



# THE FUTURE IS IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

ENVISIONING A STRONGER PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR COLORADO AND BEYOND

WHITE PAPER DEVELOPED BY ST. VRAIN VALLEY SCHOOLS  
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# Executive Summary

Our public schools have long been a catalyst for progress, having an immeasurable impact on the strength and advancement of our nation. Our educators should be celebrated and revered for the amazing things they do every day to advance our children as individuals, and our country as a whole. Public school graduates become our nation's future doctors, service industry workers, first responders, engineers, teachers, scientists, and leaders who provide the backbone of our economy, national security, service industry, public health and safety, research innovations, and so much more.

In Colorado, public education has long been a priority, with the state's original 1876 constitution, stating:

"The general assembly shall, as soon as practical, provide for the establishment and maintenance of a thorough and uniform system of free public schools throughout the state, wherein all residents of the state between the ages of six and twenty-one years, may be educated gratuitously."<sup>1</sup>

However, somewhere in the national debate, some appear to have lost sight of the impact and importance of a strong, high-quality public education system. Throughout public education today, we see a politically polarized environment that continues to focus on somewhat antiquated, standardized measures of progress, while the world around us continues to accelerate at an unprecedented

rate. With public education having such a significant impact on all of society, we believe it is critical that Colorado leaders take a close look at public education as a whole, and ask themselves, are we delivering on our responsibility and duty to provide a thorough and uniform system?

Today, K-12 education represents Colorado's largest budget expenditure, and approximately 900,000 students attend school in one of 178 public school districts.<sup>2</sup> Yet, students today are often limited in their education by their socioeconomic circumstances. While our technology-driven world has moved beyond the constraints of geographic boundaries, our public education system continues to operate under a local control model.





While having various benefits, this also potentially limits student access and opportunity based on the resources and capacity of their local communities.

Colorado has a significant opportunity to define a strong vision for public education in order to create a system that leverages the best of our resources, knowledge, innovation, and human capital to ensure a stronger tomorrow for our communities, state, and nation.

We have an opportunity to build a connected, collaborative, and cohesive system that benefits from economies of scale to create resource equity and a foundation of academic excellence that will provide all students with a strong competitive advantage necessary to succeed in our complex, globalized world. Not only will this strengthen the baseline of student achievement, it will also provide communities the opportunity to leverage local control to innovate and differentiate student experiences that best reflect the needs and values of their individual communities.

The conversation regarding the future of our schools should be preceded and accompanied by a clear, articulate vision for a better future, in alignment with the fundamentals of an excellent education – and resources should be in alignment with that vision. A new system should include considerations of: a district's socioeconomic data; the rigor of their graduation requirements; number of Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways; technology access and infrastructure; quality of early childhood education offerings; number of rigorous course offerings, including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or concurrent enrollment; quality of individualized instructional supports for students with special needs, gifted and talented students, and twice-exceptional learners; health of the district's finances; quality of the district's facilities; student safety measures; the ability to recruit and retain high-quality teachers; and perhaps more. All of these measures should constitute the foundation, not the ceiling, in every school district in Colorado.

If we all can agree that the purpose of public education is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed so that we can optimize our economy and improve our collective quality of life, we can then create a platform from which to reclaim the narrative of the importance and value of public education, and cultivate greater respect for the teaching profession in order to inspire our future generation of educators. However, we cannot do this in isolation. It will require visionary, experienced leadership at the state-level to inspire and mobilize local school boards, superintendents, administrators, teachers, business leaders, parents, and other community members in order to address this pivotal moment. We must reawaken the public consciousness regarding the importance of public education, and by doing so, reignite the promise of future generations.



# THE FUTURE IS IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## ENVISIONING A STRONGER PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR COLORADO AND BEYOND

*“Out of the public school, grows the greatness of a nation.”*

These famous words from Mark Twain’s 1900 *“I am a Boxer”* speech still carry significant weight 122 years later. It is widely accepted that a quality education system is a primary prerequisite for the future success of our children, but many may not readily and fully realize the crucial role public schools play in the strength, growth, safety, health, and well-being of our society.

In the United States, approximately 90% of all people either attend or have attended a public school.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, we believe second only to parenting, our education system has the greatest impact on our citizens, economy, public safety and national security, our residential and commercial property values, workforce readiness, innovation, creativity, public health, our democracy, and so much more.

In Colorado, public education has long been a priority, with the state’s original 1876 constitution, stating: “The general assembly shall, as soon as practical, provide for the establishment and maintenance of a thorough and uniform system of free public schools throughout the state, wherein all residents of the state between the ages of six and twenty-one years, may be educated gratuitously.”<sup>1</sup> Today, K-12 education represents Colorado’s largest budget expenditure, and approximately 900,000 students attend school in one of 178 public school districts.<sup>2</sup>

While public education has been a state priority, much of the responsibility for ensuring a “thorough and uniform system of free public schools” was also delegated to local authorities in the constitution – one of only six states to do so (others include FL, GA, KS, MT, and VA).<sup>2</sup> However, in the nearly 150 years that have passed since the establishment of the Colorado constitution, our world has seen unprecedented acceleration and transformation.

With public education having such a significant impact on all of society, we believe it is critical that Colorado leaders take a close look at public education as a whole and ask themselves, are we delivering on the promise to provide a thorough and uniform system? Are we providing the high-quality experience necessary to ensure that all students can be successful in our rapidly advancing world? Does our education system build a strong enough foundation

to ensure that Colorado has a competitive advantage for the future?

### Colorado’s Public Education Challenge

More than ever, our world is changing at an unprecedented rate, and as former Apple CEO, Steve Jobs stated, “Everyone here has the sense that right now is one of those moments when we are influencing the future.” In public education, we share that sense of purpose that we have been given the incredible opportunity and responsibility to shape the future of our communities, state, nation, and world.

Throughout our world, the United States is recognized as a beacon of ingenuity, with the creation of new knowledge, technology, manufacturing, research and development, and industry driving the success of our economy. Central to this growth is the strength of

*“Everyone here has the sense that right now is one of those moments when we are influencing the future.”* -Steve Jobs



our public schools and the impact of education on cultivating human capital, fostering innovation capacity, and furthering the knowledge transfer that leads to technological advancements, and resource development.<sup>4</sup>

Education today is incredibly complex for our children and society, and much more significant than anything many of us have ever experienced. Just as the Greatest Generation, born in the 1900s-1920s, experienced economic turmoil, rising civic and community engagement, and the acceleration of new technologies (radio and telephone), today's students are developing in a time of rapid global transformation. They came into the world at the same time Apple introduced the iPhone, Facebook and Twitter launched, Hadoop opened the world's largest open-source software platforms, Amazon launched the Kindle which could hold a library of books on a single device, and Github opened and gave everyone access to one of the world's largest repositories of software development. Moore's law showed us that the power and speed of microchips doubled every 18 months, and with IBM's launch of Watson, artificial intelligence signaled a new era of infinite possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Schools today must be ready to keep pace with industry to prepare students for jobs that do not exist today. We can no longer ask students what they aspire to be when they grow up, but rather, we must ask them what problem they want to solve for our world. Currently, while the world around us is transforming, public education in Colorado remains widely unchanged in its approach to providing a "thorough and uniform system of free public schools."

