uphold and strengthen our democratic institutions. Without a permanent and sustained investment in civic education, Colorado risks leaving many students unprepared to participate in and protect the democratic process.

Solution 2: Colorado should create a trust fund, earning capital from external, non-governmental organization donations, to finance civic education programs.

Establishing a permanent, state-administered trust fund for civic education would ensure stable, equitable support for schools regardless of geography or district wealth. This fund could draw from multiple sources, including philanthropic contributions, and would finance key program areas, including curriculum development, professional development for teachers, student field trips to civic institutions, student-led civic projects, and an allocation specifically for the Colorado Youth Advisory Council.

A successful model for this exists in Massachusetts, where legislators established the Civic Education Trust Fund in 2018.[23] The Massachusetts fund provides grants to schools and community organizations that promote civic engagement and education. It supports initiatives such as voter registration drives, civic literacy programs, and youth participation in government

[21] American Legislative Exchange Council. (2021, August 25). *American Civics and History Act* [Model policy]. https://alec.org/model-policy/american-civics-and-history-act/

[22] American Legislative Exchange Council. (2021, August 25). *American Civics and History Act* [Model policy]. https://alec.org/model-policy/american-civics-and-history-act/

[23] Annenberg Public Policy Center. (2019, September 12). *Americans' civics knowledge increases but still has a long way to go*. The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-civics-knowledge-increases-2019-survey/

processes. Since its inception, the fund has helped increase student engagement, deepen understanding of government functions, and build stronger community ties.[24]

Similarly, Florida's Civics Education Trust Fund supports the Justice Teaching program, which enhances teacher training and develops interactive civics curricula.[25] Both states report long-term benefits, including higher student voter registration and turnout, improved civic knowledge, and strengthened trust in democratic institutions.

By creating a similar trust fund, Colorado would make a sustained investment in civic education that fosters well-informed, active citizens. This initiative would not only elevate the quality of civics instruction but also support long-term outcomes such as higher voter turnout, stronger public trust, and more youth-led civic initiatives. Ultimately, the fund would support stronger democratic participation statewide, benefiting students, educators, and the broader community over the long term.

Systems thinking

Unintended consequences that we've considered include:

- Schools across Colorado strongly differ in their available resources for such programs, which could prevent schools in poorer or rural communities from providing civics education.

- There might be a lack of state funding for such a trust fund, so the fund could draw from other sources.

[24] *Students, teachers, legislators, and advocates call for increased investment in Commonwealth's civic education programs*. (2023, March 30). Discovering Justice. https://discoveringjustice.org/students-teachers-legislators-and-advocates-call-for-increased-investment-in-commonwealths-civic-education-programs/

[25] Florida Department of Education. (n.d.). *Civics literacy excellence initiative (CLEI)*. https://www.fldoe.org/academics/standards/subject-areas/social-studies/civics-lei.stml

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

- State
    - Colorado Department of Education: Amara Hobbs, Legislative Liaison (scheduled for July 2)
    - Colorado Department of Education: Stephanie Hartman, Social Studies Content Specialist (scheduled for July 2)
    - Colorado State Treasury: Dave Young, Treasurer #
    - Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE): Reuben F. Henriques, Assistant Director of Humanities
- Local
    - Animas High School: Libby Cowles, Dean of Enrollment and Community
    - Thornton High School: Charles Arellano, Principal
    - Adams 12 Five Star Schools: Chris Gdowski, Superintendent

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Civics for Colorado Students: Collen O'Brien, Associate Director; and Alice Sheehan, Director
- Colorado Association of School Boards: Matt Cook, Director of Public Policy and Advocacy (scheduled July 7)
- Colorado Children's Campaign: Madeline Ashour, Director of K-12 Education Policy (scheduled for July 7)
- Colorado Education Association: Meghan Rayes, Director of Government Affairs (scheduled for July 2)
- Daniel's Fund: Nick Loyacona, Grants Program Officer (scheduled for July 10)
- iCivics: David Buchanan, Director of Massachusetts Programs; and Diana Leo, CivXNow State Policy Lead
- Gary Community Ventures: Jack Bulger, Operations Manager

Legislators

- Senator Jeff Bridges, Senate District 26 #
- Senator Dafna Michaelson Jenet, Senate District 21 (scheduled for July 14)
- Senior Legislative Aide Colton Arciniaga, House District 7
- State Representative Eliza Hamrick, House District 61
- State Representative Dusty Johnson, House District 63

Environmental Committee

Problem 1: Colorado faces severe pollution, including plastic waste, air quality issues, and water contamination.

Definitions

- **Plastic pollution –** Accumulation in the environment of synthetic plastic products to the point that they create problems for wildlife, their habitats and for human populations.[26]

- **Air pollution –** Contamination of the indoor or outdoor environment by any chemical, physical, or biological agent that modifies the natural characteristics of the atmosphere.[27]

- **Water pollution** occurs when harmful substances – often chemicals or microorganisms – contaminate a stream, river, lake, ocean, aquifer, or other body of water, degrading water quality and rendering it toxic to humans or the environment.[28]

According to the Environment Colorado Research and Policy Center, Coloradans used 4.6 million plastic bags and 1.2 million styrofoam cups every day in 2020.[29] Additional research by

[26] Moore, C. (2017). Plastic Pollution | Sources & Effects. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/science/plastic-pollution

[27] World Health Organization. (2024). *Air Pollution*. World Health Organization; World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

[28] Denchak, M. (2023, January 11). *Water pollution: Everything you need to know*. NRDC; Nrdc. https://www.nrdc.org/stories/water-pollution-everything-you-need-know#whatis

[29] Katz, D., & Kilbane, L. (2023, May 25). *Colorado's waterways and microplastics*. Beyond Plastic. https://environmentamerica.org/colorado/center/resources/colorados-waterways-and-microplastics/#:~:text=Plastic%20use%20 and%20 pollution%20is,and%201.2%20million%20polystyrene%20cups.

the National Oceanography Centre in the UK suggests that **plastic pollution** cannot truly be estimated and that data misses 99% of plastic pollution as it breaks down into microplastics before it is able to be recorded.[30] Plastic pollution often bioaccumulates through the food chain, as plastic ingested by aquatic species makes its way to humans and other animals, possibly causing disease, disability, or premature death.[31] Plastic pollution mainly comes from single-use plastics such as to-go cups, plastic utensils, and fast fashion.[1]

In addition to plastic pollution, **air pollution** poses a significant threat in Colorado. In the American Lung Association's 2023 report, Denver (6th), Fort Collins (15th), and Colorado Springs (20th) all ranked among the nation's 25 worst cities for ozone pollution. The Denver metro area also ranked 18th worst nationally for short-term particle pollution.[32] The poor air quality is attributed to various sources, including greenhouse gas and methane emissions from oil and gas vehicles, which can exacerbate the creation of tropospheric ozone. Colorado's topography also contributes; wind patterns created by the mountains surrounding the Front Range trap pollutants in circulation, and the altitude also creates circumstances for worse ozone air pollution. Moreover, wildfire smoke and unchecked toxic pollutants emitted by factories and industries pollute the air.[33]

The pollution problem that Colorado faces is a combination of location-specific factors and others including construction, household heating, and consumer products such as paint and carpet.[34] Such significant air pollution poses serious risks to our daily way of life, impacting human health, ecosystems, and the climate. Excessive atmospheric particulate matter and tropospheric ozone can lead to eye and respiratory irritation, with long-term exposures increasing the risk of life-threatening conditions including lung and heart disease, cancer, and stroke.[35] A

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[30] Hersher, R. (2020, August 20). *The Atlantic Is Awash With Far More Plastic Than Previously Thought, Study Finds*. NPR.org. https://www.npr.org/2020/08/20/903506759/the-atlantic-is-awash-with-far-more-plastic-than-previously-thought-study-finds

[31] Geneva Environmental Network (2025, June 5) *Plastics and Human Health*.https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/plastics-and-health/

[32] State of the Air Report (PDF). (2023). American Lung Association. https://www.lung.org/getmedia/338b0c3c-6bf8-480f-9e6e-b93868c6c476/SOTA-2023.pdf

[33] Fleming, S. (2022, March 25). *Five Reasons Colorado's Air Quality is So Bad*. Conservation Colorado. https://conservationco.org/2022/03/25/five-reasons-colorados-air-quality-is-so-bad/

[34] Hastings, M. (2024, July 30). *Mile High Smog: Understanding Colorado's Air Pollution*. University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. https://www.google.com/url?q=https://news.cuanschutz.edu/news-stories/mile-high-smog-understanding-colorados-air-pollution&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1731184601847542&usg=AOvVaw0RPWYcMJi8Dc5y1rOlPRvO

[35] CDPHE Air Pollution Control Division. (n.d.). *Air pollution and your health*. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. https://cdphe.colorado.gov/air-quality/your-health

2022 study estimates that ambient ozone pollution causes more than 800 deaths annually in Colorado.[36]

Pollution threatens some of Colorado's most important ecosystems., In Rocky Mountain National Park, research estimates current pollution levels are 60% higher than what the park can sustain.[37] Furthermore, pollution levels also contribute to increasing temperatures in the state, as carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere trap heat, contributing to global warming.[38] Colorado's temperature rose by two degrees Fahrenheit in the past thirty years, an increase that is forecasted to continue.[39] Rising temperatures bring health risks, including heat stroke and severe dehydration. It can also increase extinction rates among native species and lead to an increase in extreme weather patterns.

Colorado has attempted to combat pollution, specifically plastic pollution.

- HB 23-1294 Pollution Protection Measures, created higher air quality measures.[40]
- HB 21-1162 Management of Plastic Products, honed in on plastic pollution with a tax for using reusable bags, incentivizing them.[41]
- HB 21-1162 increased implementation annually over the course of several years to decrease the amount of plastic products being used.

These bills have seen some decrease in plastic pollution, but there is still work to be done.

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[36] Cox, M. (2022, July 11). *Trouble in the ozone*. MSU Denver RED. https://red.msudenver.edu/2022/trouble-in-the-ozone/

[37] Fleming, S. (2022, March 25). *Five Reasons Colorado's Air Quality is So Bad*. Conservation Colorado. https://conservationco.org/2022/03/25/five-reasons-colorados-air-quality-is-so-bad/

[38] *End of 2023 ozone season shows meaningful progress for air pollution, with more work to be done*. (2023, September 11). Regional Air Quality Council. https://raqc.org/end-of-2023-ozone-season#:~:text=These%20days%20are%20called%20as,2021%2C%20and%2046%20in%202022.

[39] 350 Colorado Staff. (n.d.). *Climate Change In Colorado - What Is Climate Change?* 350 Colorado. https://350colorado.org/climate-change-in-co/

[40] Pollution Protection Measures, No. HB23-1294, 2023 Colo. Sess. Laws (June 6, 2023). https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb23-1294, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. (n.d.). *Air toxics: applicable laws and policies*. https://cdphe.colorado.gov/air-toxics/laws

[41] State of Colorado. (2021). Management of Plastic Products, No. HB21-1162, 2021 Colo. Sess. Laws. https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb21-1162

Solution 1: Expand HB21-1162 Management of Plastic Products.

Implement a ten-cent tax on plastic cups
HB 21-1162 helped decrease an estimated 1.7 billion plastic bags every year and decreased styrofoam products in restaurants.[42] Implementing a ten-cent tax on any plastic cup used at businesses such as cafes and restaurants would encourage the use of reusable cups, decreasing the amount of plastic used. Revenue from the 10-cent tax could be used to encourage reusable cup programs or create grants in order to create a positive feedback loop of a reusable cup. The ten cents could also be used similarly to HB21-1162 to help municipalities with enforcement and compliance of the law.

Reintroduce language from HB19-1143 Distribute Plastic Straws by Request Only
Restaurants in Colorado do not need to place plastic straws with every drink. These straws are thrown away at most restaurants whether or not they are used, contributing to plastic pollution. By only serving straws with drinks by request, businesses will save money on plastic straw costs and decrease plastic waste.

Make plastic utensils by request only in take-out and delivery orders from restaurants
When ordering food online, customers are often automatically given plastic forks and spoons, even when eating in their home where they have access to reusable utensils. By only giving plastic utensils to those who request it, businesses will reduce costs and plastic pollution. This would be similar if not the exact same as the Skip the Stuff Campaign currently occurring in Denver.

Solution 2: Enact a Polluters Pay Fund for air pollution in Colorado.

To specifically target air pollution created at a large corporate scale, Colorado could enact a "Polluters Pay Fund," similar to previous legislation in New York and Vermont[43], that holds major polluters financially responsible for their emissions. This policy would require companies in high-emission industries—such as fossil fuel production, manufacturing, and

[42] CoPIRG. (2024, January 18). *Beyond Plastic: Colorado plastic bag ban would eliminate 1.7 billion bags*. CoPIRG. https://pirg.org/colorado/updates/colorado-plastic-bag-ban-would-eliminate-1-7-billion-bags/?pg=45

[43] Gallo, A. (2025, March 4). *Polluters Pay: How States Are Filling the Federal Climate Funding Gap in 2025 | National Caucus of Environmental Legislators*. National Caucus of Environmental Legislators. https://www.ncelenviro.org/articles/polluters-pay-how-states-are-filling-the-federal-climate-funding-gap-in-2025/

transportation—to pay fees based on their greenhouse gas output. The collected funds would be directed toward air quality improvement projects, investments in renewable energy, and support for communities disproportionately affected by pollution. Implementing this system would incentivize businesses to reduce emissions, ensuring that those responsible for air pollution contribute directly to mitigation efforts, leading to cleaner air and healthier communities across Colorado.

Problem 2: Environmental mandate enforcement is not distributed equally across Colorado.

House Bill 21-1162 prohibits stores and restaurants from providing single-use plastic products like plastic bags, straws, or stirrers to customers.[44] The bill is not enforced consistently, allowing businesses to harm the environment without punishment.

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) releases a quarterly report on the Enforcement Cases Summary Report that looks specifically at air pollution compliance by businesses.[45] While there are many mentions of enforcement from CDPHE,there is little deterrent for repeat offenses from organizations who continue to break environmental mandates like HB 21-1162. Looking at the report for quarter 1 of 2025 from CDPHE, it's clear that failures to permit, or failures to monitor regulatory emissions are often not fined, rather reported without consequences from the agency themselves. Of the 60 violations reported, only 27 were fined in the first quarter of the year, meaning 33 either have no record of penalties or faced no such consequences.

The enforcement of HB21-1162 is a task that falls to local governments, which can penalize "in the manner that the local government chooses."[46] Leaving enforcement and penalty up to local governments leaves room for loopholes; certain counties in Colorado will experience heavy enforcement of the law. Many businesses will feel the serious impacts of the bill, whereas other counties do not enforce the penalties dictated by the law. Many local governments don't have the

[44] State of Colorado. (2020). Management of Single Use Products, No. HB20-1163, 2020 Colo. Sess. Laws (July 1, 2021). https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb20-1163#:~:text=The%20bill%20prohibits%20stores%20and,at%20the%20point%20of%20sAle

[45] CDPHE. (2025). *Enforcement action reports*. (n.d.). Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. Retrieved November 9, 2024, from https://cdphe.colorado.gov/compliance-and-enforcement/enforcement-action-reports

[46] State of Colorado. (2021). Concerning the Management of Plastic Products, No. HB21-1162, 2021 Colo. Sess. Laws (Jan. 1, 2021). https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2021A/bills/2021a_1162_enr.pdf

resources to enforce a bill of this magnitude, while some have other priorities that their voters dictate.

HB21-1162 sets a maximum penalty instead of a minimum punishment for infractions. Outlined in parts A and B of section 25-17-507, maximum punishments are "(A) Up to five hundred dollars for a second violation; or (B) Up to one thousand dollars for a third or subsequent violation."[19] However there is no assurance that any penalty is enforced, rather a limit on possible penalty that provides no further deterrent for repeat offenders.

Solution 2A: Centralize the penalty and enforcement system of environmental regulations in the State of Colorado rather than local governments.

Centralizing penalty and enforcement systems for state-wide environmental regulations (like HB21-1162) would ensure consistent application and proper enforcement of the law as the state government would allow for equality of enforcement across the state. Local governments often *already* suffer from insufficient resources, meaning that relying on them to enforce environmental policy is often too big of an ask. Though not a comparison between state and local governments, a paper published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* details the impact of national versus local enforcement of environmental regulations in Sweden. The findings, the author notes to be applicable to the United States, indicate that decentralized enforcement by local governments results in "suboptimal" actions regarding implementation of environmental law. This serves as an indicator that may be applied to a state vs local enforcement mechanism.[47]

Solution 2B: Make fines proportional with business size.

Currently in the state of Colorado, most fines seem to be calculated on a case by case basis with a patchwork of laws, looking at the number of repeated offenses, as well as the maximum civil penalty for the violation. Most recently HB20-1143 raised some of these maximum civil

[47] Sjöberg, E. (2016). *An empirical study of federal law versus local environmental enforcement*. Journal of Environmental Economics and Management, 76(0095-0696), 14–31. Science Direct. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeem.2015.11.007

penalties[48], but no Colorado law seems to address the size of the corporation committing the violation.

Larger businesses are often able to pay small fines for their environmental practices rather than rework their business to be environmentally friendly. Colorado could instead adopt a progressive fine system, requiring corporations to pay a fine proportional to their size. Corporations like Starbucks could easily afford to pay an environmental fine that a small business would struggle to afford. To strengthen environmental enforcement across the state, corporations should face fines that are high enough to encourage them to pursue environmentally friendly practices without crippling small businesses.

As a result, businesses will opt to comply with environmental regulations because the cost is cheaper than the fine they would pay for being noncompliant. This is further supported by two key items. First, the well-documented deterrence theory argues that for a fine to be an effective deterrent, it must be greater than the economic benefit a company gains from violating the law. This has been popularized by scholars like Gary Becker (Nobel Prize winner), detailed in *Crime and Punishment*, and Steven M. Shavell (Harvard Law and Economics), demonstrating the principle through "Liability for Harm to the Environment: An Economic Analysis." (Journal of Legal Studies, 1987).