In earlier times, when our education

system was concerned with traditional instructional practices, we'd read a chapter in order to prepare for our unit exam. We'd encounter eight or nine questions, and we'd attempt to mimic back what we'd read. We'd respond, and ultimately we'd receive our grade. Now children are expected to empathize with a problem, ideate a solution, prototype it and test it, and revise it. They must be able to work together in teams, communicate what they're thinking, have the perseverance to stick with it until they find a solution, and predict what might be coming next. When things change, they must demonstrate that they too can adapt.

These are the durable critical-thinking and advanced skills that we should be promoting among our students in Colorado and beyond. An expanded knowledge base was the goal in order to help citizens make more informed decisions. Now, the world is much more complex and innovative solutions are required to tackle the challenges of the 21st Century.

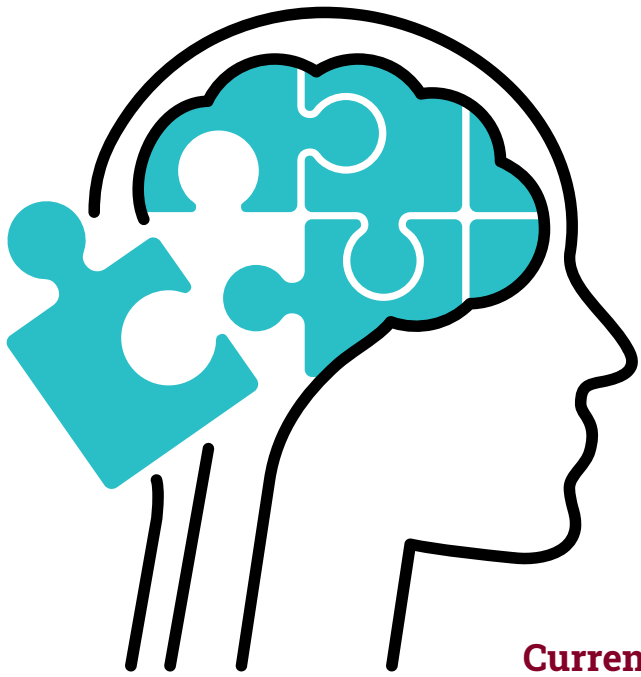
Across the state, school districts provide widely varying learning environments and experiences.<sup>6</sup> Through a local control model, there are significant differences in graduation requirements, early childhood education offerings, the level of rigor in coursework options, curriculum and instructional materials, school safety measures, concurrent enrollment opportunities, facility quality, career and technical education pathways, and much more. Even more significant are the wide disparities in funding and resource allocation between districts.<sup>7</sup>

While local control has an important role in ensuring that a community's values are reflected in



their schools, in this time of rapid global transformation, we must ask ourselves, can a statewide system of education function effectively at a high level within the construct of local control? Across Colorado's 178 school districts, enrollment numbers vary significantly from 32 students enrolled in Kim Reorganized 88 School District to over 88,000 students enrolled in Denver Public Schools.<sup>8</sup> For smaller districts, local control often ensures that they are losing resource capacity and spending power because they do not have any ability to take advantage of economies of scale. With only 12% of Colorado school districts enrolling more than 10,000 students, most districts are at a financial disadvantage, and losing resource capacity in large part due to their small size.

Additionally, students today are potentially limited in their education by their zip code, yet they will also become global citizens, and the future workforce of Colorado and beyond. Our technology-driven world has moved beyond the constraints of geographic boundaries, yet our public education system continues to operate under this boundary-driven model.



“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” -Aristotle

Aristotle once said, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” In Colorado, we believe that there is power of unity in a system that builds a strong foundation in which to accelerate innovation and advancement. We have a significant opportunity to focus on the economic benefits of high-quality public schools, and align districts systemically through ensuring a “thorough and uniform” foundation of excellence, that can honor and respect local control, while simultaneously allowing communities to innovate their programming based on their local needs, values, and community assets.

No matter a student’s zip code, they should have access to a high-quality public school that provides a foundation of rigorous coursework, comprehensive graduation requirements, multiple Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways, high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten, robust technology infrastructure, safe and welcoming environments, co-curricular activities and athletics, and aligned standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and more.

### Current Accreditation System

In addition to great variance in educational quality and resource allocation across Colorado’s school districts, is the challenge of creating an accountability system that measures the outcomes aligned with a state vision for public education. Over a decade ago, the Colorado legislature passed the Education Accountability Act of 2009, which created a system for measuring and grading the quality of public schools and school districts.<sup>9</sup> While the intentions behind this act were to move to a stronger support system for advancing school quality, data demonstrates that the law is not yielding the desired results as it originally envisioned, and we believe it is in fact, hindering the progress of public schools across Colorado.

In a op-ed signed by 64 Colorado Superintendents and distributed by the Colorado Association of School Executives, the alarm was sounded regarding the ineffectiveness of Colorado’s current accountability and accreditation system, stating, “We don’t believe the law is working as intended and believe now is the time to revisit it and find out which parts of it have failed, and which parts of

it are working. Academic scores for the past decade have not improved enough at the state level, therefore there is no rational justification to keep the system ‘as is.’”<sup>10</sup>

The current accreditation system only measures outputs (i.e. assessment scores and graduation rates), without accounting for the quality of any inputs into the system. Accordingly, accreditation ratings reliably fall across stratifications aligned to household income (the greatest predictor of student achievement scores).<sup>11,12</sup> This system also disincentivizes districts from shifting to a focus on inputs that best align with the future needs of our workforce and the skills students will need to be successful in a complex globalized world, such as high graduation requirements, CTE pathways, industry certifications, technology infrastructure, rigorous coursework, innovation, and more. Management and leadership expert, Peter Drucker, once said, “What gets measured, gets done.” It is our belief that the current accountability system is promoting and yielding the practices it was designed to achieve. Unfortunately, these measures have lost significant relevance in today’s context.

Additional concerns related to the Education Accountability Act of 2009 include a lack of stability in the assessment and performance benchmarks, and changes in state academic standards and assessments that limit opportunities for Colorado to measure the progress of its public schools over time. This is yet another example of the challenges of local control operating within statewide constraints. While all districts are held to the same standard at the state level (the outputs), there is no accounting for the vast differences in quality (the inputs and resources) across the system. Ultimately, this model limits opportunity for many students in Colorado and furthers inequities in access to skills students will need to be successful in this 21st Century.

## Inequitable Resource Funding

Within the context of local control, equitable resource allocation continues to be a significant issue that impacts the majority of school districts in Colorado.<sup>7</sup> While districts in wealthier, more population dense, or natural resource rich communities are able to greatly increase their

funding through the passages of bonds and mill levy overrides, this is not a viable option for many districts in Colorado. This disparity, along with the lack of access to economies of scale when making purchasing decisions, further creates challenges for the provision of a “thorough and uniform” education system across Colorado.

There are unique challenges with funding public education in Colorado, most notable due to the dissipation of local residency property taxes due to the interactions of the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights (TABOR) and Gallagher Amendments.<sup>2</sup> The Gallagher Amendment in 1982 limited homeowners’ share of the state’s property tax burden to 45%, however as residency property values increased at a faster pace than commercial property values, the assessed valuation rate continued to ratchet downward, decreasing local funding for K-12 education. The passage of TABOR in 1992, further decreased local funding for K-12 education by limiting opportunities for local governments to raise mill levy rates in order to generate K-12 funding. As a result, there was a significant shift in K-12 funding. In 1989 the state’s

share was only 43% of K-12 funding, whereas by 2020 it had risen to 58%.<sup>2</sup>

The funding and resource inequities across the state also has a notable impact on student achievement, and the measurement of school quality. In her 2011 ruling of the *Lobato v. State of Colorado* case, District Court Judge, Sheila Rappaport, noted:

“Insufficient funding prevents the school districts from accomplishing the ambitious goals of educational accountability. Present school district funding levels bear no intentional relationship to the costs of meeting state imposed performance goals. Failure to accomplish these goals leads to regulatory consequences of the most profound concern to local boards of education, including state administered “major restructuring” impacting at least local curriculum, school staffing, school schedules, and student assessment and training, but also school closure, privatization, or conversion to charter status.”

While there have been many attempts at the state level to address some of

“Insufficient funding prevents the school districts from accomplishing the ambitious goals of educational accountability.” -Sheila Rappaport





these concerns, voters in Colorado have not passed a statewide funding measure since Initiative 23 in 2000. Voters soundly defeated Initiative 59 in 2008 by 54.31%, Amendment 66 in 2013 by 64.46%, Amendment 73 in 2018 by 53.57%, and Proposition CC in 2019 by 53.66%.<sup>13</sup>

With the state now the primary funding source for K-12 education in Colorado, it is time to reflect on whether there can be greater resource efficiency to provide equitable funding across all of Colorado's school districts that ensure that all students receive a high-quality education, regardless of their zip code. In order to achieve this foundation, we

must first engage our policymakers, community leaders, friends, neighbors, business leaders, media outlets, civic organizations, parents, and communities in a constructive, focused conversation centered around our values and the collective benefit of strong public schools. Namely, what is the state's vision for a high-quality public school system within the context of local control?

## Messaging Impacts on Perceptions and Support

The United States public education system is at a crossroads and is experiencing political, social, and financial pressures that are arguably much greater than in previous decades.<sup>14</sup> This is driven by the rise of charter schools, school voucher programs, heightened focus on assessment, other school reform efforts, and funding challenges. The increasing polarization and dominant deficit/negative messaging around public education in our society negatively shapes the public's views of the quality and importance of our public schools.<sup>15</sup>

In its 2021 poll on Americans' Satisfaction with K-12 Education in the U.S., the number of respondents who are somewhat or very dissatisfied with the quality of public education in the U.S. is at the highest level (69%) in the history of the poll with only 28% stating that they are somewhat or very satisfied.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the 53rd annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools, less than 40% of all adults give the nation's schools an A or B grade, satisfaction of non-parents with our public education also continues to decline.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, in the three decades since the release of the U.S. National Commission on Excellence

in Education report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the discussion of school failure increased 136% in the news media.<sup>18</sup> The dominance of this narrative extends beyond the media into elite political arenas with politicians using rhetoric to gain power and influence. This is a well understood communication strategy across the political spectrum, however what is unique about the focus on education is that the failing message comes from both sides of the political aisle.

In 2009, during one of his first speeches as president, Barack Obama stated, "despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we've let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us."<sup>19</sup> Despite significant ideological differences, eight years later during his inaugural address, Donald Trump's language about our education system similarly mirrored that of Obama when he stated, "an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge."<sup>20</sup> However, the narrative of failing public schools and decreased attitudes toward public schools do not always mirror the actual data trends on gains in traditional measures of success such as increased graduation rates, increased enrollment in rigorous coursework such as AP classes, innovations in technology, increased number of students attending college after graduation, and increased reading proficiency.<sup>21,22</sup>

The cognitive dissonance between these two realities can be attributed to the continued political and media use of an emphasis framing effect to shape public opinion and influence behavior.<sup>23</sup> In the context of public education, the widespread practice of communicating about challenges

in public education through the lens of failure creates an emphasis framing effect that increases the salience of issues without a focus on solutions.<sup>18,24</sup> This communication strategy not only has an impact on national policy and attitudes toward public education, but trickles down to the local level in ways that can directly impact schools and students, and teachers' own perceptions of the profession.

For example, one of the more polarizing topics in K-12 education public rhetoric is the focus on school funding. In many of Colorado's recent statewide funding ballot measures for K-12 education, the campaign message frame focused on a loss message, emphasizing the negative impact of not passing the funding initiative, and that schools and students were hurting for resources.<sup>25</sup> While there is no definitive research on the reason these initiatives fail, message framing is known to have a significant impact on the development of perceptions and voter behavior. Values alignment in framing – or

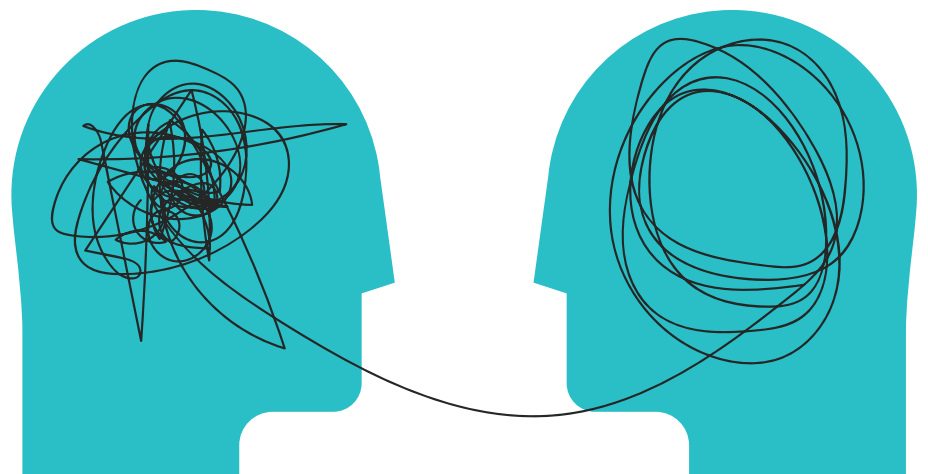
message frames that use words that align to the values of the message receiver – is an important tool to influence public opinion on policy issues, with many communicators, strategists, and politicians framing political issues based on the level of values alignment with their targeted audience.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, how education leaders use message frames when communicating about public schools has an impact on influencing and shaping perceptions and mental models that can greatly influence decision making and behavior, including voting outcomes for school funding measures.