Secondly, there is precedent in other regions for using a proportional fine. One example is the European Union, which implements General Data Protection Regulation Fines. Another example of a proportional fine, GDPR violations work towards deterrence theory, ensuring that fines against larger and smaller businesses are adjusted so that both would economically prefer to be in compliance than pay the fine.[49] In addition, the EPA has specific fee waivers and lessening of fines on environmental violations for small businesses that allow them to be more equitable in how fines are enforced. [50]

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[48] Colorado General Assembly. (n.d.). *Environmental Justice And Projects Increase Environmental Fines | Colorado General Assembly*. Colorado General Assembly |. Retrieved June 29, 2025, from https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb20-1143

[49] GDPR. (2024). *General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)*. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). https://gdpr-info.eu/issues/fines-penalties/

[50] EPA. (2025, March 31). *Small Businesses and Enforcement | US EPA*. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Retrieved June 29, 2025, https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/small-businesses-and-enforcement

Solution 2C: Increase monetary allocation to pro-environmental grants for small businesses to be able to comply.

The upfront costs of switching to environmentally friendly technology are daunting to businesses. Colorado should increase funding to grant programs that incentivize small businesses to be more environmentally friendly. This will allow businesses to get their environmentally-friendly practices started and result in long-term benefits to the state and its environmental goals. [51]

A conversation with the Academy School District 20's Green Team in Colorado Springs, a team of staff members dedicated to compliance with state regulations, revealed that many schools in the district struggle with funding to meet compliance, or truly invest in environmental projects. Though they are not small businesses, the same principle applies. In the long run, the team sees environmental regulations as producing a net positive, both environmentally and economically.

Increasing funding for pro-environmental incentive programs would allow more businesses that would like to comply with the ability to do so.

Solution 2D: Design volunteer/paid positions for people to help government and schools comply with state environmental mandates.

A struggle that governmental organizations including cities, towns, and counties face is complying with environmental mandates within budget. For this reason, it could be valuable for the State of Colorado to designate a paid or volunteer position for environmental consultants within the government.

This would provide not just immediate value, but also long-term value. Having a professional versed in the field of environmental compliance and the most efficient ways to be compliant is incredibly valuable to all parts of the state. It allows Colorado to align as much as possible with environmental standards within a budget.

[51] Cote, C. (2021, April 13). *Making the Business Case for Sustainability*. Harvard Business School. https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/business-case-for-sustainability

Systems thinking

Unintended consequences that we've considered include:

- Volunteer positions may go unfilled, which would only worsen the situation when it comes to enforcement.

- Small business owners don't always have the time to learn about enforcement programs/grants that help with enforcement. This could unfairly distribute the grant to larger businesses that are able to research and apply for these grants.

- Agreeing on the correct "proportion" for the proportional funding section would be something very hard to determine, and due to their size bigger businesses may get more of a say in the process or have larger stakeholders involved rather than smaller businesses.

Outreach

 # Did not respond
** Responded but declined to discuss our proposal/Responded but never met*

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

State

- Colorado Energy Office #
- Colorado Division of Conservation: Aaron Welch *
- CPDHE: Lindsay Ellis (July Meeting)
- Legislative Legal Services: Jennifer Berman, Assistant Director of the Business, Health Care, Natural Resources, and Environment Team

Local

- Denver Public Schools
    - Kelly Moses, Sustainability Program Manager
    - Christopher Woodburn, Gardens and Solid Waste Diversion
- Denver City Sustainability #

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Conservation Colorado: Kelly Nordini, CEO
- Colorado Water Trust: Kate Ryan, Executive Director #

- Colorado Counties Incorporated: Kelly Flenniken, Executive Director
- Classrooms for Climate Action: Tiffany Boyd, Executive Director
- Recycle Colorado: Elizabeth Chapman, Executive Director
- Cheyenne Mountain Zoo #
- Good Business Colorado Association: Debra Brown #
- Ecocycle: Kim Orr, Environmental Education/School Recycling Director
- Inland Ocean Coalition #
- 1 Percent for the Planet: Josephine Lynch, Individual Account Coordinator
- Catamount Institute #
- CoPIRG
- EarthJustice #
- National Waste and Recycling Association #
- National Environmental Law Center #
- Nature Conservancy #
- Rocky Mountain Field Institute: Celia Balliett, Community Engagement Coordinator #

Other subject matter experts

- Starbucks: Amy Halvorson, Sustainability Lead #
- CSU Office of Sustainability: Tonie Miyamoto, Head of President's Sustainability Commission
- Jeffery Boyce, Teacher of Advanced Placement Environmental Science at Cherry Creek High School; former employee of the Environmental Protection Agency
- Meghan Mosher, Teacher of Advanced Placement Environmental Science at Monarch High School
- Colorado Restaurant Association
    - Logan Dunning, Senior Manager of Government Affairs *
    - Rebekah Hernandez, Manager of Government Affairs *
- American Chemistry Council *
- John Jackson, Teacher of Advanced Placement Environmental Science at Denver Public Schools #
- Delia Medberry, Teacher of Advanced Placement Environmental Science at Doherty High School #
- CSU Academics: Robert Duffy, Professor of US Environmental Policy
- Black Rock Coffee #
- Colorado Springs School District 11: Michael Gaal, Superintendent #
- Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce: Cameron Ochse, Marketing and Communications Director #
- Dutch Bros Coffee Inc.#
- Colorado Parent Teacher Association #
- Colorado Restaurant Association - Nick Hoover (July Meeting)

Legislators

- Senator James Coleman, Senate District 33 #
- Senator Chris Kolker, Senate District 16
- Senator Larry Liston, Senate District 10
- Senator Janice Rich, Senate District 7
- Former Senator Ellen Roberts #
- Representative Mary Bradfield, House District 21
- Representative Junie Joseph, House District 10
- Representative Alex Valdez, House District 5 #
- Representative Ron Weinberg, House District 51 #
- Representative Jenny Willford, House District 34
- Aide to Senator Judy Amabile, Senate District 18
- Aide to Representative Ryan Gonzalez, House District 50

Healthcare Committee

1: Public Health and Environmental Hazards

Problem: Colorado youth are not adequately informed of public health concerns and environmental hazards.

Definitions

- **Youth** – School-aged children between the ages of approximately 5 to 18.
- **Public health** – The science of protecting and advancing the health of people and their communities. It is achieved by encouraging healthy lifestyles, researching disease and injury prevention, and detecting, preventing, and responding to infectious diseases.[52]
- **Environmental hazards –** Extreme events or substances in the Earth and its ecological system that may cause adverse consequences for humans and things they value.[53]
- **Heatwave –** A period of abnormally hot weather generally lasting more than two days.[54]
- **Drought** – A deficiency of precipitation over an extended period of time (usually a season or more), resulting in a water shortage.[55]

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[52] CDC Foundation. (n.d.). *What is Public Health?* https://www.cdcfoundation.org/what-public-health

[53] Sparling, D. (2015). *Ecotoxicology Essentials* [Ebook]. Academic Press. https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/9780128019474/ecotoxicology-essentials

[54] NOAA's National Weather Service. (n.d.). *During a heat wave*. https://www.weather.gov/safety/heat-during#:~:text=A%20heat%20wave%20is%20a,of%20people%20to%20hazardous%20heat.

[55] National Integrated Drought Information System. (n.d.). *Drought Basics.* Drought.gov. https://www.drought.gov/what-is-drought/drought-basics

- **Disability** – Any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).[56]

- **Sensitive population** – A group of people who are more likely to be harmed by exposure to chemicals, pollution, or other environmental factors than the general population.[57]

- **Climatic disaster** – Droughts, floods, wildfires, hurricanes, extreme heat waves, severe storms, tornadoes, blizzards, heavy snowstorms, sea level rise, and large-scale changes in precipitation patterns.[58]

- **PM2.5** – Extremely small particles that can be inhaled and penetrate deep into the lungs. These particles are considered a major air pollution concern due to their potential health risks.[59]

In a world characterized by rising temperatures, fluctuating weather patterns, and climate change, environmental hazards – such as worsening air quality and extreme heat – are becoming more prevalent. Often, youth – with developing immune systems and organs – are disproportionately affected by these factors. The World Health Organization estimates that 34% of all children's health issues are the result of modifiable environmental factors, and we can observe this national pattern in Colorado as well.[60] According to the Children's Environmental Health Network, more than 70% of Colorado's 1.3 million children live in counties with unhealthy levels of ozone.[61] This exposure can have long-term health consequences, such as

[56] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, April 2). *Disability and health overview*. https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/about/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html

[57] Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. (2024). *Guidance for inhalation exposures to particulate matter*. https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pha-guidance/resources/ATSDR-Particulate-Matter-Guidance-508.pdf

[58] Federal Emergency Management Agency. (n.d.). *Natural hazards.* https://hazards.fema.gov/nri/natural-hazards

[59] *Particulate Matter (PM2.5) trends | US EPA*. (2024, August 16). US EPA. https://www.epa.gov/air-trends/particulate-matter-pm25-trends#:~:text=Particulate%20Matter%20(PM2.-,5)%20Trends,our%20Particulate%20Matter%20Pollution%20page.

[60] World Health Organization. (2010). *Children's environmental health units*. https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/327187/9789241500425-eng.pdf

[61] Children's Environmental Health Network. (2024, July 16). *Protecting Colorado children's health*. https://cehn.org/blog-protecting-colorado-childrens-health/

asthma and diminished lung development.[62] Youth in our state need to be adequately informed about these concerns.

The increasing frequency of heat waves and extremely high temperatures can also dramatically impact the health of Colorado citizens. The first few years of the 2020s already saw 12 heat waves in the Pikes Peak region, which is more than any full decade between the 1950s and 1990s, according to the Colorado Climate Center's analysis of data from the National Centers for Environmental Information.[63] Heat waves can affect the health of youth across the state. For instance, exposure to extreme heat can increase the risk of developing asthma, allergies, cardiovascular illness, and respiratory problems for children; it also increases the risk for labor complications during pregnancy and the delivery of low birthweight babies.[64]

The CDPHE identifies areas facing environmental burden through its creation of the Colorado EnviroScreen, an interactive map that displays data points such as environmental exposures, climate vulnerability, and demographics.[65] This resource is a fundamental step towards addressing and communicating the dangers of environmental hazards. However, Colorado needs to disseminate this information effectively across the state to inform people of accessible means of environmental hazard trends and the risks that such dangers pose to their communities. Without effective channels of information and communication surrounding environmental hazards and public health in our state, the health of Coloradans will be detrimentally impacted.

Colorado needs to address public health matters in our state, such as public water systems, to further the health of Colorado youth. For instance, according to the Colorado Public Interest Research Group (CoPIRG), a 2021 study found that 72% of Colorado children under 6 who were tested had detectable levels of lead in their blood, well above the national rate of 51%.[66] Exposure to even low levels of lead can cause damage to brain development over time, learning disabilities, shorter stature, impaired hearing, and impaired formation and function of blood cells,

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[62] American Lung Association. (n.d.). *Who is Most Affected by Outdoor Air Pollution?* https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk

[63] Schumacher, R. (2024, July 23). *Colorado's mid-July heat wave: where did it rank?* Colorado Climate Blog. https://climate.colostate.edu/blog/index.php/2024/07/23/colorados-mid-july-heat-wave-where-did-it-rank/

[64] UNICEF USA. (n.d.). *UNICEF: How to Keep Kids Safe and Healthy During a Heat Wave*. https://www.unicefusa.org/what-unicef-does/childrens-health/parenting/heatwaves

[65] Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. (n.d.). *Colorado EnviroScreen 2.0 - About the methods and data.* https://cdphe.colorado.gov/colorado-enviroscreen-20-about-the-methods-and-data

[66] Colorado Public Interest Research Group. (2024, June 6). *Get the Lead Out of Drinking Water in Colorado Schools*. https://pirg.org/colorado/foundation/resources/get-the-lead-out-of-drinking-water-in-colorado-schools/#:~:text=A%202021%20study%20found%20that,adding%20to%20that%20health%20risk

especially in youth.[67] In Colorado, common sources of lead in drinking water include contaminated water service lines, homes built before 1951, copper pipes, and brass faucets.[68]

Youth who reside near small Colorado airports had slightly higher levels of lead in their blood than the statewide average.[69] Furthermore, elevated lead cases are prevalent in low-income, older neighborhoods with deteriorating lead-based paint. Denver Department of Environmental Health records from 52 zip codes in the Denver metro area revealed that 60% of the elevated lead cases were present in only five of the zip codes, which are classified as low-income and are inhabited by immigrants.[70]

[67] US EPA. (2024, November 21). *Basic Information about Lead in Drinking Water*. https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/basic-information-about-lead-drinking-water

[68] Denver Water. (n.d.). *Sources and history of lead in drinking water*. https://www.denverwater.org/your-water/water-quality/lead/sources-in-drinking-water

[69] Berg, K., Snow, M., & Richardson, K. (2024). The association between childhood blood lead levels and proximity to airports in Colorado. *Discover Environment 2, 32.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s44274-024-00061-1

[70] Hubbard, B. (2023, April 6). *In Denver's older neighborhoods, kids show signs of exposure to lead*. Collective Colorado. https://collective.coloradotrust.org/stories/in-denvers-older-neighborhoods-kids-show-signs-of-exposure-to-lead/

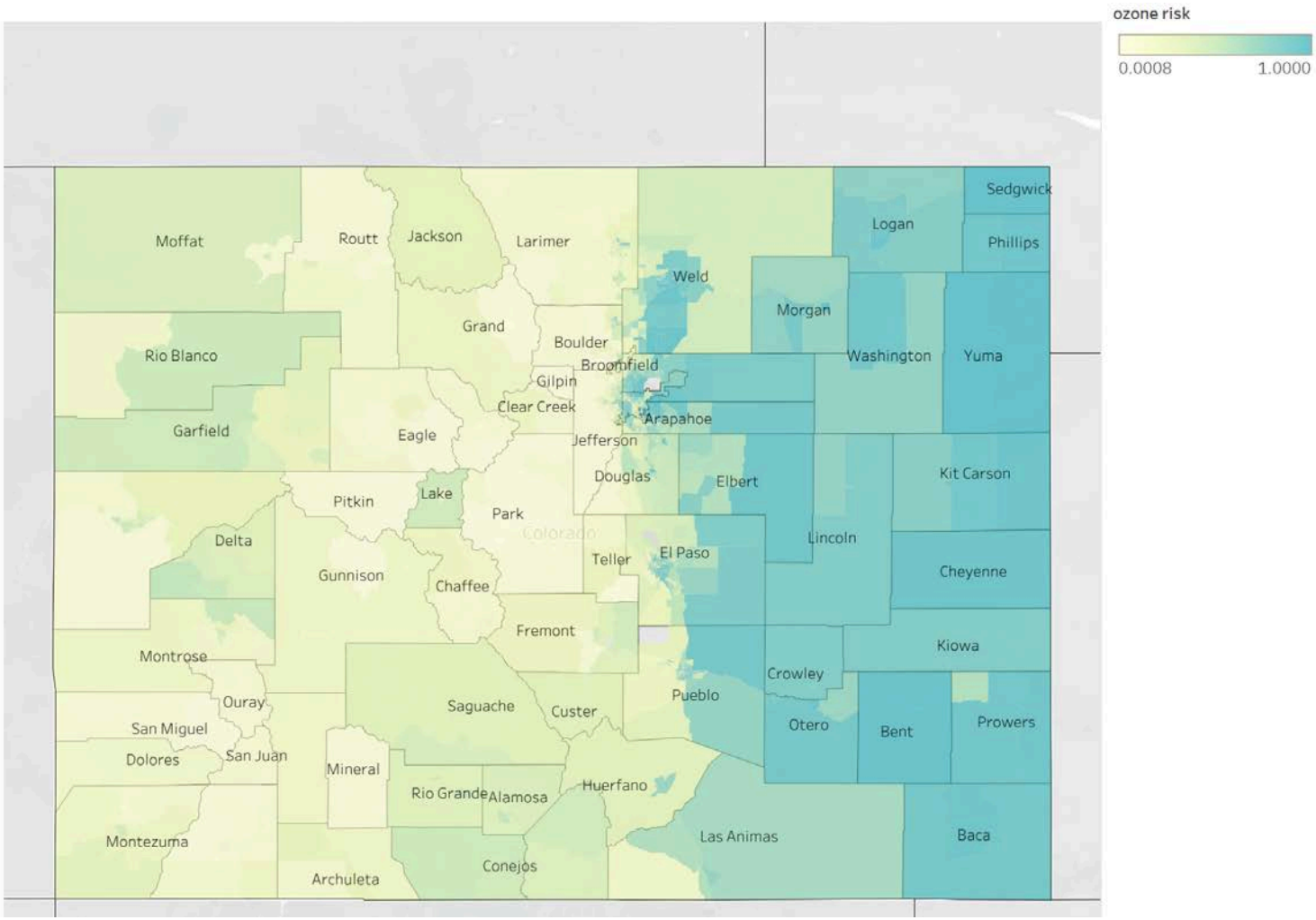


Figure 1: This map depicts the risk of ozone for people in each of Colorado's census tracts from 0 (lowest risk) to 1 (highest risk). Communities with a higher share of young people, older people, outdoor workers, and people with asthma or heart disease are more likely to be harmed by the impacts of ozone. From Colorado Fiscal Institute. (n.d.). *Ozone Risk Map.* Colorado Climate Change. https://coloradoclimatechange.com/climate-maps/ozone/risk-map.