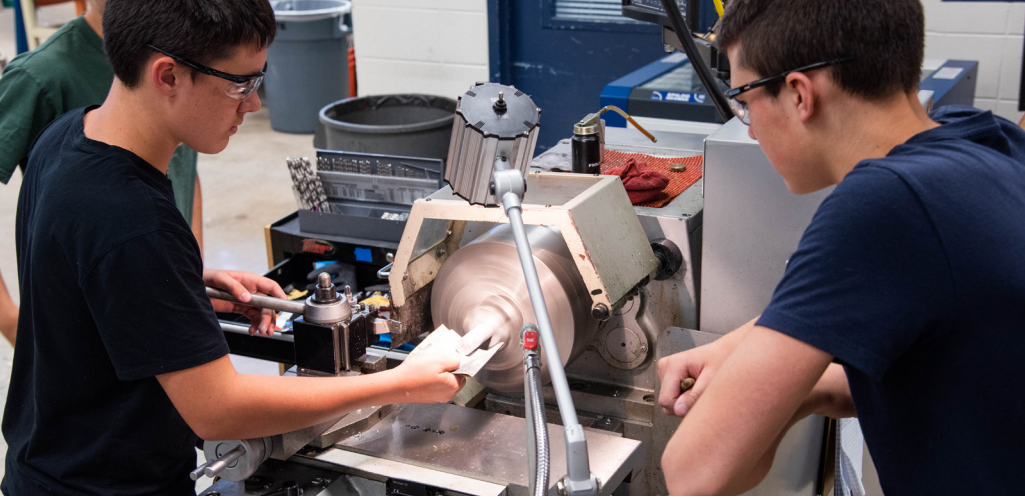
It is this framing effect that constructs mental models through the intake of the message frame in combination with the interpreter's social knowledge. Mental models – or the constantly evolving and changing constructs of a person's assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and biases that have a significant influence on decision making and behavior – serve as a foundation and framework for how humans process

information, make decisions, build perceptions of reality, and understand the world.<sup>27</sup> They are also extremely difficult to influence and change once established.<sup>28</sup> However, in the book, *Advances in Psychology*, Seel and Strittmatter shared that mental models can be abandoned when “it is disproven by perceptual data, or when it proves to be inconsistent with the previous knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> Changing mental models requires new informational processing – or learning – and can be viewed as a developmental step that emphasizes relationships amongst systems within information.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, messaging frames are important to shaping these mental models alongside perception, influence, and trust.

In the media today, there are several dominant messaging frames around public education: the consumerism frame and the crisis frame.<sup>30</sup> In the consumerism frame, the messaging focus around education is on individual economic gains. More education equates to a better job and

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a higher salary, which creates the narrative and perception that public education becomes a commodity or consumer product – a means to an end.

The lack of focus on the collective benefits of high-quality public schools, such as increased economic development, enhanced public safety and an informed citizen base, discourages policy-oriented thinking among the public. With the crisis frame, educational issues are discussed with an overwhelming sense of impending doom. In media patterns of education coverage over the past several years, across a spectrum of 20 major media outlets, only 20% of the media's reporting on problems and issues in public education contained solution statements.<sup>30</sup> The constant focus on problems and the impending crisis of the education system – without addressing viable solutions – is ineffective at changing perceptions or influencing behavior. In fact, it breeds increased pessimism and a sense of helplessness among the public and shapes the collective mental model of the quality of public schools.

Attitudes toward public services can be based on citizen perceptions of the character of the service providers, the quality of the services, trustworthiness in government,

and the citizens relative valuation of the public services, and these attitudes have a direct impact on a person's willingness to pay for those services.<sup>26,31</sup> This is one area of policy where individual citizens can have a direct impact on resources available to provide a public service. States and school districts often have to go to the ballot to request bonds or tax increases to further meet their obligations to provide a high-quality education in a safe learning environment. However, a community's demographics are often working against the known factors for a successful school funding referendum, which can make them very challenging to pass.<sup>32</sup>

The demographic most likely to support increased school funding are voters with school-aged children in the home.<sup>33</sup> When families have students in a public school their perceptions of the quality of their local school is much higher than how they grade schools nationally. One can extrapolate from this that when given opportunities to have positive interactions with public school environments, and the teachers and administrators within them, it can have a large impact on overall perceptions of school quality.

A working paper published by the Program on Education Policy and

Governance at the Harvard Kennedy School, Chingos, et al. found that for parents of school-aged children, the relationship between actual and perceived school quality (based on available accreditation and performance data) was two to three times stronger than for those without students in a school.<sup>34</sup> Further, they shared that accountability ratings had a diminishing effect on perceptions for non-parent citizens, and that “elite-generated information is most influential among citizens with the least prior information on the issue in question.” This confirms the critical role that messaging frames play on perceptions of school quality.

Voters elect policy makers and pass referendums to support public services in alignment with their beliefs and attitude toward the government and its services. Both experience and media exposure affect attitudes toward government services and those attitudes have a correlational impact on their openness to pay for those services. In a study of citizen willingness to pay for public services – in this case, public safety – researchers, Donahue and Miller, found that “the more positive people's views of public safety personnel are and the more important people think the services are, the more they are willing to pay in additional taxes to improve services.”<sup>35</sup> Additionally, they found trust to be a moderately significant, positive predictor of taxpayer willingness, however, service quality was not identified as a correlated factor in willingness to pay for public services.

This is significant in the context of voter motivations to support public schools, as building positive views and organizational trust have a greater

impact on voter motivation. Donahue and Miller further noted:

“We also found that as expected, attitudes are positive predictors of willingness to pay. Namely, the more a person trusts service providers, the more positive his or her views of the character of public safety personnel are, and the more important he or she perceives the services to be, the more money he or she is willing to pay in additional taxes to improve the service. These findings remain even when controlling for demographic variables traditionally used as proxies for attitudes.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition to building brand connection, communicating value, benefit, and impact are also shown to be key factors in increasing public support for school funding measures.<sup>36</sup> High-quality schools provide a return on investment and services valued in greater excess to their funding. As a region’s quality and level of education increases, productivity, income, social stability and economic development also rise, while crime rates, health care dependence and public service costs decrease substantially.<sup>37,38</sup> Voters are more likely to support a bond

initiative if they stand to benefit directly. This is potentially why Colorado has had a challenge passing school funding referendum using message frames that focus on deficits and what is lacking in schools. Past efforts have not communicated value or benefit to constituents beyond those who stand to directly benefit as parents of school-aged children.