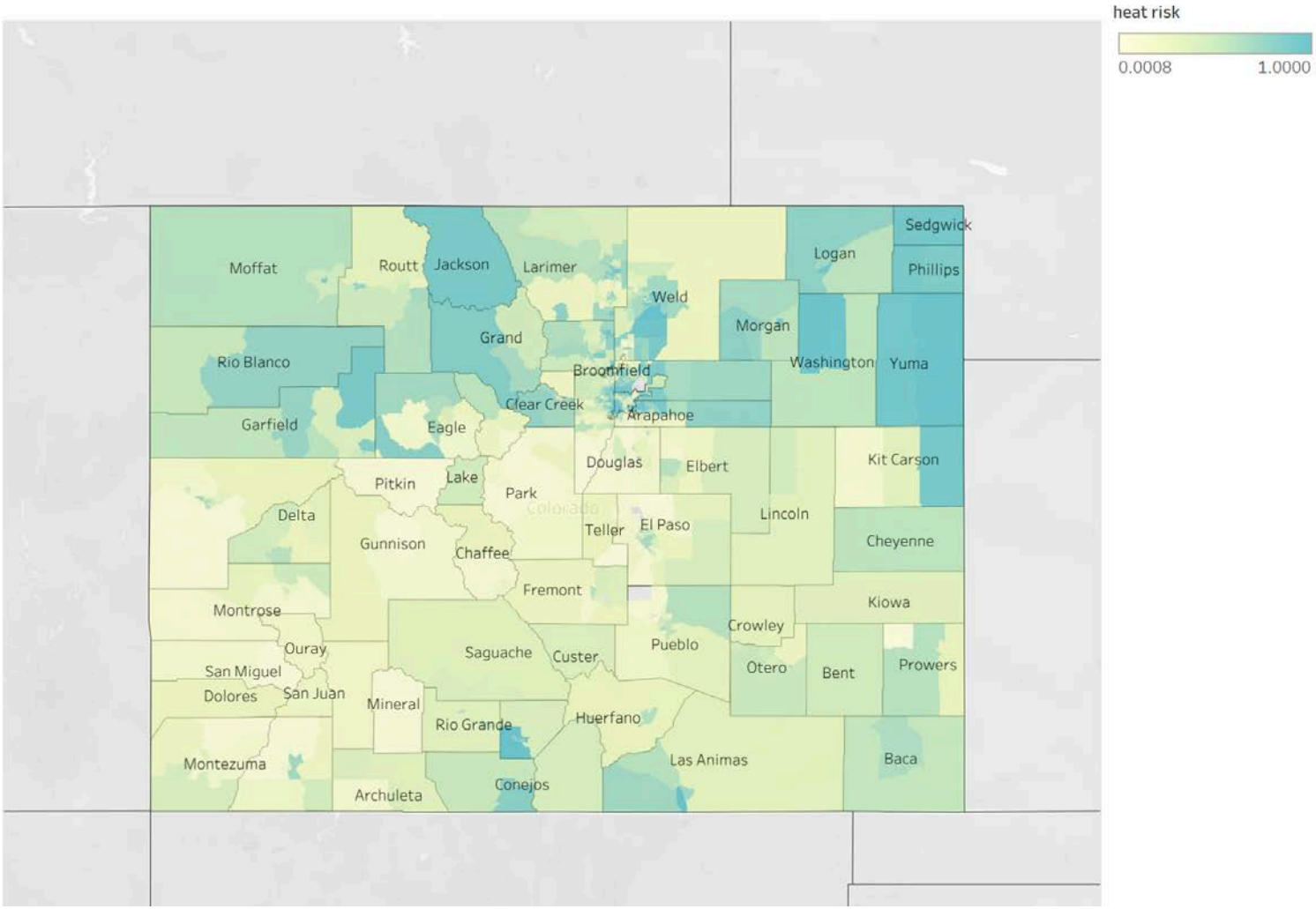


Figure 2: This map depicts the risk of extreme heat for people in each of Colorado's census tracts. The index assigns a risk level between 0 and 1, where 0 indicates the lowest risk and 1 indicates the highest risk. Communities with a higher share of young people, older people, outdoor workers, and people with asthma or heart disease are more likely to be harmed by the impacts of ozone.
From Colorado Fiscal Institute. (n.d.). Ozone Risk Map. Colorado Climate Change. https://coloradoclimatechange.com/climate-maps/heat/heat-risk-map

Problem: Individuals with disabilities are more susceptible to the effects of environmental hazards and public health emergencies, limiting access to necessary medical care and exacerbating existing health conditions.

According to the Colorado Health Institute, the compounding effects of rising temperatures, declining air quality, persistent drought, and destructive wildfires have produced an urgent health challenge.[71] Many Coloradans whose health is likely to be affected the most by a changing climate – including children and Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic groups – already experience multiple barriers to their health and well-being.

Similarly, in rural areas, residents often face infrastructure limitations, lack of access to medical facilities, transportation hurdles, insufficient internet connectivity, and economic constraints.[72] Several studies have shown a correlation between geographic isolation and higher rates of disability, indicating the need to invest in public health infrastructure to improve the lives of over 625,000 Coloradans (11% of Colorado population) with disabilities.[73] In a study conducted by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, disabled participants were asked, "If you are given sufficient time and warning to evacuate before a possible disaster would you have difficulty responding to this request?" Even with sufficient advance warning, the vast majority would still face difficulties evacuating, with some unable to evacuate independently at all.

[71] Colorado Health Institute. (2022, June 16). *Think Globally, Adapt Locally | Colorado Counties Health and Climate Index.* https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/about/health-agenda

[72] Rocky Mountain Health Plans. (2024, July 1). *Improving rural health care access in Colorado.* https://www.rmhp.org/improving-rural-health-care-access-in-colorado/

[73] Colorado Health Institute. (2024, August 21). *2023 CHAS: Disability.* https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-disability#:~:text=In%202023%2C%207.4%25%20of%20Coloradans,lasting%20six%20months%20or%20more.

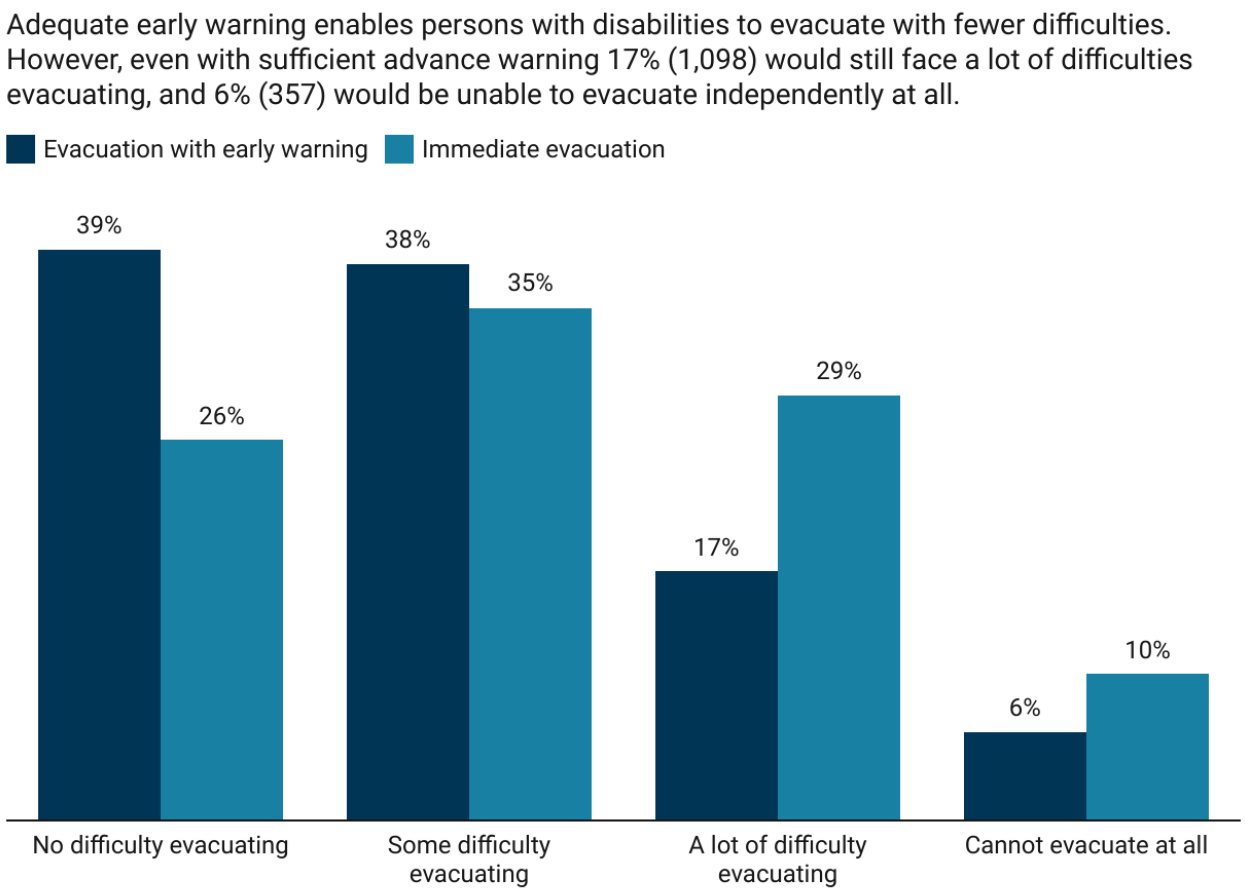


Figure 3: This graph reveals individuals' responses to the question: *If you are given sufficient time and warning to evacuate before a possible disaster would you have difficulty responding to this request?* People with disabilities often have more difficulty evacuating climatic disasters such as flooding, heat waves, drought, tsunamis, etc.
From United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (2023). *The world must act on unacceptable failures to protect persons with disabilities.* https://www.undrr.org/report/2023-gobal-survey-report-on-persons-with-disabilities-and-disasters.

Disabled individuals are increasingly susceptible to the effects of environmental hazards. According to the Harvard University Center for the Environment, people with disabilities are "two to four times more likely to die or be injured in climate emergencies including heatwaves, hurricanes, and floods."[74] Additionally, they may lack public transportation options, have difficulty understanding emergency alerts due to sensory impairments, or lack accessible communication methods with emergency responders. However, protocols that mandate accessible preventive screening equipment, alarm systems that can be both seen and heard, and power doors with sensors at entrances have been shown to enhance the preparedness of disabled individuals in the wake of an emergency.[75]

The diagram below depicts how environmental exposures, such as toxic releases from facilities and wastewater discharge, disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and predispose individuals to environmental health disparities.

[74] Harvard University Center for the Environment. (2023, January 19). *Disability in a time of climate disaster*. Harvard University. https://www.environment.harvard.edu/news/disability-time-climate-disaster#:~:text=Michael%20Ashley%20Stein%3A%20Persons%20with,%2C%20social%20isolation%2C%20and%20institutionalization

[75] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, April 3). *Disability Inclusion Strategies*. https://www.cdc.gov/disability-inclusion/strategies/index.html#:~:text=Provides%20more%20health%20care%20choices,collection%20to%20assess%20health%20disparities.

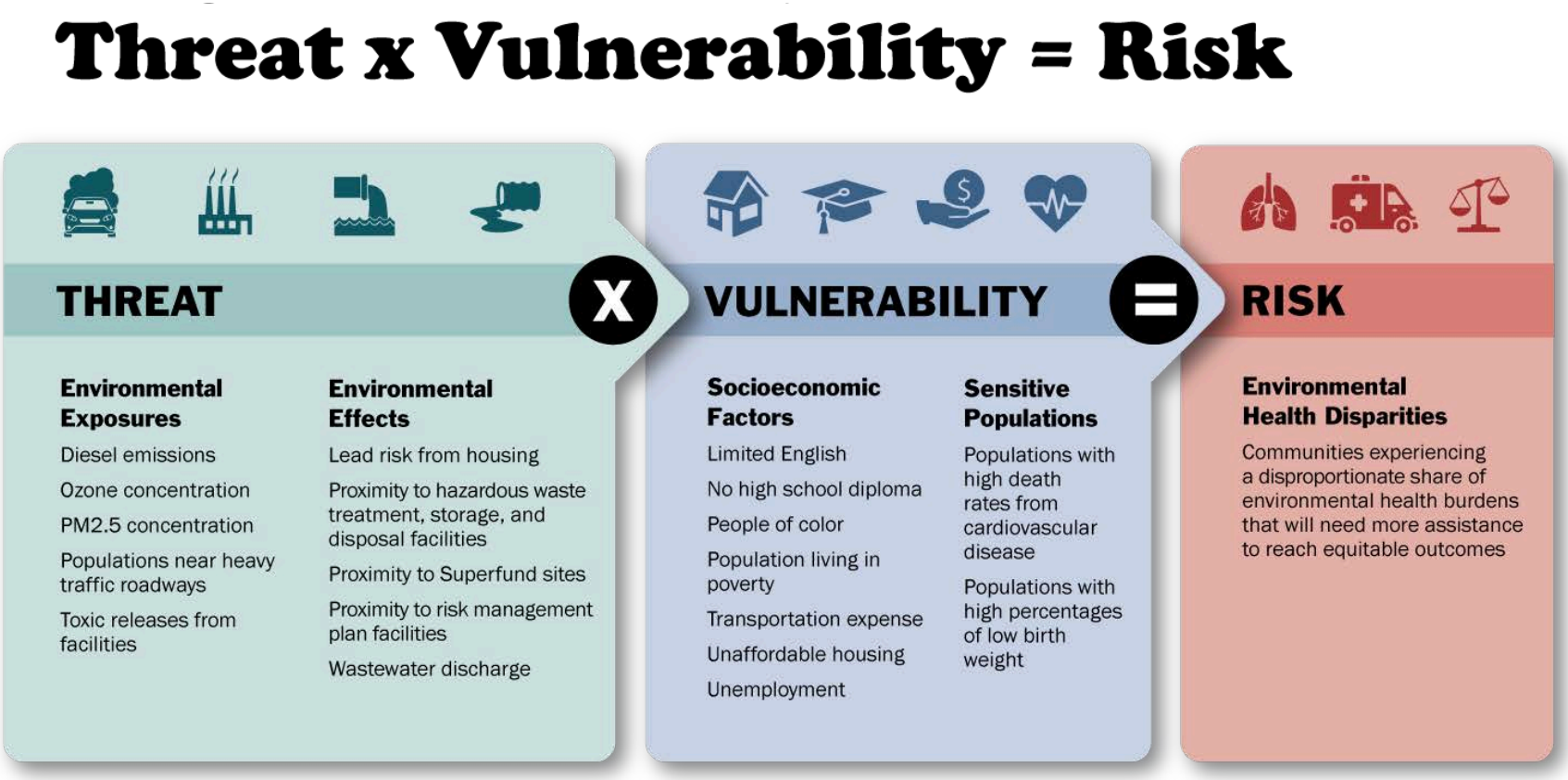


Figure 4: This diagram reveals how sensitive populations, especially those with disabilities and underlying health conditions, face a heightened risk of environmental health disparities due to exposures such as diesel emissions, PM2.5 concentration, and proximity to hazardous waste treatment facilities. From Washington State Department of Health. (n.d.). *Washington Environmental Health Disparities Map.* https://doh.wa.gov/data-and-statistical-reports/washington-tracking-network-wtn/washington-environmental-health-disparities-map.

Solution: Colorado should convene a two-year pilot program of an Emergency Preparedness Task Force to inform youth about mitigation strategies for environmental hazards.

Hazard mitigation and emergency preparedness efforts inform people of the steps to take in the event of an emergency, fostering safe practices and effective action when they face a hazard. Youth should receive information surrounding mitigation and response strategies for environmental hazards – such as droughts, heat waves, ozone levels, water quality, and tornadoes – so they are equipped with the knowledge necessary to defend and protect themselves and others in case of an emergency, whether it occurs inside or outside of school.

Colorado should create an Emergency Preparedness Task Force to inform youth about techniques surrounding emergency preparedness. The Emergency Preparedness Task Force would include a **volunteer** group of educators, emergency medical technicians, parents, and state officials to ensure that youth are informed of both the steps to take during an emergency, and the effects that some emergencies may have on their health.

The Emergency Preparedness Task Force will be responsible for compiling **asynchronous** presentations composed of a written PowerPoint element, a hands-on activity, and an active discussion that will take place within the classroom, and take-home materials that students can use to review and expand upon their learning.

The presentation will cover three essential topics:

- Specific steps to take in case of different environmental emergencies (droughts, heat waves, ozone levels, water quality, and tornadoes)
- Effects that these emergencies can have on the health of youth
- Other channels of seeking more information about environmental hazards (specific webpages, tools, or extensions).

Furthermore, the task force's presentations will be administered twice each year, with one presentation in the fall and the other in the spring. Each series would cover a different set of topics relevant to those seasons (i.e., fall = idling vehicles in cold weather promotes higher concentrations of air pollution, spring = heatwaves & water scarcity), ensuring that information remains pertinent and effective. Individuals requiring accommodations should also be represented in these lesson plans to ensure that all students, regardless of physical ability, are prepared to navigate emergency situations.

The Emergency Preparedness Task Force will be responsible for reaching out to public spaces, such as schools, places of worship, and recreation centers, in order to promote their presentations.

The impact of this task force will first be measured by a two-year pilot program implemented in one Colorado school district before expanding across the entire state.

Beyond Colorado, similar methods for disseminating emergency preparedness information to youth are well underway. For instance, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services has established the Preparedness Ambassadors Program, which is focused on "[engaging] fourth grade students to develop and promote disaster preparedness guidelines for their homes, school, and local community." [76] The program consists of instructional materials, such as activity books that expand students' knowledge of natural disasters, teacher guides, which provide a step-by-step curriculum for teachers to follow, and a family readiness guide that aids families in preparing for environmental disasters. By implementing a similar program in Colorado, youth will be better equipped to prepare themselves and those around them in case of a natural disaster or environmental hazard.

Solution: Colorado should implement a Youth Publication Program that mobilizes youth to enact research-driven change on pressing public health issues affecting at-risk Colorado populations.

To augment youth engagement in public health advocacy and research-driven climate mitigation efforts, Colorado should oversee the creation of the Youth Public Health Innovation Program: an opportunity for emerging scholars to research major Colorado-centric public health issues and design mitigation strategies. For instance, health conditions such as chronic lower respiratory disease and cardiovascular disease are often amplified in the wake of environmental stressors, public health emergencies, and poor access to necessary medical information and intervention strategies.[77] Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is linked to environmental stressors such as air pollution and occupational dust, which can trigger inflammation while leading to

[76] California Governor's Office of Emergency Services. (n.d.). *Preparedness Ambassadors.* https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-the-director/operations/planning-preparedness-prevention/planning-preparedness/school-emergency-planning-safety/preparedness-ambassadors/

[77] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Colorado*. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/colorado/co.htm

progressive decline in lung function.[78] Older individuals, marginalized populations, and those with lower education levels or living in rural communities have an increased susceptibility to developing this debilitating, often fatal chronic disease.

The *Youth Public Health Innovation Program* incentivizes Colorado's brightest minds to design mitigation efforts for such issues and catalyze reverberating change. The selection and nomination process operates as follows:

- Participating schools nominate students using a selection process and application form to gauge commitment. In the case that a student's school does not participate, students can elect to submit an at-large application that is reviewed by the state.

- Accepted students are paired with a local expert or mentor from a similar area of expertise, with whom they work throughout the school year to research a significant public health issue and design implementable solutions. Students are expected to meet with their mentors at least twice per month, and by winter break, students should have a rough draft of the following submission materials:
    - Research report about their chosen topic and mitigation strategy proposal
        - Report is reviewed by field experts, who will provide feedback and revisions
    - Professional outreach plan (seeking input from local legislators, organizations, community leaders, etc.)
    - Digital slideshow presentation summarizing project

- Between January and April, Colorado will organize a student visitation day, where student researchers spend time at a dedicated Colorado department (i.e. CDPHE) to engage in project revision and mock presentations. If available, students will also gain the opportunity to meet their mentors in-person and connect with other state officials.

- By late May, the state will review finalized student research reports, which will be published in the Public Health Digital Library.[79] In July, students will present their finalized slideshows at the Colorado Health Symposium (2-3 day event), where they will

[78] Stoleriu, M. G., Ansari, M., Strunz, M. (2024). COPD basal cells are primed towards secretory to multiciliated cell imbalance driving increased resilience to environmental stressors. *Thorax, 79(6)*, 524–537. https://doi.org/10.1136/thorax-2022-219958

[79] Colorado Local Public Health and Environmental Resources. (2024). *Public Health Digital Library*. Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment - Local Public Health Agency. https://cdphe-lpha.colorado.gov/training-resources/public-health-digital-library

connect with local organizations, health advocates, and researchers to begin implementing their ideas while gaining professional experience.[80]

Colorado should encourage students requiring accessibility accommodations to join the program, and additional aids (ASL, language interpretations, extended time) should be provided to ensure equitable opportunity. The state should allocate funds to support student transportation costs, especially for those residing in rural communities or who would otherwise face significant barriers due to financial constraints. However, the majority of the research will be conducted remotely, thus minimizing expenses. Based on the program's success during the initial years of implementation, the state should provide districts with the option to formalize it as a board-approved course to ensure students can gain course credit/certifications for their work.

Systems thinking

Unintended consequences that we've considered include:

- Rural students may be underrepresented in the Youth Publication Program due to transportation difficulties, logistical constraints (finding a qualified mentor within range), and accessing university resources to aid their research.
- While the asynchronous materials provided by the Emergency Preparedness Task Force allow students to access life-saving resources at their immediate disposal, youth may not take advantage of these opportunities or engage with them since participation is not mandated.
- It may be challenging to develop appropriate metrics and methods for evaluating the success of the two-year Emergency Preparedness pilot program, and it could be terminated if it does not deliver expected results.

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach
** Responded but declined to discuss our proposal*

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

- State
    - Colorado Commission for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind *

[80] The Colorado Health Foundation. (n.d.). *2024 Colorado Health Symposium.* https://coloradohealth.org/events/2024-colorado-health-symposium

    - Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Mark Thompson, State Hazard Mitigation Officer
    - Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Sadie Martinez, DHSEM Access and Functional Needs Coordinator
    - Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Emily Roozen, Legislative Liaison (scheduled for July TBD)
    - Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Paxton Hyde, Legislative Policy Advisor, Health Access Branch

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    - Boulder Valley School District: Communications Department
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    - Delta County School District: Rachel Smathers, Registered Nurse
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- Colorado Coalition for Livable Climate
- Colorado Health Institute: Emily Johnson, Director of Policy Analysis
- Colorado Hospital Association: Lyle Moore Jr., Director of Hospital Emergency Preparedness #
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- Sanchez Policy Works: Jordan Sanchez, Lobbyist and Business Owner #
- Young Invincibles: Cameron DeTello, Rocky Mountain Organizing Manager
- Young Invincibles: Melanie Kesner, Rocky Mountain Regional Director
- Youth Climate Collaborative: Tanya Jagdish, Climate Change and Sustainability Consultant
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- Dr. Katie Dickinson, Associate Professor, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Environmental and Occupational Health in the Colorado School of Public Health

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- State Representative Kyle Brown, House District 12
- State Representative Eliza Hamrick, House District 61
- State Representative Dusty Johnson, House District 63 (scheduled for July 2)
- State Representative Sheila Lieder, House District 28 (scheduled for July, TBD)
- State Senator Cathy Kipp, Senate District 14 (scheduled for July, TBD)
- State Senator Janice Rich, Senate District 7 #
- State Senator Faith Winter, Senate District 25 #

2: Access to Equitable Healthcare and Medical Options in Rural Areas

Problem: Transparency around medication and healthcare options is insufficient, hindering health outcomes and access to life-saving services.

Definitions

- **Critical Access Hospital** – A designation given by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to small, rural hospitals that meet specific criteria. The main purpose of this designation is to ensure access to essential healthcare services in rural areas where larger hospitals might be too far away.[81]

- **Medicaid** – A public health insurance program for some people or families with limited incomes and resources, including children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with disabilities.[82]

- **CHP+** – Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+) is public low-cost health insurance for certain children and pregnant women. It is for people who earn too much to qualify for Health First Colorado (Colorado's Medicaid program), but not enough to pay for private health insurance.[83]

- **CHIP** – The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) provides low-cost health coverage to children and pregnant women in families that earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid. Each state offers CHIP coverage and works closely with its state Medicaid program.[84]

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[81] Rural Health Information Hub. (2025, May 21). *Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) Overview*. https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/critical-access-hospitals

[82] National Cancer Institute. (n.d.). *NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms*. https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/medicaid

[83] Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing. (n.d.). *Child Health Plan Plus.* https://hcpf.colorado.gov/chp

[84] HealthCare.gov. (n.d.). *Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).* https://www.healthcare.gov/medicaid-chip/childrens-health-insurance-program/#:~:text=The%20Children's%20Health%20Insurance%20Program%20(CHIP),-If%20your%20children&text=In%20certain%20states%2C%20CHIP%20provides,money%20to%20qualify%20for%20Medicaid.

The lack of transparency around medication and healthcare options is a significant barrier to improving health outcomes and accessing life-saving services among Coloradans. Many challenges that residents face are understanding the full range of treatment options, the costs associated with these treatments, and how to navigate the often complex healthcare system. This lack of clarity can lead to delayed or inadequate care, as individuals may not be fully informed about the best course of treatment or the medications that could improve their health.[85]

According to CBS news, in 2019, Frank Esposito received emergency back surgery, saving him from paralysis. Although people initially greeted the operation's success with jubilation, the bills began to accumulate after a few weeks, totaling over $650,000.[86] The uncertainty surrounding healthcare bills can be life-altering, leaving people torn when pursuing life-saving medical care.

In Colorado, patients often struggle with high out-of-pocket medication costs or limited insurance coverage, which can cause them to not have the necessary treatments done. One in five adults report not being able to afford needed medications due to high out-of-pocket costs, according to a 2023 survey by the Colorado Health Institute.[87] This lack of transparency and accessibility around medication costs can lead patients to not get certain prescribed treatments, worsening their health outcomes. Approximately 25% of Coloradans with chronic conditions report not having access to the healthcare services they need, either due to high costs or lack of information about their options.

Insurance coverage adds another layer of complexity. In Colorado, around 4.6% of residents are uninsured, and many others have insurance plans with high deductibles or limited medication coverage.[88] As a result, individuals may be prescribed treatments that are either too expensive or are not the most effective given their specific health conditions.

Lack of transparency also complicates efforts to address health inequalities. Communities with lower health literacy or access to resources may find it particularly challenging to make informed decisions about their care. According to the Colorado Health Access Survey, nearly 1 in 10 Coloradans experience barriers to accessing healthcare services, and these barriers

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[85] Colorado Health Institute. (2024, April 10). *2023 Colorado Health Access Survey: Dismissive Treatment*. https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-dismissive-treatment

[86] CBS News. (2019, September 20). *Medical Price Roulette: CBS News investigates the lack of transparency in America's health care system.* https://www.cbsnews.com/news/medical-price-roulette-cbs-news-investigates-the-lack-of-transparency-in-americas-health-care-system/

[87] Colorado Health Institute. (2024, February 15). *2023 Colorado Health Access Survey: Affordability of Care*. https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-affordability-care

[88] Colorado Health Institute. (2023, November 26). *CHI Colorado Health Access Survey Preview.* https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/colorado-health-access-survey-preview

disproportionately affect communities of color and lower-income population.[89] This can perpetuate inequalities in health outcomes, contributing to higher rates of chronic conditions, preventable diseases, and even death.

Ensuring patients have clear, accessible information about their healthcare options is essential to improving health outcomes and guaranteeing that all Colorado residents can access the care they need.

Problem: Rural youth in Colorado often face significant barriers to healthcare access due to a shortage of healthcare professionals in schools and limited health infrastructure.

Within Colorado, rural youth often face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, especially within school based settings. Many rural districts lack full-time nurses, counselors, or health aides, leaving students without daily access to physical or mental health support. In fact, only about 40% of Colorado public schools have a full-time nurse on staff, while 17% report having no nursing presence at all.[90] The absence of healthcare is particularly alarming in rural areas, where students often rely on schools as a primary source of healthcare due to the scarcity of nearby providers.

In context, the Colorado Health Institute highlights significant regional disparities regarding rural health infrastructure: statewide, there are approximately 1,873 residents per full-time primary care physician, but in some rural regions—like the Eastern Plains (Cheyenne, Elbert, Kit Carson, and Lincoln counties)—this figure reaches 5,636 residents per physician—nearly three times the state average.[91] Additionally, access to behavioral health services is even more limited: rural areas average one mental health provider per 1,282 residents, compared to one per 755 in urban regions.[92]

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[89] Colorado Health Institute. (2020, February 19). *Colorado Health Access Survey: Access to Care.* https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2019-colorado-health-access-survey-access-care

[90] National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Percentage of public schools with full-time and part-time school nurses, by state: 2020–21*. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/estable/table/ntps/ntps2021_7342_s1s

[91] Colorado Health Institute. (2014, February 11). *Colorado's primary care workforce: Regional Disparities.* https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/blog/colorados-primary-care-workforce-regional-disparities

[92] Ventrelli, M. (2024, July 22). *Colorado's rural communities struggle with mental health care access — and stigma | COVER.* Colorado Politics.

Furthermore, insurance coverage further exacerbates restrictions to healthcare. Rural students are more likely to rely on Medicaid or CHP+, yet not all local providers accept public insurance due to low reimbursement rates and administrative burdens. According to Georgetown University's Center for Children and Families, children in rural areas are 24% more likely to depend on Medicaid or CHIP than their urban peers.[93] However, many schools in Colorado do not bill Medicaid for school-based health services, limiting access even when students are technically insured.

Rural youth lack access to comprehensive and dependable healthcare due to a complex network of challenges including, scarce school-based health staff, severe regional provider shortages, and fragmented insurance access. Without consistent access to preventive services, chronic disease management, and behavioral health support, thousands of Colorado students face worsening health outcomes that can hinder their academic success, emotional well-being, and long-term quality of life.

https://www.coloradopolitics.com/agriculture/colorado-mental-health-access-rural/article_ba8b5586-2ff9-11ef-ac51-2b026995586e.html

[93] Pudelski. S., & Searing, A. (2017 November 16). *Report: Children in Rural Communities More Likely to Rely on CHIP and Medicaid*. Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy | Center for Children and Families. https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2017/11/16/report-children-in-rural-communities-more-likely-to-rely-on-chip-and-medicaid/

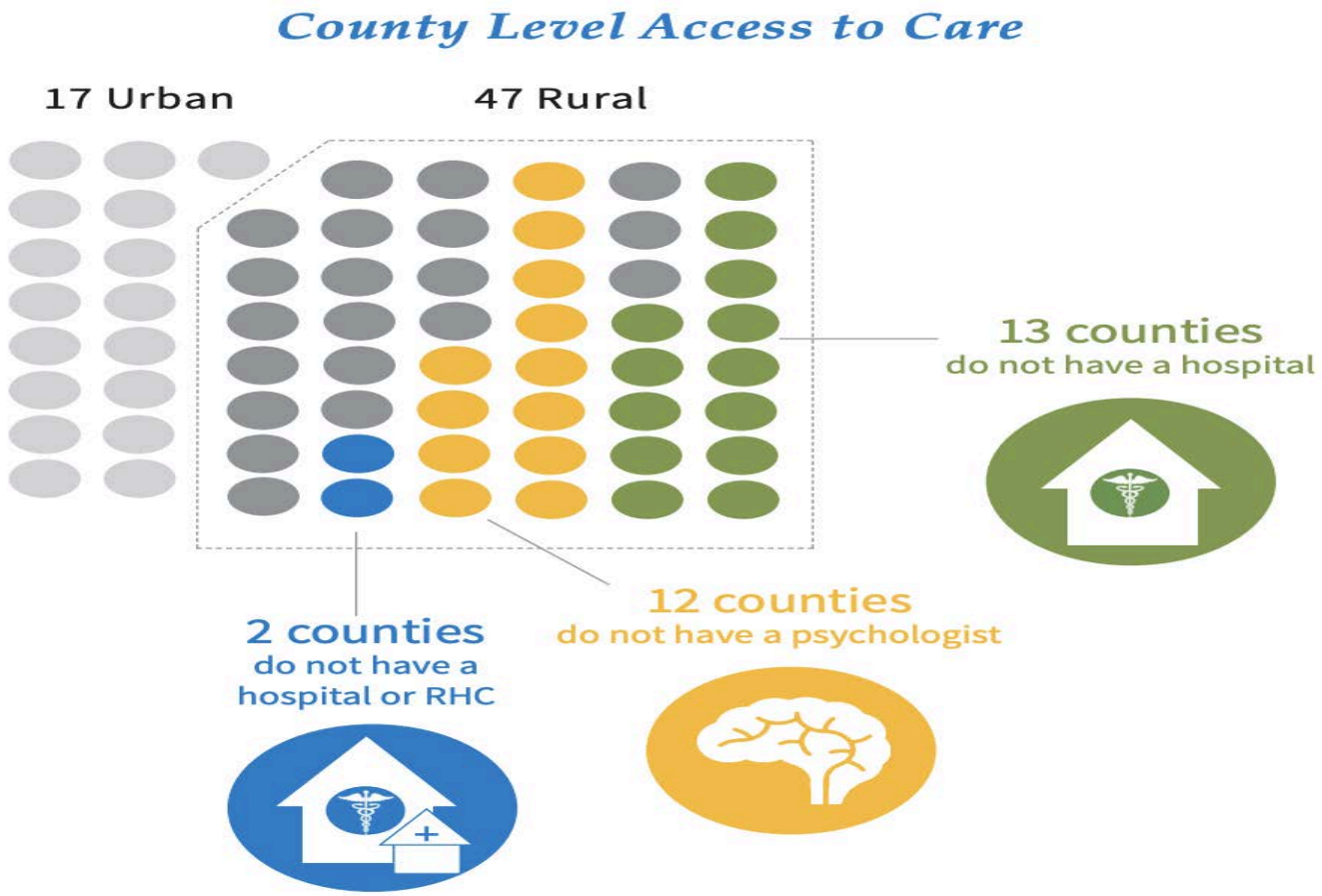


Figure 6: This graphic depicts the access to healthcare services at a county level. The graphic is divided into urban and rural counties and shows how many Colorado counties lack access to certain services, which include hospitals and psychologists.
From Colorado Rural Health Center. (2016). *County Level Access to Care*. [Diagram].
https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/committees/2016/11_-_colorado_rural_health_center_-_2016_snapshot.pdf

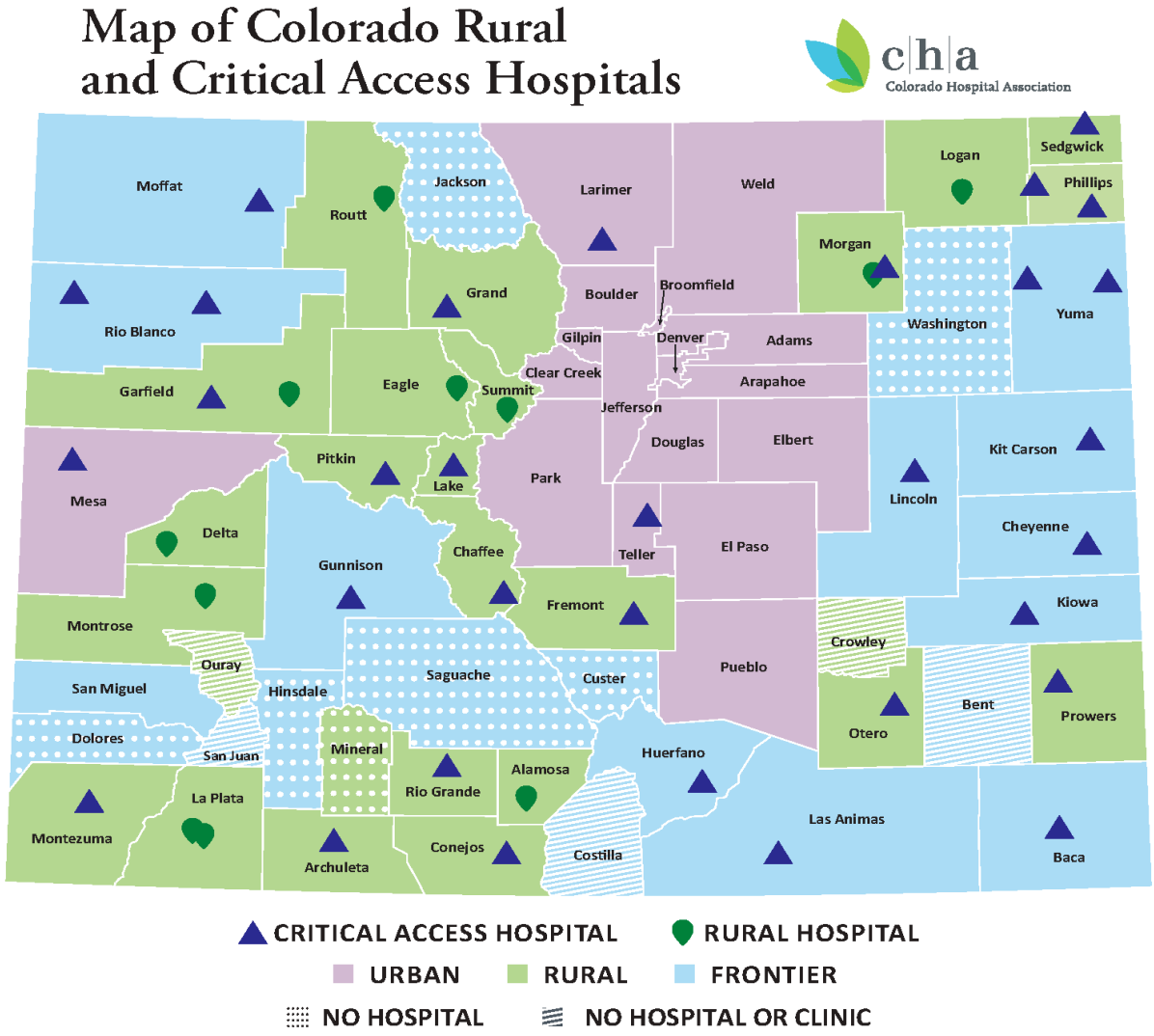


Figure 7: The map depicts the distribution of rural and critical access hospitals in Colorado. From Colorado Hospital Association. (2023). *Map of Colorado Rural and Critical Access Hospitals.* https://cha.com/issues/rural-health/

Solution: Colorado should establish a two-year pilot program for a School-Based Digital Health Extension to expand healthcare access for rural youth through telehealth services, partnerships, and emergency communication systems while ensuring insurance compatibility and minimizing fiscal costs.