## Teacher Recruitment Challenges

Almost every person in the U.S. today has a direct, personal experience with the teaching profession – a story, memory, or experience of a classroom experience or a teacher who had an impact on their life. The societal connection to education goes further than personal experience. Teachers have always been important characters in cultural and media libraries, playing prominent roles in movies, television shows, and stories. Yet, despite their importance and high-levels of personal cultural exposure, we have seen a significant shift in the profession as districts struggle to fill open positions, politicians argue over pay for performance, and teachers themselves lead protests to march for change.

Across the United States, enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined 39%, having a significant impact on the availability of qualified teachers for a growing population.<sup>39</sup> Also adding to the challenge, one in six Colorado teachers will leave the profession within their first five years.<sup>39</sup> Not only does this impact student achievement, but it also has wide-ranging implications for fiscal sustainability within our systems. A report released in 2013 by the Alliance for Excellent Education found that yearly costs associated with teacher attrition were at \$2.2 billion nationally.<sup>40</sup>

Since the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report raised the alarm on teacher shortages, the challenges have reached a boiling point as the national narrative continues to decline, as well as the number of students who pursue a career in education. In Colorado and across the U.S., universities are experiencing significant declines in qualified teacher applications and sharp reductions in teacher prep program enrollment. A study published by Colorado Succeeds in March 2018 highlighted that Colorado educator preparation programs saw a 17% decrease in enrollment over the previous five

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years, while at the same time, the state saw large population growth, requiring more qualified teachers to fill classrooms.<sup>39</sup>

In a survey that CDE conducted at the end of the 17-18 school year, they found that approximately 81% of urban suburban districts and 85% of rural districts noticed fewer initial or professionally licensed candidates applying for positions in their districts, and even more concerning, 80% of urban suburban districts and 60% of rural districts had vacant positions that they were unable to fill at the beginning of the school year.<sup>41</sup>

There is a lot of complexity to this issue and many factors that are contributing to this decline, including teacher pay, class sizes, and a hyper-focus on standardized testing, however, the negative public narrative of teaching as a profession also is a common thread across the analysis of the erosion of teacher morale, the hierarchy of society values related to the teaching profession, and public education overall. To this end, a primary root cause to the decline in enrollment in teacher preparation programs, is in how we brand and message public education and the teaching profession. The current messaging of public education has

focused so much on perceived deficits and negative messaging frames which discourage potential students from seeing education as a viable career path.

The information and media landscape has shifted dramatically over the past several decades, accelerated by the advent of social media, the rise of the 24/7 news cycle, and the powerful computers/cameras/devices that seemingly every person carries in their pocket. As public narratives become more polarized and ‘fake news’ more pervasive, the narrative and tone cultivated in the media has become even more important to shaping perceptions, creating mental models, and influencing behavior. Across the U.S., there are many institutions and issues that have experienced significant disruption due to the rapidly advancing media environment and polarizations, but none may be as important as public education and the teaching profession.<sup>21,22</sup>

Another messaging frame dominant in media coverage of public education is focused on the teacher’s role in education reform – the obstructionist frame. In media coverage patterns of teachers and teacher’s unions, 65% of the coverage is political – related to

legislation – 56% of op-ed coverage is negative and critical in tone, and the overall messaging narrative is one that paints teachers and unions as out-of-touch, resistant to innovation, and focused only on protecting their pay and benefits.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, teachers and unions are characterized by the media as obstacles and combatants to reform strategies or positive change without giving context or reason for their resistance, or providing teacher-developed solutions. While the media plays an important role in disseminating the message and narrative, some educators themselves have played a part in promoting and self-inflicting this negative perception.

Even in the entertainment industry, movies have further cemented negative narratives and stereotypes of the teaching profession and American Education system. They continually reinforce the myth that to be a great teacher, you must be a crusader against the failing or ‘evil’ education system, as researcher, S. Thomsen, noted:

“The myriad of reports critical of education that appeared in the mid-1980s seemed to corroborate the “fantasy myths” of the teacher movies of that period. As confirmed by the opinion surveys, teachers are apparently viewed as uncommitted, ill-prepared and incompetent. The schools themselves are viewed as equally incompetent and suffering from disciplinary problems, crime, drugs, violence, and general student, teacher and administrator apathy. The media plays a powerful role in shaping the mental models and realities for those who consume it, whether by reinforcing

In media coverage patterns of teachers and teacher’s unions, 65% of the coverage is political – related to legislation – 56% of op-ed coverage is negative and critical in tone, and the overall messaging narrative is one that paints teachers and unions as out-of-touch, resistant to innovation, and focused only on protecting their pay and benefits.<sup>42</sup>

existing perceptions and beliefs or creating entirely new constructs that strengthen societal myths.”<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, administrators are viewed as overpaid bureaucrats that lack a sound business sense. So much emphasis and focus has been on creating a mental model of extremely low pay for teachers that most immediately jump to pay as a primary root cause for the decline in teacher prep program enrollment. When the cover of Time magazine in 2018 highlighted that someone has to work three jobs and donate plasma to make it financially in the U.S.<sup>44</sup> and that is because they are a teacher, would that inspire anyone to go into this profession? This mentality contributes to damaging the brand and narrative of public education.

When evaluating the data on enrollment in college majors vs. expected salary outcomes, the National Center for Education Statistics lists social sciences and history as the third most popular major and psychology as the fourth though all typically lead to careers with a lower starting salary than is seen in education.<sup>45</sup> When accounting for the compensation difference in calendar days worked by teachers vs. most other professions, this disparity is even more pronounced. A 2013 study by College Measures of median earnings at years one, five, and ten among Colorado graduates with bachelor's degrees noted median earnings of approximately \$33,091, \$49,930 and \$55,287 respectively<sup>46</sup>, yet according to the Colorado Department of Education, the average 2019-2020 teacher salary in Colorado is around \$57,700 a year and the starting salary is similar to that over year one earnings for all graduates with a bachelor's degree.<sup>47</sup> This can lead one to conclude that increasing



teacher salaries alone may not have an immediate or direct impact on enrollment in teacher prep programs, unless society first changes the story, narrative and perception of teaching and public education.

Teachers and educational leaders have choices to make in how to move forward in this polarized climate amid the crisis of the teaching profession. As teacher attrition climbs, preparation program enrollment decreases, and the U.S. population continues to grow, the need to focus collective efforts on the training, hiring, and retention of teachers is greater than ever. Alongside these challenges is the negative national narrative around public education that is perpetuating a vicious cycle of decline. With the rising strength of the GenZ and the Millennial generation, coupled with political strength among teachers' associations, now is the time for educational leaders to cultivate a stronger brand for public education and the teaching profession.