To increase healthcare access for rural youth, Colorado should establish a School-Based Digital Health Extension (Youth Telehealth Service). The program would leverage partnerships between the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), regional hospitals, universities, and nonprofit healthcare organizations to provide remote access to qualified healthcare professionals. By using existing Medicaid waivers, private telehealth providers, and philanthropic funding, the program can limit state costs while ensuring the services are insurance-compatible and accessible to both insured and uninsured students. The digital health extension would prioritize preventive care, mental health services, routine check-ins, and chronic disease management:services that are often lower-cost, but critical for student health outcomes.

A two-year pilot program in one Colorado rural school district will first measure the impact of the Telehealth System before expanding it across the entire state.

Telehealth became a more prominent mode of providing healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, when patients and providers sought to decrease in-person contact for routine visits. Telehealth services allow rural healthcare providers to offer quality healthcare services locally and at lower costs through e-visits and virtual visits, enabling rural patients to access necessary healthcare without traveling long distances.[94] One rural school district will implement the School-Based Digital Health Extension as a two-year pilot program to assess feasibility, fiscal sustainability, and student outcomes before expanding it statewide.

Integrating this system into existing school networks would allow students to receive individualized healthcare information, schedule virtual consultations with school nurses or local providers, and access asynchronous health education modules and preventive care resources tailored to their rural setting. On-site school health aides would be trained to coordinate telehealth appointments and provide in-person support as needed. To ensure full accessibility, the program would incorporate text-based communication, emergency alerts with American Sign

[94] Rural Health Information Hub. (n.d.). *Telehealth and Health Information Technology in Rural Healthcare.* https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/telehealth-health-it

Language and visual interpretations, and proactive parental communication, ensuring that all students – including those with disabilities or facing socioeconomic barriers –receive timely, effective healthcare services.

Other states, such as Texas and North Carolina, have implemented similar telehealth and school-based programs which have shown reduced emergency room visits and increased access to preventive care.

- Texas's Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHATT) program connects students to remote mental health providers through school partnerships.[95]
- North Carolina's School-Based Telehealth Alliance offers virtual access to healthcare professionals in medically underserved rural communities.[96]

By adopting a comparable model, Colorado can improve rural healthcare access for youth in a fiscally responsible and sustainable way.

Solution: Each Colorado school-based health center should nominate at least one youth officer who is elected for a one-year term to represent that SBHC at the statewide level and engage in program management, youth input, and reducing urban/rural barriers.

The vast majority of school-based health centers are located in urban communities, particularly clustered in Denver, Arapahoe, and Jefferson counties. However, the rural counties of Delta, Montrose, and Garfield only have 1-2 operating school-based health centers, jeopardizing youth access to necessary medical services and efficient care. Colorado's rural residents face unique challenges when it comes to medical care, and geographic isolation can complicate hospital wait times, nurse/doctor availability, and modernized transportation/technology infrastructure. Thus, each school-based health center should include at least one youth officer onto its governing body to provide support mechanisms to fellow students, collaborate with their respective SBHC to

[95] Baylor College of Medicine. (n.d.). *Texas Child Health access through telemedicine*. https://www.bcm.edu/community/healthcare-outreach/mental-health/texas-child-mental-health-care-consortium/texas-child-health-access-through-telemedicine

[96] Ferguson, J. (2023, November 16). *Home - Carolina Collaborative*. Carolina School-Based Telehealth Learning Collaborative. https://schooltelehealthcollaborative.org/

optimize health planning services, and encourage the student body to take advantage of the resources that SBHCs provide. The application process is as follows:

- April/May of current academic year: Students complete an online application process through their SBHC. The application can take any format and is tailored to each SBHC, but suggested formats **include**:
    - Slideshow/PowerPoint presentation
    - Typed essays & short responses
    - In-person speech
    - Personal/independent research expo

- Each SBHC selects 1-3 junior and/or senior students to serve as youth officers. During the summer, selected students complete a series of brief training sessions administered by the CDPHE that cover effective leadership, SBHC policy, basic healthcare information, etc.

- During the next academic year, elected youth officers carry out their assigned duties and advertise themselves to each student via their SBHC's website, physical flyers, etc. The officers will actively participate within their respective SBHC's governing body by providing a youth perspective and conducting research into local healthcare challenges.

- After their one-year term is completed, students interested in serving another term must reapply.

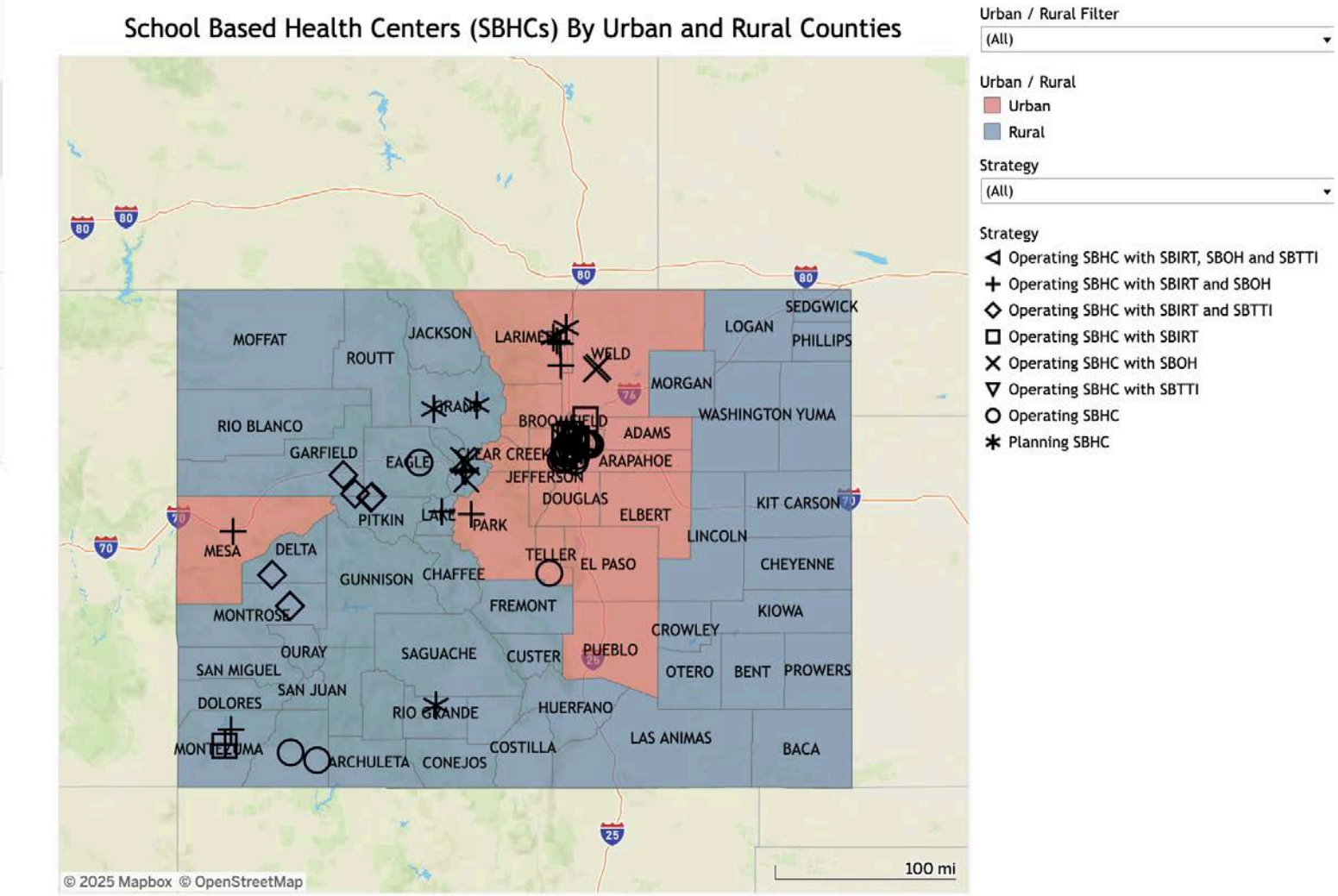


Figure 8: SBHCs by urban and rural counties in Colorado. This chart does not account for locally/privately funded school-based health clinics. From Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. (n.d.). *Map of school-based health center sites funded by CDPHE.* https://cdphe.colorado.gov/sbhc/locations

Systems thinking

Unintended consequences that we've considered include:

- Due to a lack of professional experience, youth voices may be undermined or underrepresented within their respective SBHC governing bodies, which may inhibit youth officers from effectively sharing their research findings and insights.
- SBHCs are often a partnership between schools and local healthcare organizations, potentially complicating youth involvement due to organizational limitations (i.e., the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act).
- Incorporating American Sign Language, language accommodations, and other assistive technologies into the digital health extension may require additional funds and external collaboration, making its implementation more complex and prolonged.

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach
** Responded but declined to discuss our proposal*

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

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- State
    - Colorado Commission for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind *
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- State Senator Faith Winter, Senate District 25 #

Postsecondary Planning Resources Committee

Problem 1: Young adults with intellectual disabilities leaving high school face a resource gap for transitioning into postsecondary institutions.

Background

- **Intellectual disability** – A child with an Intellectual Disability shall have reduced general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the development period, which prevents the child from receiving reasonable educational benefit from general education.[97]

- **Vocational school** – Any school or institution conducting a course of instruction, training, or retraining to prepare individuals to follow an occupation or trade or to pursue a manual, mechanical, technical, industrial, business, commercial, office, personal service, or other nonprofessional occupation. [98]

- **Inclusive education** – Inclusive higher education (IHE) is an option for students with intellectual disability to attend college. IHE provides students with intellectual disability (ID) support in their academics, independence, vocational development, and social lives. Students who apply to IHE do not need to meet the regular admissions criteria for college; instead they are evaluated on their unique abilities and desire to go to college. [99]

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[97] *Intellectual disability*. CDE. (n.d.). https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/sd-intellectual

[98] *2018 Colorado Revised Statutes :: Title 24 - government - state :: Principal departments :: Article 34 - Department of Regulatory Agencies :: Part 4 - employment practices :: § 24-34-401. definitions*. Justia Law. (n.d.). https://law.justia.com/codes/colorado/2018/title-24/principal-departments/article-34/part-4/section-24-34-401/

[99] *Overview of inclusive higher education in Colorado*. IN! (n.d.). https://inclusivehighered.org/college-options/

According to the Colorado State Demography Office, there are 233,348 people with an intellectual disability about 5% of the total population of Colorado in 2021[100]. Within the status quo, it is extremely difficult for young adults with cognitive disabilities to find a job. The Special Olympics conducted one of the most comprehensive U.S. surveys ever done on adults with disabilities in the workforce and found that unemployment among people with intellectual disabilities is more than twice as high as for the general population. The unemployment rate for a working-age adult with an intellectual disability is 21% compared to the 8% unemployment rate for a working-age adult without a disability.[101] Adding on to this, a common phrase about the stigma behind young adults with intellectual disabilities is encapsulating their jobs into the Four F's: food, filth, filing, and factories[102]. This phrase shows the box that people with intellectual disabilities who are seeking jobs are put in. Stigmas and current systems add to this issue confining these young adults into career paths that many want to branch out of.

A large reason behind this is because there are fewer accessible opportunities for young adults with intellectual disabilities after they leave secondary school. One untapped resource is the ability to enroll in vocational schools. While there are smaller programs in specific areas, currently there is nothing state-wide that is allowing for young adults with cognitive disabilities to be able to enroll in vocational schools.

Solution 1: Expand the IN! Pilot Program for students with intellectual disabilities to include vocational schools.

Offering programming and necessary support for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to allow for students to complete a degree, certification, or diploma from a vocational school in the student's area of interest allows for preparation in career fields, the ability to become more competitive when applying for jobs, and the opportunity to pursue something that aligns with the student's interests.

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[100] Colorado State Demography Office Home Page. (n.d.). https://demography.dola.colorado.gov/assets/crosstabs/disability_2021_20230831.html

[101] *National Snapshot of adults with intellectual disabilities in the Labor Force*. SpecialOlympics.org. (2018, August 2).https://www.specialolympics.org/our-work/research/national-snapshot-of-adults-with-intellectual-disabilities-in-the-labor-force

[102] Meriah, & says:, S. P. D. (2022, October 4). *Navigating beyond the four F's of disability employment*. Unpacking Disability with Meriah Nichols. https://www.meriahnichols.com/the-four-fs-of-disability-employment/

The program

In 2016, Senate Bill 16-196 Inclusive Higher Education Pilot Program mandated that postsecondary four-year and two-year institutions become more equitable and expand their programs to include adults with intellectual disabilities. This program is known as IN! Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education and now has eight programs spanning Colorado.

Programming and necessary supports for students with intellectual disabilities might include reading at a different grade level than the course textbook, decreased number of tasks on an assignment or exam, changing exam format from a written paper to a multiple choice test, lessening the length of a writing assignment, rewording questions on an exam to simpler language, or others based on a student's individual need.[103]

IN has a four pillar system of education: academics, social engagement, employment, and individual life skills. The academic pillar is the most intensive, containing a modified course and earning a modified certificate. The next pillar is social engagement which includes peer mentors who can assist with tutoring, workshops and social events. The employment pillar is job shadowing and preparing students for the job market. The final pillar is the independent life skills pillar. This is where students learn essential skills such as writing a check or learning how to set an alarm. These four pillars combined are the basis of education that is provided at the four year institutions.

If the student takes a modified course, after completing their education, there is a modified certificate for the student. This is an especially beneficial factor to trade schools because within the status quo, trade jobs require fewer educational requirements. This means that students with intellectual disabilities who choose to take a modified course will still be competitive for a job market that is in need of more employees.

The Economic Need

There are currently 70 technical and vocational schools within Colorado meaning that there are many opportunities for new programs to be started and used. Many of these schools are excited by the idea of IN and implementing the program into their curriculum.

According to Colorado Succeeds, a reliable news source, Colorado is experiencing a shortage of more than 30,000 construction workers, with workforce needs in the industry projected to grow as much as 32% by 2030.[104] While there are many solutions to this problem, having a larger

[103] *Overview of inclusive higher education in Colorado*. IN! (n.d.-a). https://inclusivehighered.org/college-options/

[104] Project scale: Stackable construction pathways for all. Colorado Succeeds. (2025, June 13). https://coloradosucceeds.org/resource/project-scale-stackable-construction-pathways-for-all/#:~:text=A%20Quick%20Summary%E2%80%A6,Colorado's%20construction%20&%20skilled%20trade%20sector

number of people enrolled in vocational schools with the ability to contribute will help to solve this.

Funding

In Senate Bill 16-196 Inclusive Higher Education Pilot Program it is already stated that post secondary institutions that do not have the funds for this program will not be required to implement it. In similar fashion, vocational schools that do not have sufficient funding should not be required to fund and implement inclusive education programs.

IN currently has a four year sustainability system where post-secondary education institutions stop relying on state funding and are able to become self-sustaining. There are four programs that are self-sustaining and those are Arapahoe Community College, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, University of Colorado Colorado Springs, and Regis University.

Solving Current Issues

One of the main problems that has arisen from the current program of IN! is that it is used largely by more affluent families. The main reason for this is people will still have to pay for the tuition of four years post secondary education on top of living expenses. This solution aims to bridge that gap because of the less expensive cost of vocational schools.

By receiving a diploma from a vocational school, people with intellectual disabilities can access more opportunities in the job market. This will create a larger consequence where these young adults are able to break out of the Four F's and start to work in higher paying jobs. A study done by Accredited Schools found that "trade school students typically pay less for their education than students at four-year universities. For example, public universities in Colorado charge over $9,500 per year in tuition and fees, on average, while private universities cost over $22,000 a year. In contrast, Colorado community colleges charge an average of $3,600 per year."[105] This would reach a larger number of people with intellectual disabilities and open pathways for them that they were not currently able to access.

IN's Success

As of May 2024, 63 students with intellectual disabilities have graduated from inclusive higher education programs in post secondary institutions. Currently, there are approximately 100 students enrolled in inclusive higher education programs in post secondary institutions.
IN has proven to work resulting in 84.2% of graduates are employed and graduates report working as administrative assistants, dietary technicians, educational aids, servers, ushers, and more. From the graduates 84% were satisfied with the job that they currently hold.100% of graduates from the IN! program earned a credit-bearing certificate or higher, 83% of graduates

[105] Writers, A. S. (2024, September 20). *Best trade schools in Colorado*. AccreditedSchoolsOnline.org. https://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/vocational-trade-school/colorado/

from IN! said that IHE prepared them to engage in their community, 67% of graduates said that IHE prepared them for their current living situation, and 78% of graduates are competitively employed across 7 job industries. [106]

System thinking

Unintended consequences we've considered include:

- Opening programs in vocational schools may require funding and budgeting from other programs.
- Some families may not be able to access programming such as IN! due to rising tuition costs.

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

State

- Colorado Department of Education
    - Bill Brown, Affective Needs / Serious Emotional Disability Specialist #
    - Gina Herrera, Supervisor / SSN and Deaf-Blindness Specialist
    - Kacy Little Owl, Disability Specialist
- Colorado Department of Labor and Employment
    - Cheryl A. Carver, Youth Services and Transition Unit Manager

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Ace Hardware Larimer County #
- Community College of Aurora #
- Community College of Denver #
- Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition #
- Colorado Neurodiversity Chamber of Commerce
    - Leslie Espinoza, Board Member
- Developmental Pathways: Kim Tenure, Associate Director of I/DD Policy

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[106] *Expansion grant program*. IN! (n.d.-b). https://inclusivehighered.org/college-options/expansion.html

- Disability Law Colorado #
- Front Range Community College Disability Services
    - Chico Garcia, Dean of Student Development #
    - Megan Wolff, Senior Director of Disability Support Services #
- IN! Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education: Shayna Laing, Community Engagement Manager
- Metropolitan State University of Denver, Inclusive Higher Education Solutions: Cathi Allen, Director
- Teaching the Autism Community Trades (TACT) #
- Pikes Peak State College
    - Moises Hinojosa, Director of Accessibility Services
    - Sarah Malin, Disability Specialist #
- Red Rocks Community College: Jean Kelly, Director, Accessibility Services
- University of Northern Colorado: Silvia Correa-Torres, professor in the School of Special Education #

Legislators

- State Senator Judy Amabile, Senate District 18 #
- State Representative Shannon Bird, House District 29 #
- State Representative Eliza Hamrick, House District 61#
- State Senator Barbara Kirkmeyer, Senate District 23 #
- State Representative Emily Sirota, House District 9 #

Problem 2: Young adults leave high school without necessary skills for living independently, such as knowing how to rent an apartment, get insurance, or prepare legal documents.

The transition from high school to independent living is a critical phase in a young adult's life. Unfortunately, many graduates find themselves lacking essential skills necessary for navigating adulthood. They lack knowledge regarding practical life skills, including renting an apartment, financial literacy, job application skills, and legal knowledge. Addressing these deficiencies in the high school curriculum is essential for better preparing young adults for the responsibilities of independent living.

Renting an Apartment

Renting an apartment is a crucial skill that young adults need to master as they transition into independent living. A lease agreement serves as the foundation of the rental process, outlining the rights and responsibilities of both tenants and landlords. It is essential for young adults to learn how to read and interpret these agreements to navigate their new living situations effectively. Key components of a lease include the rental amount, duration of the lease, security deposits, and regulations regarding maintenance and repairs. For example, understanding clauses related to eviction, subletting, and renewal options is vital for preventing misunderstandings and disputes that can arise between tenants and landlords.

The U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that nearly 40% of individuals aged 18-34 are renters, highlighting the significant portion of young adults affected by rental agreements.[107] The challenges faced by many first-time renters often stem from a lack of familiarity with lease agreements. A survey conducted by the National Apartment Association revealed that over 60% of first-time renters reported confusion regarding the terms of their leases, which can lead to complications in managing their living arrangements. According to a study by Apartments.com, 75% of renters regretted not fully understanding their lease agreement before signing it[108]. Without a clear understanding of lease components, young adults may inadvertently agree to unfavorable terms or overlook important details that could impact their rights as tenants. This lack of awareness emphasizes the need for education on rental agreements to empower young adults to make informed decisions when entering the rental market.

[107] U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Housing and household economic statistics*. U.S. Department of Commerce.

[108] Apartments.com. (2023). *Renter regret study*. Apartments.com.

Incorporating education about lease agreements into high school curricula could enhance students' readiness for renting an apartment. By providing lessons on how to read and interpret leases, schools can help students build a solid foundation of knowledge that will serve them well in the future. Educators could use real-world examples and case studies to illustrate common pitfalls and best practices in leasing. Furthermore, inviting guest speakers, such as real estate professionals or tenant rights advocates, could provide students with insights into the rental process. A report by the National Association of Realtors found that renters who received formal education on lease agreements reported 30% fewer disputes with landlords.[109] By equipping young adults with these skills, we can support informed renters who are better prepared to navigate the complexities of the housing market.

Job Application Skills

Job application skills are essential for young adults as they enter the workforce. Many high schools do not provide adequate training on how to create effective resumes, prepare for interviews, or understand the job search process. This lack of preparation can hinder young adults' ability to secure employment, which is critical for achieving independence.

Research indicates that effective job application skills significantly improve a candidate's chances of landing a job. According to a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), employers rate a candidate's communication skills and problem-solving abilities as the most important attributes during the hiring process.[110] By incorporating job application training into high school curricula, students can develop the skills needed to present themselves effectively to potential employers and navigate the job market with confidence. Moreover, a study by LinkedIn found that 85% of jobs are filled via networking, highlighting the importance of teaching young adults how to build and maintain professional relationships.[111]

The Economic Policy Institute reports that the unemployment rate for young adults (ages 16-24) is consistently higher than the national average, underscoring the need for enhanced job readiness programs[112]. Equipping students with these skills can help bridge this gap and improve employment prospects. Additionally, research from Harvard University indicates that individuals who participate in career skills workshops experience a 20% increase in their likelihood of securing employment within six months of graduation.[113]

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[109] National Association of Realtors. (2021). *Impact of rental education programs*. National Association of Realtors.

[110] National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). (2023). *Employer survey on hiring attributes*. NACE.

[111] LinkedIn. (2022). *The ultimate guide to networking*. LinkedIn.

[112] Economic Policy Institute. (2023). *The state of working America*.

[113] Harvard University. (2021). *Career skills workshop impact study*.

Solution 2: Enhance life skills education in high schools.

By enhancing and updating life skills education programs, schools can ensure that students are prepared for financial independence, employment, and other crucial life challenges. This solution involves re-evaluating the curriculum, collaborating with community resources, and integrating relevant topics into existing courses.

Update the curriculum for life skills: A foundational step in enhancing life skills education is to update the curriculum to cover essential topics such as financial literacy, housing information, and job application processes. Research conducted by the Council for Economic Education indicates that students who receive financial literacy education tend to have better economic outcomes, including improved saving habits and reduced debt. By including topics like budgeting, credit management, and understanding loans, schools can provide students with the knowledge they need to make informed financial decisions. Furthermore, practical lessons on renting and housing can help demystify the complexities of finding and maintaining a home, which is critical for independence.

Integrate existing programs: To further enrich life skills education, schools should look at integrating life skills into the existing curriculum. Although life skills courses have evolved over the years, they can be revitalized to address contemporary issues such as financial planning, understanding contracts, and legal responsibilities associated with adulthood. By merging these subjects, schools can provide a holistic approach to life skills education that is relevant to today's youth. Research suggests that integrating these topics not only enhances student engagement but also leads to a deeper understanding of the practical applications of their education. This comprehensive approach ensures that students are not only learning theoretical concepts but are also prepared to apply them in real-world situations.

System thinking

Unintended consequences we've considered include:

- Expanding life skills education may require additional funding. Without a new funding source, that could lead to budget reallocations from other programs.
- Increased enrollment in these classes might lead to overcrowded classrooms, impacting the quality of education.
- There may be resistance from traditional educators, parents, or community members who feel that these topics detract from core academic subjects.

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

- Colorado Department of Education: Amara Hobbs - Legislative Liaison #
- Colorado Department of Higher Education: Megan McDermott - Chief Communications and Outreach Officer/PIO
- Education reEnvisioned BOCES School District #
- Colorado Workforce Development Council: Keri Funkhouser, Senior Communications Strategist

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Colorado Career & Technical Education: Lauren Jones-Austin - CTE Program Director
- Colorado Council on High School/College Relations #
- Colorado Succeeds: Rachel Van Brocklin and Amadou Dieng - Policy & Advocacy Manager
- Colorado School Counselors Association: Matthew McClain - Executive Director
- Colorado Rural Schools Alliance #
- Colorado Association of School Executives #
- Colorado PTA #
- State Advisory Council for Parent Involvement in Education - SACPIE #

Other subject matter experts

- Great Education Colorado: Lisa Weil, Executive Director

Legislators

- Senator Janice Rice, District 7 #
- Senator Janice Marchman, District 15 #
- Senator Chris Kolker, District 16 #
- Representative Mary Bradfield, District 21 #
- Representative Meghan Lukens, District 26 #
- Representative Anthony Hartsook, District 44 #
- Representative Eliza Hamrick, District 61 #
- Representative Matthew Martinez, District 62 #
- Representative Dusty Johnson, District 63
- Colton Arciniaga, aide to Senator Jennifer Bacon, District 7

Problem 3: Colorado does not have a statewide platform for (Individual Career and Academic Plan) ICAP completion. College and career advising tools are scattered across many webpages, which prevents high school students from effectively using these tools.

Definitions

- **ICAP** – An Individual Career and Academic Plan is a Colorado process that encourages high school students to explore career interests and create plans for their future. Participation is required to graduate from high school.

- **HSBP** – The High School and Beyond Plan is a required process for Washington high school students and functions similarly to Colorado's ICAP. It helps students explore their interests and connect their current classes with future areas of study or career training options.

- **PWR Big 3** – The Postsecondary Workforce Readiness Big Three is a framework to streamline postsecondary preparation for students. Its components are Postsecondary Credit, Industry-Recognized Credentials, and Work Based Learning, which align with the ICAP process.

One major goal for high school students is to have a clear plan for stepping into their adult lives after graduation. This process is supported by school-provided resources; for every student, this includes completing the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) process. Pathway advising, such as ICAP, can help students discover which industries, careers, or postsecondary education options interest them.

However, advising methods vary by district, and even by school. There are many disparities in access to resources and tools across the state, which prevents informed planning and limits the opportunities available to students and recent graduates.

Disparities in school-provided resources affect student outcomes.

Variance in school-provided ICAP resources (college counseling, career advising, PWR programs, etc.) can disadvantage students. Schools also have different methods of following up

with students about their ICAP, and provide varying degrees of support and guidance on student goals. Administrative workloads can limit opportunities for educators to provide individualized advising. Additionally, opportunities are often "shaped by district resources and geographic location."[114] Students at more resourced schools have greater access to experiences and ICAP tools, giving them more opportunities to create a meaningful plan. ICAPs can't reach their full value for students without equal access to postsecondary exploration tools.

Ultimately, this unequal distribution of resources has a negative impact on student outcomes. In Colorado, "one-quarter of high schools don't send any kids to top tier schools…some high schools will send more than 50 percent of their students to top tier schools.[115]" The disparity in opportunities can change the trajectory of a student's life after graduation; without equitable resources, students in traditionally underrepresented communities will continue to face negative effects.

Online resources currently create an ineffective system for students.

In addition to resources provided by their school, students use various online resources to complement their ICAP. Websites such as My Colorado Journey and Colorado Career Advising (among others), offer personality tests, skill inventories, and career surveys. These resources help students discover paths they're interested in pursuing. However, there is a high volume of college/career advising websites, meaning that quality and applicability of resources varies. This creates inconsistencies in students' ICAP completion across the state; in addition, students who transfer to another Colorado school may have to adjust to different websites and ICAP models. The state of Washington had a similar problem with HSBP resources, noting "school districts have been using over a dozen different HSBP platforms, and the platforms vary broadly in the kinds of tools and resources that they offer students, families, and schools. Further, because of differences in the functionality of different platforms, a student's HSBP may not follow them if they move."[116]

The burden of finding and organizing online resources often falls to counseling departments and other educators. Most of these websites have little or no marketing, leading to reduced awareness

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[114] Office of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness. (2024, December). *PWR Financial Study* *https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/slalom_pwrfinancialstudy-december2024*

[115] Allen, E. (2019, February 27). *Study shows big disparities among Colorado high schools sending students to top colleges*. FOX31 Denver. https://kdvr.com/news/local/study-shows-big-disparities-among-colorado-high-schools-sending-students-to-top-colleges/

[116] Payne, K. (2025, February 28). *State superintendent Chris Reykdal launches universal online statewide high school and beyond plan platform*. Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/news-center/news-releases/state-superintendent-chris-reykdal-launches-universal-online-statewide-high-school-and-beyond-plan

about their availability. It's challenging to compile a comprehensive list of these items, meaning that educators have to spend additional hours finding this information. This burden increases further when students transfer between schools, because ICAP advisors have to evaluate what a student has completed, and what they have missed, due to inconsistencies in online tools. The time spent finding and evaluating online resources, if available at all, limits an advisor's ability to work directly with students. The structure of Colorado's online ICAP resources is ineffective, leading to increased workload for educators.

The companies who own these tools also struggle due to this "scattered" effect. With users being split many ways, some college and career advising platforms are having to reduce the resources they offer. For example, My Colorado Journey is removing their Resume Builder and other professional tools. This impacts students who were using this platform, especially those who have limited school-provided resources. Other companies are struggling to financially maintain their resources without consistent student/district use. Colorado students are already losing resources due to this problem – a pattern that will likely continue if online advising tools are not restructured. With these longevity struggles, having the current quantity of online resources is not a sustainable model for ICAP advising. The impact of discontinuing resources disproportionately harms students in small, rural, or low-income communities. Well-resourced school districts (typically) have a greater number of counselors or dedicated college/career centers, giving students more options for postsecondary advice.

Student outcomes are negatively affected by these problems with ICAP resources.

With disparities in school-provided resources, and inconsistencies in the quality of online options, students face barriers to completing an effective ICAP. With the array of postsecondary options available – such as vocational training, 2-year and 4-year higher education, apprenticeships, and more – goal setting is a key function of a student's ICAP. However, ineffective planning tools impact goal-setting, and prevent students from making deliberate investments with their time and financial resources. One example comes from a survey of high school and college students, which found "when asked if a person should have a concrete career goal after starting college but before graduating, 46 percent of college sophomores agreed while only 16 percent of high school juniors felt the same way."[117] If students enroll in postsecondary education without clear goals, it can create a financial challenge.

[117] Junior Achievement of Southern Colorado. (2019, September 4). *Survey finds teens and young adults continue putting off career decisions as they progress from high school to college*. https://soco.ja.org/news/press-releases/survey-finds-teens-and-young-adults-continue-putting-off-career-decisions-as-they-progress-from-high-school-to-college

Improving the ability to explore postsecondary options in high school helps students make an informed decision about which path is right for them. Additionally, "learning to set goals is a lifelong skill that will serve students…throughout their personal and professional lives."[118]

Due to inconsistencies and resource disparities, the Colorado ICAP process is not reaching its full potential to teach students this important skill. More accessible, consistent resources would strengthen the Colorado ICAP program, ensuring that students know how to set informed goals, and increase their likelihood of success on the path they choose.

Solution 3: Establish a statewide ICAP platform that offers free advising tools and resources.

To improve accessibility, clarity, and efficacy of ICAP resources, Colorado should have a centralized online location for college and career advising tools. This would help ensure the quality and consistency of student's ICAP advising.

Centralized platforms are a common solution to statewide advising disparities. Colorado HB25-1038 establishes a similar platform for postsecondary credit transfers, including dual enrollment credit. In Washington, "the 2023 Legislature directed OSPI [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction] to facilitate a transition to a universal online HSBP platform,"[119] which launches in 156 schools this fall, and will be universal by the 2026-27 school year.

A centralized ICAP platform reduces resource disparities.
This solution would address key problems within the ICAP process. By providing consistent resources, this platform ensures that all students, regardless of location or circumstance, have access to the tools they need to create an effective ICAP. Resource distribution would also become more equitable because schools wouldn't incur a cost to use this platform, removing a barrier that districts currently face with some of the existing online tools.
Completed inventories, surveys, and plans would also follow students who transfer schools. This tracking would open opportunities for Colorado to better understand how students are using

[118] Army and Navy Academy. (n.d.) *Importance of Goal Setting for Students.* *https://armyandnavyacademy.org/blog/why-setting-goals-is-important-for-students/#:~:text=Goals%20help%20students%20reach%20higher%2C%20but%20they,goals%20and%20deal%20with%20adversity%20and%20setbacks.&text=Creates%20accountability%20%E2%80%93%20Having%20goals%20makes%20students,homework%2C%20preparing%20for%20exams%2C%20and%20college%20planning*.

[119] Payne, K. (2025, February 28). *State superintendent Chris Reykdal launches universal online statewide high school and beyond plan platform*. Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/news-center/news-releases/state-superintendent-chris-reykdal-launches-universal-online-statewide-high-school-and-beyond-plan

college and career planning tools. Insights from this data would help ensure that resources are reaching students in all parts of the state, and fulfills the need for "transparency, equity, and efficiency in tracking student outcomes, particularly in areas critical to PWR."[120]

In addition to current postsecondary exploration tools, a central platform could provide a broader array of resources to students; this removes the burden of creating resources from school districts while reducing disparities for students. Provided resources could include course planning templates, college/job application organizers, and more. Some high schools offer these tools, but this relies on district staff to create them and is not universal.

As rising costs of postsecondary education impact more youth, including a list of scholarships (local and national) would help students achieve their goals. Scholarships aren't just for college-bound students; they exist at trade schools, and some cover the costs of licensing or exams for students entering the workforce. Having scholarships compiled in one place makes it easier for students, especially those who come from historically disadvantaged communities, to find opportunities. This scholarship listing should include what the scholarship can be used for, eligibility requirements, what the application process consists of (i.e., letters of recommendation, essays, etc.) and a link to the application page. The time saved by having scholarships already compiled is valuable to students who have limited hours, such as students with significant family responsibilities or limited access to the internet.