Beginning at the local level, superintendents must engage with their community – especially those members of our community who



do not have children in our public schools – to share and highlight success stories and the incredible impact of teachers in the community.

With the rise of social media – where anyone can be a content generator, journalist, and advocate – energizing your community to focus on the collective benefits of public schools will pay dividends in future teacher recruitment. It is clear that all professionals want to feel valued in their work, and toward this end, there is a significant and serious gap in public sentiment regarding teachers and the level of value teachers feel in their daily work. We believe implementing systems improvement around the messaging frame and narrative of teaching and public education will facilitate cultural change that will only strengthen the teaching workforce, and advance public school systems.

## Defining our Purpose

In Colorado, we've experienced an ongoing discussion around the adequacy of resources for our public

schools with mixed results. Before engaging in this conversation, however, we must first articulate a clear and purposeful vision for public education in our state, starting with an in-depth discussion of why public education is so critically important.

In reflecting on the roles of school in society, the late American philosopher John Dewey shared that, “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” The power of our learning is so intertwined with who we are, that to understand its value is to acknowledge and measure the whole of human achievement. Through the intellect of public school graduates, we’ve walked on the moon, cured diseases, invented vaccines, and nearly eradicated extreme poverty.<sup>48</sup> Largely due to public school graduates, approximately 90% of the world’s population has a device in their pocket more powerful than the super computers of the late 20th Century. From those devices, anyone in the world has access to resources of information exponentially greater than any library or prior repository of knowledge, and with the touch of a button we can engage in a face-to-face conversation with a loved one on the other side of the world.



## Collective Impact of a High-Quality Education System

A high-quality public education system is a primary catalyst for powerful economic development that attracts industry and jobs to our communities. Research shows that over the past 40 years, the rate of educational achievement strongly predicts economic growth across the United States. The U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) — a significant marker of economic performance — would increase by \$32 - \$76 trillion over the next several decades with moderate increases in student achievement.<sup>49</sup>

Early investments in learning are very effective and play a critical role in improving the knowledge and skill levels of American workers. Studies have shown that investments in education lead to a diverse and skilled workforce that increase median wages, boost worker productivity and serve an essential function in continued economic development.<sup>50</sup> In Colorado — a state already experiencing faster than average economic growth — small gains in education and student achievement

could potentially increase the state’s GDP by \$832 billion over the next 80 years.<sup>49</sup>

The quality of a neighborhood school has an enormous influence on property values, and is one of the most important factors in a home buyer’s decision regarding where to purchase a home.

High-quality public schools also have other significant economic and social impacts. Over the course of a lifetime, a high school graduate earns \$331,000 more than a student without a high school diploma, and \$754,000 more if they have an associate degree.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, if Colorado had reduced its dropout rate by 50% last year, the long term benefit for those students would have been over \$1.4 billion in increased earnings and economic gains.

As the quality of a community’s public education system increases, productivity, income, social stability, and economic development also rise, while crime rates, healthcare dependence, and public service costs decrease.<sup>4</sup> For every \$1 invested in early childhood programs, taxpayers see an average return of \$13 through increased workforce productivity and reduced future costs of crime and government assistance<sup>52</sup>, and for every high school graduate, the net economic benefit to the public is \$127,000.<sup>53</sup>

Increased wages, worker productivity and business development are not the only ways public education has a direct impact on community well-being. In addition to providing growth opportunities for students and businesses, the quality of a public school district has a significant impact on public safety. Although

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” -John Dewey



incarceration rates comprise less than 20% of the U.S. population, over 50% of inmates do not have a high school diploma.<sup>53</sup> It is estimated that a 5% increase in high school graduation rates would produce an annual savings of \$5 billion in crime-related expenses nationally and states with a higher proportion of residents with high school diplomas have lower than average violent crime rates.<sup>54</sup> Education also factors into community health. High school graduates live, on average, 9.2 years longer than those without a high school diploma.<sup>55</sup> Years of education correlate with increased incomes, better jobs, access to health care resources and increased awareness of behavioral choices that impact health. For example, women who enroll in college and complete at least two years reduce their rate of smoking during pregnancy by 5.8%.<sup>56</sup> In addition to decreased health care costs and increased well-being, greater education attainment also reduces costs of public assistance and welfare. High school graduates have a lower probability of receiving temporary government assistance by 40% and food stamps by 19%. When some level of college education is factored in, government assistance decreases by 62% and food stamps by 54%.<sup>55,56</sup>

## Priorities Across Colorado's Communities

Last year, the non-partisan organization, Building a Better Colorado (BBCO), hosted statewide conversations about the future of Colorado's K-12 education system and the priorities for communities across Colorado.<sup>57</sup> In this effort, BBCO noted that there are great disparities in educational quality and funding across Colorado districts, among many other challenges. There were also differences in values and goals for K-12 across diverse demographics. Of note was that the most important value of education for Republicans was that K-12 education contributes to our economic productivity, whereas for Democrats and Unaffiliated voters, the most important value was supporting our collective quality of life.<sup>57</sup> In some ways these are the same, however, there is also an important distinction, and message framing can bridge these two priorities across voting demographics in the community. A strong economy contributes greatly to supporting a collective quality of life.

BBCO also noted consistency across voter demographics with regard to what they want from Colorado's K-12 education system. An education that allows every child the opportunity

to succeed was overwhelmingly the priority, with alignment to the needs of the workforce also important, particularly with Republican voters. To improve student outcomes, participants prioritized providing more high school education alternatives to a four-year college degree, and placing more emphasis on developing soft skills.<sup>57</sup> This is significant because workforce pathways and soft skill development are the tools that students will need to achieve a strong competitive advantage, and align with Colorado's priority that every child should receive an education that gives them the opportunity to succeed.

We believe that students are not simply a statistic or a test score, but their full potential should be recognized, and passions cultivated. Our schools serve as much more than a place to learn academic content, they are pivotal in supporting student health and well-being, including counseling and health services, access to food and other basic needs, and so much more.

Schools are a place where students can discover who they are and what they value in a safe environment that encourages movement beyond their comfort zone. School should be a place of agile learning that empowers self-expression, creative



analysis, gratitude, deeper and higher-level thought, innovation, and emotional intelligence to best prepare our students for success in our complex, globalized world. However, these factors are not built into the current accreditation system. The overemphasis on standardized testing remains the dominant practice for measuring educational quality, thereby incentivizing a prioritized focus on instructional practices that primarily influence those measures. To achieve an increase in the collective quality of life and economic productivity in Colorado, the system must be designed to incentivize and resource the inputs that are known to achieve these end goals.