In addition to tools for students to explore college/career options from home, this platform could provide information about outside opportunities. One example is college "fly-in" programs, which allow students to visit a university, attend a class, stay in dorms with a host student, and more. They're traditionally funded by the university, and geared towards rural, low-income, or underrepresented students. Many trade schools and two-year universities also offer "open days" for prospective students to explore programs and tour facilities. By including this information in ICAP resources, Colorado would provide more opportunities to underserved students. This also reduces the disparity in opportunities to visit postsecondary education options and experience different environments.

Providing centralized resources reduces burdens on both students and educators. This platform would also ensure students all have access to the tools they need to complete their ICAP, at no cost to schools.

A centralized platform improves the efficacy of online resources.
A centralized platform makes resources more effective than the current model. By putting all tools on one platform, it's easier to link and draw connections between each one. A student's

[120] Office of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness. (2024, December). *PWR Financial Study* https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/slalom_pwrfinancialstudy-december2024

results on an assessment can more clearly feed into their use of another resource. This makes online tools more valuable to students.

A centralized ICAP platform would benefit students' ability to access, use, and connect resources. Additionally, this online space could assist educators with maintaining ICAP processes at individual schools. An “Introduction to ICAP” section would acclimate new teachers and administrators, who may be coming from out-of-state, to the process. It could also provide details on the Colorado Department of Education’s ICAP recommendations or models. Guidance on instructing students to use the new, centralized resources would make it easier to implement these tools in classrooms. This section of the platform could also host an email list, allowing updates (new resources, recommendations, upcoming events/trainings, etc.) to go directly to educators. All of these tools would reduce the burden on school staff. ICAP advisors would not have to evaluate or compile many different resources. Lessening their administrative workload allows them to develop a greater understanding of this platform, and dedicate more time to other important responsibilities.

Maintaining a single platform will be more reliable than having many separate websites. This makes ICAP tools more reliable; students will be more confident in creating their ICAP knowing they won’t need to change models or platforms part-way. Maintaining this comprehensive platform also creates an opportunity for youth involvement in ICAP content. Students from around Colorado could assist in updating database listings, refining templates, fact-checking web pages, and other maintenance tasks. This could be facilitated via part-time (summer) jobs or internships for school credit. Including youth voices when creating and revising ICAP resources will make this platform more effective and appealing to students. Students could also contribute their perspective when designing marketing materials or the appearance of resources. This is especially important for rural youth, as current recommendations for supporting these communities include “increase access to equitable resources through policy changes” and “include rural young adults in the design of policies and programs.”[121] Making an ICAP platform that is youth-oriented, appealing, and reflective of current needs will encourage students to be more involved with postsecondary planning.

Task force studies provide a foundation to creating this platform.
HB22-1215 created the Secondary, Postsecondary and Work-based Learning Integration Task Force (also referred to as the 1215 Task Force). One of the primary recommendations at the conclusion of this task force was to “develop a ‘single source of information’ web-based

[121] Corrales Jimenez, G., & Kesner, M. (2024, August). *Barriers to postsecondary education for Young Adults in Rural Colorado*. Young Invincibles. https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Rural-Brief_Barriers-to-Post-Secondary-Education_Final_8.13.2024.pdf

platform"[122] for career pathway guidance. Connecting Colorado fills part of this space, but primarily targets adult Coloradans. There is still a need for a youth-centric platform tailored towards postsecondary advising and ICAP requirements. The 1215 Task Force report prompted additional studies. The Postsecondary Workforce Readiness office finds that a statewide ICAP system "should be prioritized within the unified Big Three PWR Fund to enhance outcome monitoring, reduce administrative workloads, and inform resource planning."[123] These reports demonstrate a clear benefit at the state level; an additional review by Bellwether collected feedback from a variety of stakeholders on statewide platforms. Their report explains that this platform would also benefit students because a "centralized approach could empower learners to take ownership of their career planning journey in an intuitive and accessible way and allow for their accomplishments, progress, and experiences to follow them throughout their individual journeys."[124]

These studies demonstrate the potential for, and interest in, centralized ICAP resources. With the detailed reports provided, the resources can be developed in an informed manner. The recommendations provided, in conjunction with youth feedback, provide a clear path to an effective and equitable ICAP platform.

In summary, creating a central online hub for ICAP resources will benefit student outcomes. This platform would reduce disparities in resource accessibility, offer a broader array of tools, reduce burden on educators, improve consistency for students, and engage youth in their ICAP process. It would also help inform educators about ICAP and improve awareness of these tools. The 1215 Task Force, in conjunction with Bellwether stakeholder reports, offers a strong foundation and path forward when creating this platform.

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[122] Office of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness. (2023, December). *Secondary, Postsecondary, and Work-based learning Integration Task Force Report*
https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdedepcom/1215taskforcereport

[123] Office of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness. (2024, December). *PWR Financial Study*
https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/slalom_pwrfinancialstudy-december2024

[124] Bellwether. (2025, January). *Stakeholder Insights on Developing a Statewide Career Pathways Platform | Colorado Career Advisor Training Grant Objective 2*.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oNI8glHHSdPN2rm-MpdwNkWc20pP7_0G/view

System thinking

Unintended consequences we've considered include:

- Internet access may be inconsistent for students in rural or low-income communities, and prevent these students from accessing online resources.

- Students would still require guidance on using new tools.

- Maintaining accurate information may be difficult as policies and offerings change from year to year.

Outreach

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

- Colorado Department of Education
    - Michelle Romero, Director, Student Pathways, Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness
    - Amara Hobbs, Legislative Liaison
- Colorado Department of Higher Education: Rachel Fischer, Legislative Liaison
- Washington Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction: Jenny Plaja, Chief Policy and Legislative Affairs Officer (reached out on June 29)
- Cherry Creek Schools: Tammy Dodson, Partner of Postsecondary Workforce Readiness #
- Poudre School District: Liz Davis, Senior Executive Director of Student Services

Organizations that work in this policy area

- American School Counselor Association #
- Colorado Career Advising: Sheri Smith, Founder & CEO
- Colorado Council on High School/College Relations
- Colorado School Counselor Association #
- Colorado Succeeds: Amadou Dieng, Policy & Advocacy Manager
- Young Invincibles: Melanie Kesner, Rocky Mountain Regional Director

Legislators

- Representative Meghan Lukens, District 26 #
- Representative Eliza Hamrick, District 61
- Representative Dusty Johnson, District 63
- Representative Ryan Armagost, District 64 #

Substance Abuse Policy Committee: Promoting Tobacco Transparency & Intervention Services to Students

Problem: Despite Colorado's continued efforts to reduce youth and young adult tobacco and nicotine use, access to cessation resources remains limited or underutilized.

Definitions

- **Youth** – School-aged children between the ages of approximately 5 to 18.

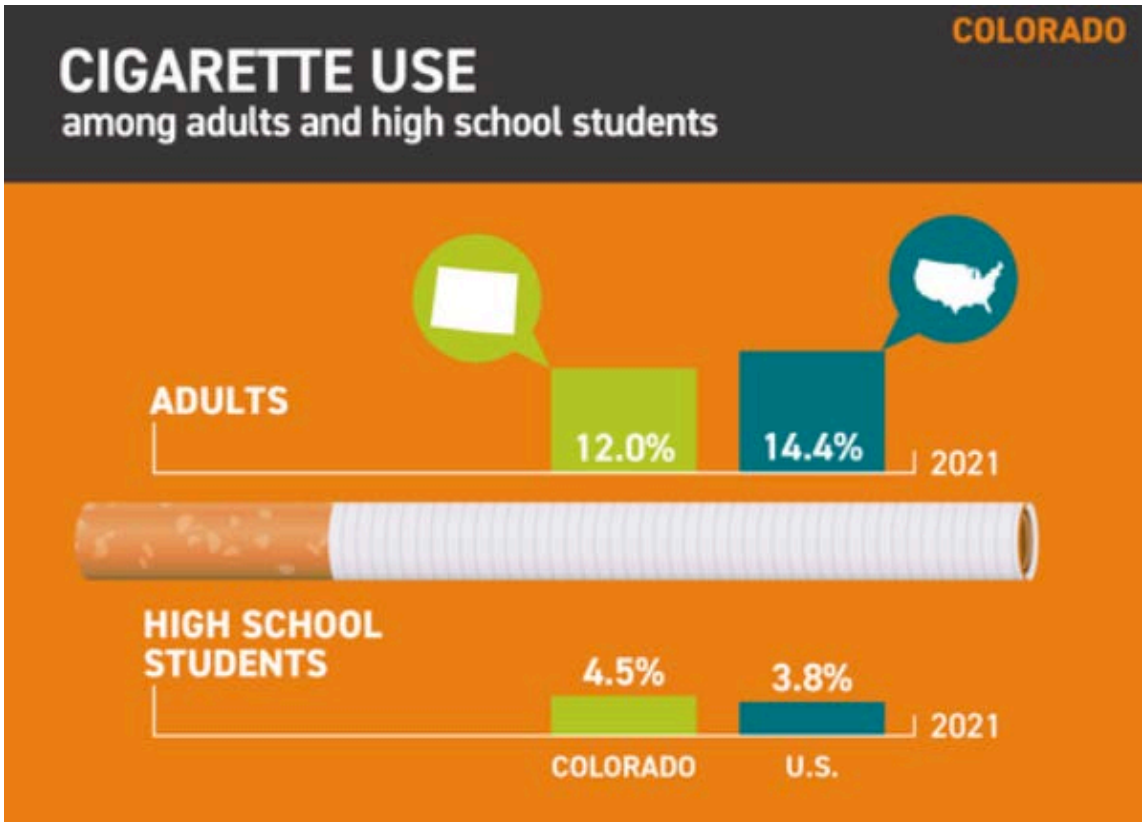
- **Tobacco** – Tobacco is a nicotine-containing substance derived from the dried leaves of *Nicotiana* plants. It can be consumed through a variety of ways, although the most common form is cigarette smoking. Tobacco use is significantly concerning for public health, as there is no safe level of exposure to tobacco and its consumption is a major risk factor for a variety of diseases, including cancer (National Cancer Institute).

- **QuitLine** – Colorado QuitLine is a nonprofit organization that provides free tobacco cessation services to Colorado residents that are 12 and older. These services are completely free of charge and include 24/7 access to expert coaches, special tools designed to aid in the quitting process, and nicotine replacement theory. (CDPHE)

Colorado Tobacco and nicotine addiction remains a systemic youth facing public health challenge despite the roll-out of multiple prevention initiatives. According to the 2023 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, 15% of high school students reported using e-cigarettes in the past 30 days.[125] In addition, nearly 1 in 4 individuals ages 18-24, are actively using tobacco or nicotine

[125] Latest Healthy Kids Colorado Survey shows promising trends in youth tobacco use | Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. (2022, August 2).

according to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE). Furthermore, national data stresses that nearly 90% of adult daily smokers first tried cigarettes by age 18. Many of these individuals report starting use in adolescence and continuing due to stress, social pressure, or addiction.(CDC 2024)



Data table showing cigarette use rates among Colorado youth in 2022 by age group and demographic.

Truth Initiative. (2024, April). Cigarette use Colorado (2022 state fact sheet). Truth Initiative. https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/smoking-region/tobacco-use-colorado-2023

In addition, use of oral nicotine pouches is on the rise, yet there is a lack of data regarding its use; specifically, the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey does not directly question oral nicotine pouch use.

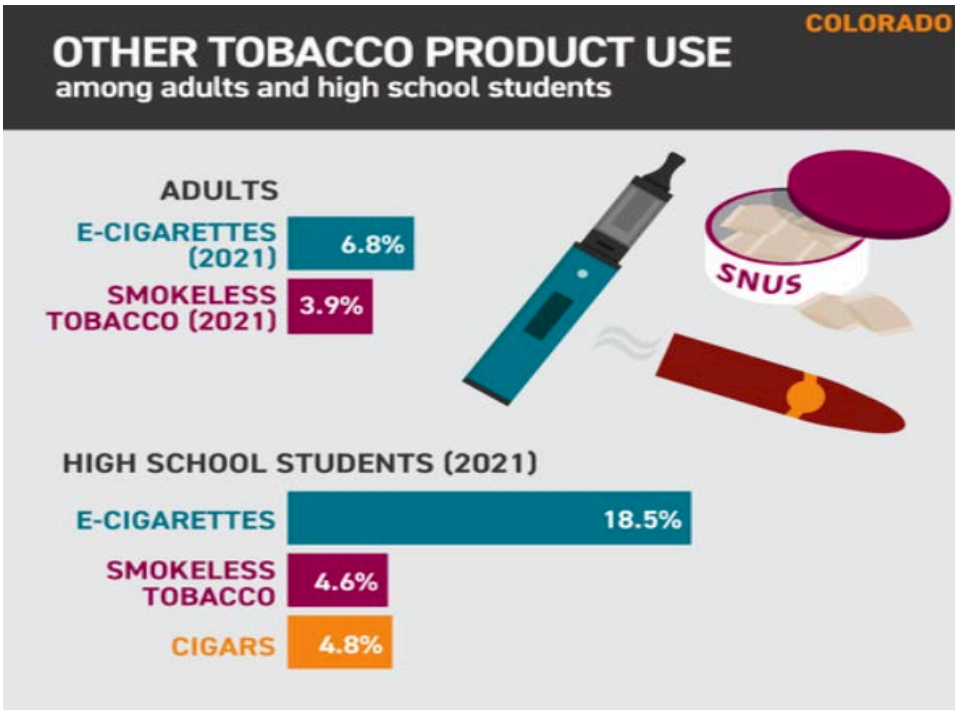
Tobacco and nicotine use fosters a particularly harmful impact on adolescent development. Nicotine alters circuits within the brain which lead to a wide array of adverse symptoms including decreased attention, learning, and mood regulation, increased risk of addiction, anxiety, and depression.[126] These effects are also simultaneous with numerous physical health risks

https://cdphe.colorado.gov/press-release/latest-healthy-kids-colorado-survey-shows-promising-trends-in-youth-tobacco-use#:~:text=For%20the%20first%20time%20since,smoking%20and%20vaping%20is%20wrong.

[126] Youth and tobacco use. (2024, October 17). Smoking and Tobacco Use. https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/php/data-statistics/youth-data-tobacco/index.html

including reduced lung function and cardiovascular stress.[127] Furthermore, oral nicotine pouch use leads to long-term health challenges including gum irritation, lesions, and potentially oral cancer.[128]

While there are resources available, many youth opt out of using them—especially students on campuses where many users are active. The Colorado QuitLine (1-800-QUIT-NOW or www.coquitline.org) offers free, confidential coaching and nicotine replacement therapy. These were proven strategies to double or triple an individual's chances of quitting successfully.



A graphic depicting rates of vaping and other tobacco product use in Colorado for 2021, showing percentages for adult e-cigarette use, smokeless tobacco, and youth usage of electronic vapor products, chewing tobacco, and cigars.

Truth Initiative. (2024, April 9). *Other tobacco product use: Colorado (2021 data graphic)* [Infographic]. Truth Initiative. https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/smoking-region/tobacco-use-colorado-2023

[127] Ibid
[128] Ibid

However, youth awareness and utilization remain consistently low. CDPHE data show that only 2.6% of QuitLine users in 2023 were between the ages of 15–24, despite their disproportionately high rates of use.[129]

With over 890,000 students enrolled in Colorado public K–12 schools and nearly 250,000 in higher education, failing to act leaves thousands of students unaware of the free, effective support available to them.

Solutions

1. Colorado should include QuitLine information on the back of K-12 public school student identification cards.

Under HB22-1052, Colorado requires 988, the statewide suicide prevention hotline, and Safe2Tell platform's phone number, website, and text line to be printed on public school student ID cards.[130] This initiative along with other parallel efforts resulted in Safe2Tell receiving a 25 percent increase over the previous year in the 2023-2024 cycle with a total of 25,218 reports. A significant portion of these engagements stemmed from distressed youth facing mental health challenges including suicidal thoughts. This low-cost intervention has been linked to a 16 percent increase in crisis reports and multiple life-saving outcomes, showing the effectiveness of making critical resources easily accessible.[131]

Through building on pre-existing infrastructure and legislation, Colorado should require the addition of the Colorado QuitLine to all public school student identification cards. This simple and cost-effective measure has the ability to expand access and normalize help-seeking behavior around tobacco/nicotine addiction. If the school does not issue student identification cards, it should also request and display outreach materials from CDPHE and send that information to guardians at the beginning of each school year. Marginalized youth, including an estimated 329,600 low-income students across the state, have been disproportionately affected by tobacco and nicotine use. With proactive efforts by the state legislature to ensure QuitLine information is

[129] Tetlow SM, Zhang L, Borowiecki M, Kim Y, Gentzke AS, Wang TW, et al. A Safety Net Tobacco Use Cessation Resource: Quitline Service Usage, 2019. Prev Chronic Dis 2023;20:230033. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd20.230033.

[130] Suicidal thoughts, bullying and drugs are plaguing Colorado students, according to latest Safe2Tell report. (2023, November 6). Cpr.org. https://www.cpr.org/2023/11/06/suicidal-thoughts-bullying-and-drugs-are-plaguing-colorado-students-according-to-latest-safe2tell-report/

[131] Ibid

always within reach of students, Colorado can take advantage of trusted and well-built systems to reduce youth addiction. Ultimately, this step will allow the state to further improve long-term health outcomes and ensure teens have the tools necessary to make healthy decisions.

2. Colorado should create legislative specifications about products that are labeled with "0% nicotine" or "synthetic nicotine"

Products that contain "0% nicotine" or "synthetic nicotine" still may contain the addictive substance. This misleading labeling can lead to confusion and potentially harmful outcomes for our youth. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, nicotine is a highly addictive substance, and even small amounts can impact brain development in adolescents.[132]In some cases according to David Lawson, chief executive at Inter Scientific and a fellow of the Organisation for Professionals in Regulatory Affairs, nicotine products labeled as nicotine-free actually contain stimulants. Their product testing showed that Dr Gorilla King Blackcurrant Grape Slush, which says it is nicotine free, actually had 19.7mg/ml of stimulant. This highlights the need for clearer legislative specifications to ensure that products marketed as nicotine-free are accurately labeled. Colorado should implement stronger legislative measures to regulate nicotine content, ensuring safety standards and protection of Colorado youth.