## A Foundation of Excellence and Accelerated Innovation

Colorado is at a turning point, and has, we believe, a significant opportunity to redefine public education in order to advance the future of our State. We must realize our responsibility to meet

our obligation under the state constitution to provide a “thorough and uniform” education system, as the world around us has transformed at a pace far greater than our K-12 systems. The conversation regarding the future of our schools should be preceded and accompanied by a clear, articulate vision for a better future, in alignment with the fundamentals of an excellent education. The following should constitute the foundation, not the ceiling, in every school district in Colorado:

- Every student should be able to attend a high-quality, safe school facility, with a positive climate and environment that is conducive to optimal learning and educational success.
- Every student should have the opportunity to attend a high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten.
- Every student should have exposure to scientifically-based reading instruction, and updated, relevant, comprehensive, and rigorous curriculum.
- Every student should have dedicated and highly-qualified teachers and staff with the time necessary to strategically prepare their lesson plans and to professionally collaborate with their peers.
- Every student should have opportunities to experience a full schedule of rigorous classes and strong pathways toward the future with options such as Advanced Placement courses, college concurrent enrollment classes, International Baccalaureate programs, instructional focus academies and various career and technical pathways, and access to an extended academic calendar year that increases access to these opportunities.
- Every student should have access to robust co-curricular activities such as theater, dance, music, art, athletics, and more.
- Every student should be equipped with cutting-edge, 21st-century technology designed to enhance and broaden their learning and provide excellent opportunities for creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.
- Most importantly, every student should feel physically and emotionally safe at school, supported by counselors, nurses, mental health professionals, and school resource officers.

With over half of school district funding coming from the state<sup>2</sup>, this should be focused on building a strong foundation that aligns directly to the needs of students today – and tomorrow.

A unified system can serve to provide significant resource equity through the economies of scale, and ensures a consistent, high-quality experience for all students. This can be achieved through alignment of technology, aligned curriculum and instructional practices, professional development, school safety measures, high-quality early childhood education, consistent high-level graduation requirements, workforce pathways, an extended school year calendar, and access to rigorous coursework. While in some of these areas we benefit from economies of scale, in other areas, this can be difficult. A systemic approach, bolstered by local investments in innovation must coexist if we are going to pursue, with fidelity, a comprehensive, high-quality education system for all children in Colorado – not simply those that benefit from large-scale systems that yield adequate resources.

Local school boards and district leaders should be starting from the same strong foundation of academic excellence, and build innovative programming above and beyond a set high-standard for K-12 learning.

The concept of local control only works with the assumption that the local governance has the experience, skillset, capacity, and/or resources to create and define high-quality education systems. Visionary, experienced leadership at the state-level is necessary to provide a foundation in order for local control to focus on instruction, learning, and relevant innovation.

## Statewide Communications Strategy

As the communication and media landscape has evolved over the past decade, communicating effectively about the impact of our public schools and strength of this critical institution has become a greater challenge amid competing messages and special interests. The message we see across the media and even from school districts and our strongest public education advocates emphasizes the perceived inadequacies – the ‘not working’ and ‘not enough’ and ‘we’re failing’ and our system is broken.’ Why is it that in public education, we are often the only industry who tries to build loyalty and inspire people by talking about what we are lacking? Conversations about the resources and tools we need to accelerate student success are important, but the way we inspire people to action is to

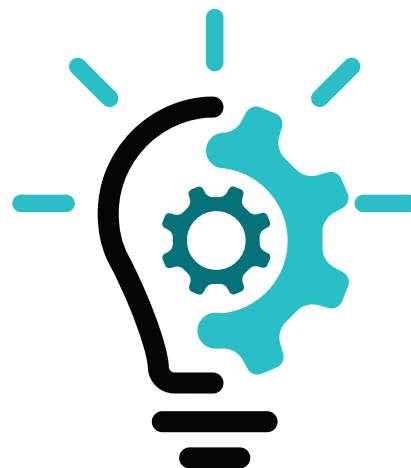
make them both feel and understand the value public education brings to their lives.

Colorado education leaders must reclaim the narrative around public education in order to shift perception, increase the teaching workforce pipeline, and garner stronger support for a unified system built on a strong foundation of excellence. It will take strong leadership at both the state and local levels to advance the narrative around public education to emphasize purpose and strength, particularly during this time of increased polarization and political influence. No one is going to change the way we talk about public schools unless we, as educators, change the way we talk about public schools. The failures of past statewide funding referenda have demonstrated that our current messaging strategy is not inspiring investments from our community.

## Measuring Success

Measurements of success should align to the values and goals that Coloradans envision for their public education system, and to the skills that students need to be successful, contributing citizens in an accelerated, globalized economy. In 2021, the Colorado Legislature passed HB21-1294, the K-12 Education Accountability Systems Performance Audit, calling for an

A systemic approach, bolstered by local investments in innovation must coexist if we are going to pursue, with fidelity, a comprehensive, high-quality education system for all children in Colorado – not simply those that benefit from large-scale systems that yield adequate resources.



A new system should include considerations of: a district's socioeconomic data; the rigor of their graduation requirements; number of CTE pathways; technology access and infrastructure; quality of early childhood education offerings; number of rigorous course offerings, including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or concurrent enrollment; quality of individualized instructional supports for students with special needs, gifted and talented students, and twice-exceptional learners; an extended school year option; health of the district's finances; quality of the district's facilities; student safety measures; the ability to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, and perhaps more. **All of these measures should constitute the foundation, not the ceiling, in every school district in Colorado.**

independent performance audit of the statewide system of standards and assessments, as well as the statewide education accountability system.<sup>58</sup> The objective of HB21-1294 is to evaluate the efficacy in which the current system meets the goals of the General Assembly set forth in Colorado Revised Statutes 22-7-1002 and 22-11-102. Accordingly, we believe it is imperative that an enhanced system of accountability and accreditation be developed that utilizes stronger measures of a student's academic potential than primarily a standardized exam, and incentivizes school districts to provide educational opportunities and rigorous experiences that better equip students for their future.

A new system should include: considerations of a district's socioeconomic data; the rigor of their graduation requirements; number of Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways; technology access and infrastructure; quality of early childhood education offerings; number of rigorous course offerings, including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or concurrent enrollment; quality of individualized instructional supports for students with special needs, gifted and talented students,

and twice-exceptional learners; an extended school year option; health of the district's finances; quality of the district's facilities; student safety measures; the ability to recruit and retain high-quality teachers; and perhaps more. All of these measures should constitute the foundation, not the ceiling, in every school district in Colorado. Once the results of the statewide audit have been published, due in November 2022, we will update this white paper to further reflect on the data and the opportunities to strengthen Colorado's measures of success in our public education system.

### **St. Vrain Valley Schools – Leading by Example**

It is imperative that we as public education leaders understand the rapid pace of change and accordingly, prepare our students to be successful in our complex, globalized, highly-competitive economy.