3. Colorado should add questions to the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey about oral nicotine pouch use and leverage data for an annual report for schools about prevention and cessation guidance.

The Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS) was introduced in 2013 and since has provided invaluable data to the state about kids' health and well-being including mental health, substance use, and alcohol consumption. The data collected guides programs or the creation of new programs to support youth. Although HKCS already includes questioning on several nicotine products such as chewing tobacco, vapor products, cigarettes, and more, the survey does not yet directly address the rapidly growing use of oral nicotine pouches including but not limited to Zyn, VELO, and On!. Without reliable and accurate statewide data of adolescent usage, policymakers and educators are left without clear data to guide prevention efforts.

The use of oral nicotine pouches has been hypothesized to have surged in recent years and has been linked to issues such as gum irritation, oral lesions, and potentially an increased risk of oral

[132] How nicotine affects the teen brain | National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2023, March 31). National Institute on Drug Abuse. https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/parents-educators/lesson-plans/how-nicotine-affects-teen-brain

cancer later in life.[133] Products like Zyn are more discreet and thus grant adolescents the ability to use them more frequently and in more places such as classrooms that previously wasn't possible with other nicotine products. The full extent of oral nicotine pouch use is still unclear and there isn't reliable and accurate data currently behind it. This highlights the need to collect accurate data in order to develop appropriate prevention programming, allocate cessation resources, guide future legislation and programs, and to evaluate the impact of existing policies. To address this need, Colorado should add direct and targeted questions to the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, including but not limited to:

- Adolescent use of oral nicotine pouches
- Where adolescents are using them
- How much adolescents consume on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis

Colorado should require CDPHE and the Behavioral Health Administration (BHA), in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to analyze the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey oral nicotine pouch data within six months of each survey administration and identify higher risk grades of students, usage environments (classrooms, home, athletics, etc.), and regions of greater use. Historically, the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey is administered in the fall of odd numbered years and published by CDPHE the following June, about 6 months later[134]. A 6 month deadline for oral-nicotine pouch data analysis would align with this reporting schedule. This should be published in an Oral Nicotine Pouch Prevention and Cessation Guidance report developed by the CDPHE and BHA and, in partnership with CDE, distributed electronically to every superintendent and charter school principal.

Possible sources of funding we've learned about:

- Colorado Health Institute
- Colorado Tobacco Tax

[133] Youth and tobacco use. (2024, October 17). Smoking and Tobacco Use. https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/php/data-statistics/youth-data-tobacco/index.html

[134] Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. (2024, June 13). CDPHE releases the latest Healthy Kids Colorado Survey data [Press release]. https://cdphe.colorado.gov/press-release/cdphe-releases-the-latest-healthy-kids-colorado-survey-data

System thinking

Unintended consequences we've considered include:

- There could be possible conflict with school district policies, as implementing legislation in schools often can involve a variety of stakeholders.

- Bills with fiscal notes are usually challenging. However, we have identified possible alternate sources of funding and met with legislators and organizations to discuss the capacity and reality of the sources.

Outreach

 # Did not respond

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

State

- Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment
    - Lindsay Ellis, Director of Legislative Affairs
    - Paxton Hyde, Legislative Policy Advisor
    - Meghna Patta, Community Outreach Specialist
    - Alicia Haywood, Deputy Director of Prevention Services
    - Emily Roozen, Legislative Liaison
    - Riley Crisler, Intern
    - Emily Fine, School & Youth Survey Manager
    - Mica Moller, School-Based Tobacco Treatment & Intervention Coordinator
    - Elyse Contreras, Program Manager, Marijuana Health Monitoring & Research Section
- Colorado Department of Education
    - Sarah Blumenthal, Director of School Health Services Office
    - Phyllis Reed, Director of Health Education Services Office
    - Amara Hobbs, Legislative Liaison, Legislative Relations and Policy
- Colorado Department of Behavioral Health
    - Carole Broderick, Substance Misuse Prevention Evaluation Supervisor
    - Matt Holtman, Director of Colorado's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Implementation Plan
    - Ryan Templeton, Division Director, Policy & External Affairs, Behavioral Health Administration

- Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention: José Esquibel, Associate Director
- Colorado Behavioral Health Council: Betsy Molgano, Program Director, Mental Health First Aid Colorado

Local

- Adams County Health Department
    - Ruth Kadima, Community Prevention and Policy Specialist
    - Libby Harrington, Youth Engagement Coordinator
- Jefferson County Public Schools
    - Molly Jordan, Assistant Director of Activities
    - Sharon Hawkins, Substance Prevention Coordinator
- Weld County Health Department: Giovanna Castro, Health Education Specialist, Tobacco Free Schools Coordinator
- El Paso County Public Health: Ivelisse Nieves-Ryan, Lead Policy and Prevention Specialist
- Pueblo Community Health Center
    - Avanye Renner Outreach & Enrollment Manager
    - Maria Mungaray Community Outreach Specialist
- Boulder County Public Health: Alberto De Los Rios Bilingual Community Health Specialist, Tobacco Education and Prevention Partnership (TEPP) Community Health Division
- Northeast Colorado Health Department: Kirstin Schelling, Health Integration Manager

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Rise Above Colorado
    - Jenna Garrow, Director of Prevention Education
    - Angelica Ochoa, Manager of Youth Engagement
- Youth Healthcare Alliance
    - Aubrey Hill, Executive Director
    - Rebecca Gostlin, Director of Clinical Initiatives
- Colorado Children's Campaign: Madeline Ashour, Policy Director of Youth Success
- Turning Point: Wendy Lee, Executive Director
- Servicios De La Raza: Jose Palacios, Youth Services Manager

Legislators

- Senator Jessie Danielson, Senate District 22
- Senator Lisa Frizell, Senate District 2
- Senator Nick Hinrichsen, Senate District 3
- Senator Robert Rodriguez, Senate District 32

- Senator Dylan Roberts, Senate District 8
- Representative Monica Duran, House District 23
- Representative Ryan Gonzalez, House District 50 #
- Representative Meghan Lukens, House District 26 #
- Representative Tisha Mauro, House District 46
- Representative Stephen Woodrow, House District 2

Teacher Retention Committee

Problem: Colorado is experiencing a deepening teacher shortage, driven by challenges in retaining experienced educators due to burdensome professional development requirements that add excessive hours to educators' workloads without significantly enhancing their professional growth. This leads to staffing instability and declining educational outcomes.

Definitions

- **Teacher retention** – The practices and strategies used amongst school districts and administration to retain their current teachers.[135]

- **Teacher turnover –** The rate in which teachers exit schools.[136]

- **Professional development –** Ongoing learning opportunities for teachers and other education personnel provided through district training, collaborative groups, seminars, or conferences.[137]

[135] Bailey, J., Miller, G. J., & Kaiser, F. (2023). What is teacher retention. IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/teacher-retention/33607

[136] Ayar, Z. (2023). What is teacher turnover. IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/the-driving-forces-behind-teacher-attrition-and-its-multifaceted-face-in-language-teaching/97405

[137] Schwartz, S. (2023, July 26). Teacher Professional Development, Explained. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/teacher-professional-development-explained/2023/07

Across the U.S., teacher turnover remains alarmingly high, with over 270,000 educators leaving the profession annually since 2016, a trend projected to continue through 2026.[138] Within Colorado, workload is the leading factor driving teachers to leave, making it a critical issue in the state's ability to retain experienced educators.[139]

One major contributor to this excessive workload is professional development. In Colorado, 47% of educator survey respondents are considering leaving the profession and approximately 61% cite high workloads as a reason.[140] According to a RAND Corporation study, teachers work an average of 53 hours per week, with 15 of those hours being unpaid overtime. Much of this time is consumed by mandatory professional development programs, many of which lack meaningful improvements in teaching quality.[141] The RAND 2024 report further reveals that teachers are twice as likely as comparable professionals to experience frequent stress or burnout, largely due to excessive work demands.[142]

Despite school districts nationally spending an average of $18,000 per teacher annually on professional development, only 30% of educators feel these programs significantly improve their teaching. Some teachers even describe district-led training as feeling more like detention than a valuable learning opportunity. The nonprofit New Teacher Project has highlighted how these hours spent on ineffective training fail to support educators in meaningful ways.[143]

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[138] Torpey, E. (n.d.). Projections for teachers: How many are leaving the occupation? : Career Outlook: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Www.bls.gov. https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/how-many-teachers-are-leaving.htm?view_full

[139] Colorado Education Association. "State of Education." CEA, 13 Jan. 2025, coloradoea.org/state-of-education.

[140] Teres-Martinez, Andrea. "Colorado's Educators Are Considering Leaving the Profession over Workload, Low Pay." SteamboatToday.Com, SteamboatToday.com, 15 Jan. 2025, www.steamboatpilot.com/news/colorados-educators-are-considering-leaving-the-profession-over-workload-low-pay/.

[141] Will, M. (2023, September 12). Teachers Work 50-Plus Hours a Week—And Other Findings From a New Survey on Teacher Pay. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-work-50-plus-hours-a-week-and-other-findings-from-a-new-survey-on-teacher-pay/2023/09

[142] Doan, S., Steiner, E. D., & Pandey, R. (2024, June 18). Teacher Well-Being and Intentions to Leave in 2024: Findings from the 2024 State of the American Teacher Survey. Www.rand.org. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-12.html

[143] Mader, J. (2015, August 4). New report reveals that teacher professional development is costly and ineffective. The Hechinger Report. https://hechingerreport.org/new-report-reveals-that-teacher-professional-development-is-costly-and-ineffective/

Working 44 hours or more per week significantly increases the risk of burnout, and teachers consistently exceed this threshold, working an average of 53 hours weekly. Burnout leads to low morale, exhaustion, and decreased self-esteem, making it one of the most common reasons highly effective teachers leave the profession.[144]

A strong link exists between teacher retention and student performance, as teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement.[145] High turnover correlates with lower student outcomes in core subjects such as English and math.[146] Additionally, research from Vanderbilt University found that losing just one teacher equates to 32 to 72 lost instructional days, disrupting student learning and school operations.[147]

The current approach to professional development places an overwhelming burden on teachers. Without meaningful reforms to change the status quo, Colorado will continue to struggle to retain its educators, exacerbating teacher shortages and harming student outcomes.

Solutions

1: Colorado should allow school districts to suspend yearly evaluations of a teacher for three years after the teacher achieves "Highly Distinguished" status on an evaluation, and encourage that, in this case, yearly evaluations be replaced by peer mentoring or some other form of constructive professional skills enrichment.

Colorado's teacher evaluation system aims to ensure high-quality instruction, but once a teacher has obtained excellence, reflected in a "highly distinguished" rating, annual evaluations become redundant and burdensome. Suspending these evaluations for three years would reduce teacher burnout, minimize administrative workloads, and allow time for more instructionally valuable professional growth. Additionally, replacing standardized evaluations with peer mentoring or other forms of professional enrichment would be more effective in helping these "highly distinguished" teachers disseminate information and help less experienced teachers.

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[144] Bousquet, S. (2012, August 7). Teacher Burnout: Causes, Cures and Prevention [Review of Teacher Burnout: Causes, Cures and Prevention]. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED534527.pdf

[145] Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016, August 16). Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover-report

[146] Donley, J., Detrich, R., Keyworth, R., & States, J. (2019). Teacher Turnover Impact. Winginstitute.org. https://www.winginstitute.org/teacher-retention-turnover

[147] Redding, C. (2018, September 7). Teacher turnover is a problem – here's how to fix it. Phys.org. https://phys.org/news/2018-09-teacher-turnover-problem.html

The teacher evaluation process is not effective for high-performing teachers as it lacks actionable constructive feedback. Furthermore, reforms aimed at toughening evaluations have shown no significant impact on student achievement, suggesting that yearly evaluations do little to enhance instruction, especially for already high-performing teachers.[148]

For high-performing teachers, replacing yearly evaluations with peer mentoring to instructional coaching offers a more effective path for professional growth. Peer coaching programs significantly improve classroom quality and student-teacher interactions after just a few sessions. Instructional coaching has also been found to build confidence and motivation, encouraging teachers to reflect on and further refine their practice through collaborative dialogue.[149] Additionally, mentoring communities and lesson-study models have been linked to measurable gains in both teacher knowledge and student learning, especially in subjects like science and English.[150] These approaches provide the kind of personalized, practical support that high-performing teachers don't receive in yearly, administrator based evaluation systems.

Replacing annual evaluations with peer-based enrichment for "highly distinguished" teachers for a three-year period would also make better use of time and resources by lowering administrative burdens. Teacher evaluations require significant administrative effort, with principals citing they have spent as many as 248 hours, or 31 full work days, on evaluations every year. This time could be better spent supporting early-career or struggling teachers who need targeted guidance and will benefit from the teacher evaluation system.[151] Moreover, cost-benefit analyses show that mentoring programs often yield positive returns, sometimes entirely offsetting their costs through gains in teacher effectiveness and retention.[152] Redirecting saved time and funds from teaching

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[148] Will, M. (2021, November 29). Efforts to Toughen Teacher Evaluations Show No Positive Impact on Students. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/efforts-to-toughen-teacher-evaluations-show-no-positive-impact-on-students/2021/

[149] Hamre, B. K., Pianta, R. C., Burchinal, M., Field, S., LoCasale-Crouch, J., Downer, J. T., Howes, C., LaParo, K., & Scott-Little, C. (2012). A Course on Effective Teacher-Child Interactions. American Educational Research Journal, 49(1), 88–123. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211434596

[150] Ergi Bufasi, Ildze Čakāne, Karlis Greitans, Inese Dudareva, & Dace Namsone. (2024). Lesson Study as a Professional Development Model for Teaching Spatial Ability in Primary STEM. Education Sciences, 14(5), 512–512. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14050512

[151] Professional Support for Principals Is Essential for Strong Teacher-Evaluation Systems. (2014, July). Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/professional-support-for-principals-is-essential-for-strong-teacher-evaluation-systems/

[152] Villar, Anthony, and Michael A Strong. "Is Mentoring Worth the Money? A Benefit-Cost Analysis and Five-Year Rate of Return of a Comprehensive Mentoring Program for Beginning Teachers." ResearchGate, Jan. 2009, www.researchgate.net/publication/228653979_Is_mentoring_worth_the_money_A_benefit-cost_analysis_and_five-year_rate_of_return_of_a_comprehensive_mentoring_program_for_beginning_teachers

evaluations for "highly distinguished" teachers to struggling, newer teachers would increase teacher retention, as administrators help new teachers and don't overload high-performing teachers.

As teacher retention rates continue to worsen, taking the burden of annual teacher evaluations off of "highly distinguished" educators and their administrators would increase retention by preventing burnout from "highly distinguished" teachers and giving administrators more time to help educators new to the profession — as new teachers leave their jobs at higher rates than those with more years of experience.

2: Colorado should implement a cap on the total hours of professional development required to obtain and renew a teaching license. If new professional development courses are introduced, an equal or greater number of hours should be removed from existing requirements to ensure the total time commitment does not increase above the current number.

While professional development (PD) is essential for improving teaching effectiveness and fostering student success, excessive PD requirements can burden educators rather than support them. Implementing a cap on PD hours would ensure that teachers receive meaningful training without being overwhelmed by excessive time commitments, thereby reducing burnout and improving retention rates.

Studies show that school staff frequently cite time constraints as the primary barrier to engaging in PD.[153] If new training programs are introduced, an equal or greater number of existing hours should be removed to prevent increasing workload beyond sustainable levels.
Research highlights that high-quality PD should enable educators to collaborate positively and influence school culture and instruction.[154] However, excessive PD requirements often reduce opportunities for meaningful collaboration, replacing effective training with generic or redundant sessions that fail to enhance teaching.

This issue is exacerbated by a demanding workload, where teachers already juggle long hours, administrative burdens, and classroom responsibilities. Adding increased PD hours without removing outdated requirements only worsens burnout and discourages retention, instead of

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[153] Bubb, S., & Earley, P. (2013). The use of training days: Finding time for teachers' professional development. Educational Research, 55(3), 236–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2013.825161

[154] Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M., & Gardner, M. (2017). Effective Teacher Professional Development. Learning Policy Institute. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606743.pdf

helping teachers grow.[155] Research supports a more thoughtful approach to professional development—one that prioritizes effectiveness rather than simply adding hours to meet arbitrary requirements.

As teacher retention challenges continue to worsen, limiting unnecessary PD hours will allow teachers to engage in impactful training while ensuring that their total workload remains manageable and beneficial.

Systems thinking

Unintended consequences that we've considered include:

- Reducing evaluation frequency for "highly distinguished" teachers may inadvertently diminish opportunities for these educators to receive constructive feedback when they do require it.

- Capping PD hours could discourage school districts from offering innovative training opportunities, potentially limiting access to increasing new/better practices in education.

Outreach

 # Did not respond after email and phone outreach

While researching and writing this proposal, we reached out to:

Government agencies

- State: Colorado Department of Education: Amara Hobbs, Legislative Liaison
- Local: teachers from
    - Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO
    - Douglas County School District, Castle Rock, CO
    - Poudre School District, Fort Collins, CO
    - Steamboat Springs School District, Steamboat, CO
    - Weld Re-5j School District, Johnstown, CO

[155] Montanez, Ricardo (2025, January 3). Teacher Retention and Professional Development: Addressing Challenges and Enhancing Effectiveness | CSMS Magazine. https://csmsmagazine.org/teacher-retention-and-professional-development-addressing-challenges-and-enhancing-effectiveness/

Organizations that work in this policy area

- Colorado Children's Campaign: Riley Kitts, Vice President of Strategy & Government Affairs

Legislators

- State Senator Dylan Roberts, Senate District 8
- State Senator Jim Smallwood, Senate District 2 #
- State Representative Ryan Gonzalez, House District 50
- State Representative Eliza Hamrick, House District 61
- State Representative Anthony Hartsook, House District 44
- State Representative Meghan Lukens, House District 26