St. Vrain Valley Schools is the seventh-largest district among the 178 school districts in Colorado, and is home to more than 33,000 students across 13 communities. St. Vrain has spent more than a decade cultivating a relationship with its community that

has been the nexus for implementing systemic and strategic change. This has forged a path toward transformation from a school district on the brink of bankruptcy to one that is nationally and internationally recognized for innovation and parent leadership.

In 2008, St. Vrain found itself at a crossroads. It had stabilized its budget after making significant sacrifices and staffing cuts following a \$13.8 million shortfall in 2002 and was preparing for a looming national recession with expected significant additional cuts to education funding in Colorado. Revenues would need to increase if the district wanted to provide the high-quality education that our students deserve, however, community trust and support was at a low.

Leading into 2008, St. Vrain's messaging had focused on a deficit mindset: *Our schools do not have enough resources to adequately serve our community, so we need you to invest more.* With the previous failed ballot initiatives, it was clear that this approach was not working.

One of the most significant changes in the St. Vrain Valley school system since 2008 was the shifting of our

messaging strategy to a focus on our value proposition across our entire community and beyond. At the core of any relationship—whether it is between spouses, friends, or a parent and child—is a foundation of trust and how each person in the relationship perceives each other in the context of their values, priorities, and beliefs. The same holds true for organizations and the greater public. Your brand is built on the public's perception of your value in their lives. Do you enrich my life? Are you trustworthy and will you follow through on your mission? Do your core values align with my core values?

Public education is one of the only industries that tries to inspire support by emphasizing perceived deficits. It would be the same as a car company showing an ad with a car lacking all of the necessary safety features and asking you to spend more to purchase it so that they could build a better car in the future. If we want to truly engage our community in our mission and our greater value, we must ensure that we are aligning our message to that purpose. It wasn't until 2008 when the district shifted the messaging strategy to focus on impacts and strengths – how strong public schools advance community outcomes, was the district able to pass the first mill levy override in the district's history, and again passed another four years later in 2012.

Since that pivotal moment in 2008 – thanks in large part to outstanding teachers and staff, parents, business leaders, elected officials, and school/district leaders – St. Vrain Valley Schools has become a nationally recognized model of adaptability, creativity, and innovation. This has resulted in the launch of over 70 diversified and rigorous instructional focus academies and programs across

all 60 of our schools, including aerospace, energy, medical and biosciences, leadership, STEM, and visual and performing arts, along with a 55,000 square foot state-of-the-art Innovation Center and 45 foot high-tech Mobile STEM Lab, all supported by our Apple 1:1 technology with robust technology infrastructure, including the second fastest internet service in the United States through our partnership with NextLight.

This has also provided the opportunity to rapidly elevate our educational programming and student learning opportunities in advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, virtual and augmented realities, advanced manufacturing fields such as optics, electronics, machining, and welding, and so much more. Furthering our mission, we have launched three Pathways in Technology Early College High School programs, known as P-TECH, in which students

earn their two-year associate degree simultaneously with their high school diploma at no cost to our students. Our current P-TECH programs offer degrees focused on computer information systems, cybersecurity, and biochemistry. We are also continuing to leverage technology to implement new programs and further provide student access to high-quality coursework and instruction through the implementation of a systems-wide Advanced Global Interactive Learning Environment (AGILE) telecommunications program, which will allow students in any of our high schools (as well as students outside of St. Vrain) to receive synchronous, live real-time instruction in courses such as advanced world languages, micro and macroeconomics, computer science, etc., all from their home high school location.

As we have increased rigor, innovation, and technology integration, we have realized

*Innovation Center of St. Vrain Valley Schools*



significant gains in student achievement. Over the past ten years, St. Vrain's overall on-time graduation rate has increased 14% while our on-time Hispanic graduation rate has increased 31%. Over this time, we also increased graduation requirements to have among the highest credit requirements in Colorado and beyond. Additionally, fifth grade reading and math achievement continues to increase, outpacing our state average, with our Hispanic student population demonstrating even larger gains. St. Vrain Valley Schools is one of four Colorado school districts, and one of 373 nationwide out of approximately 14,000 school districts, to make the College Board's Annual Advanced Placement (AP) District Honor Roll list for increasing access to AP courses for all students. In the past five years, our number of AP exams taken has increased 62% with scores also increasing greatly. We have experienced a 201% increase in the number of concurrent enrollment college classes taken by our students in the past seven years, and added new opportunities for students to receive college credit through our CU Succeed programs. Accordingly, the Class of 2021 had the opportunity to start their postsecondary education with approximately 32,000 college credits on their transcripts, potentially saving their families over \$8.1 million in tuition costs.

Throughout this journey, we have been supported by over 90 leading business and corporate partners, such as Apple, IBM, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Otterbox, UCHHealth, Crestone Peak Resources, United Power, Amazon, Google, Stapp Toyota, and many more, who assist us in understanding the future of workforce readiness and relevancy,

as well as influence and develop the curriculum necessary to provide our children with a world-class education. These partners, and many more, have also provided us with industry experts to mentor our students, and inspire them toward their future endeavors.

## What's Next for Colorado?

Educators across the United States provide an immeasurable service to our country and should be celebrated and revered for their place in society. The amazing things they do every day continues to advance our children as individuals and our country as a whole. Somewhere in the national debate, we have lost sight of the fact that millions of students graduate from public schools every year and emerge as the leaders and agents of change across our communities. From the doctors who advance our health and well-being, to the first responders who are always there when we need them, to the CEOs leading innovation across multinational businesses, to our strong military that keeps our country safe, to the millions of exceptionally hard working Americans who elevate our manufacturing, trade, and service industries. These citizens all have one thing in common. Likely, most are graduates of a public school. Accordingly, public education is one of the greatest success stories in American history.

The future of Colorado is largely dependent on the quality of our public schools. It is imperative that we create a system that leverages the best of our resources, knowledge, innovation, and human capital to ensure a stronger tomorrow for our communities, state, and nation.

We have an opportunity to build a connected, collaborative, and cohesive system that benefits from economies of scale to create resource equity and a foundation of academic excellence that will provide all students with a strong competitive advantage necessary to succeed in our complex, globalized world. Not only will this strengthen the baseline of student achievement, it will also provide communities the opportunity to leverage local control to innovate and differentiate student experiences that best reflect the needs and values of their individual communities.

If we all can agree that the purpose of public education is to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed so that we can strengthen our economy and improve our collective quality of life, we can then create a platform from which to reclaim the narrative of the importance and value of public education, and build greater respect for the teaching profession in order to inspire our future generation of educators. However, we cannot do this in isolation. It will require visionary, experienced leadership at the state-level to inspire and mobilize local school boards, superintendents, administrators, teachers, business leaders, and community members in order to address this pivotal moment. We must reawaken the public consciousness regarding the importance of public education, and by doing so, reignite the promise of future generations.



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