Path4Ward Research Report

Insights and learnings gathered from students, parents, and implementation partners during the 2022-2023 implementation year.

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Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

Path4Ward is the first program in Colorado that invests public funding into the post-secondary and vocational paths of early high school graduates who graduate in three and three and a half years. While there are current state and federally established programs that support graduates to pursue their learning goals beyond K-12, such as Colorado GEAR UP, Concurrent and Dual Enrollment, the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI), and Federal Pell Grants, Path4Ward seeks to channel resources into a specific subset of students who, for various reasons, decide to graduate high school in less than four years. By focusing efforts to support early high school graduates who demonstrate financial need with public resources, the Path4Ward program highlights how Colorado is responding to offering students more options to explore their learning and career paths. The 2022-2023 implementation year serves as an opportunity to evaluate the design and progress of the program. To better understand the program's efforts, this report focuses on sharing insights that capture the experiences of students, parents, and implementation partners.

This report seeks to share insights and lessons learned to communicate baseline learnings regarding student, parent/guardian, and implementation partner experiences that will help inform future recommendations for Path4Ward. This report also aims to contribute to a broader understanding of student-centered investments and their intersecting support ecosystems.

The scope of our inquiry includes:

1. The experiences of students, parents, and implementation partners in the pilot year
   - What are their motivations and perceptions of year 1 of the Path4Ward implementation pilot? How would each describe their experiences?
2. Current challenges and areas of opportunity
   - What are the current highlights as described by various stakeholders? How are stakeholders describing their pain points at different parts of Path4Ward?
3. Recommendations to address challenges and areas of opportunity
   - What are possible ways forward to support learner-centered experiences in Path4Ward? What are potential policy recommendations?

Summary of Learnings

The learnings from our engagements with Path4Ward's stakeholders during the 2022-2023 implementation year can be organized into three main areas: **student and parent experiences**, **implementation partnership**, and **program structure.** Key takeaways include:

Student and Parent/Guardians Experiences

- Students' motivations for graduating early and participating in Path4Ward are contextual and unique to each student and their aspirations.
- Students shared reflections about their experiences in in-person and virtual peer-driven navigation cohorts, highlighting a desire for spaces for meaningful relationship building and requests for more structured support.
- Clear communication of Path4Ward funding timelines and the availability of immediate supplemental learning funds are essential to support the student experience.
- Engaging with parents through multiple communication channels supports their access to information and resources regarding post-secondary options for their children.

Implementation Partnership

- Collaborating across open communication channels is a significant strength of the partnership and is necessary to discuss and share challenges and highlights.
- Clear definitions of roles within the implementation partnership are necessary to coordinate data, information, and resources across partners.
- Philanthropic grants funded many of the functions of the implementation partnership (e.g., navigation support and direct supplemental funding to students), and partners expressed the desire to explore options to codify and sustain this scope of work.

Program Structure

- Some students and implementation partners desired more transparent communication of reliable timetables to anticipate when Path4Ward funding would be available and needed clarification around funding timelines.
- Navigators are essential to implementing Path4Ward, and access to accurate and timely data is necessary as they intersect with students, parents, implementation partners, districts, and post-secondary institutions.

Summary of Learnings

As part of our learnings, we have summarized the key recommendations as the following:

Recommendations

- **Continue to capture user experiences and document the impact of the Path4Ward pilot.** As this program progresses into its five-year pilot, concentrated efforts to capture and learn more about the student and ecosystem experiences of those who are part of Path4Ward's implementation are needed.

- **Deeply explore student-centered approaches as part of the funding model.** Engaging students and families in the design of this approach would help ensure that the created systems are equitable and accessible.

- **Explore student-centered approaches to bridging the transitional experiences between high school and higher education/vocation.** Investing in resources to deeply explore and uncover their perspectives and suggestions to prototype some of their student-centered approaches could benefit the program and expand navigational and implementation capacity.

- **Revise and update the Path4Ward legislation, as necessary, to reflect the learnings around implementation and to provide a better experience for students.** Incorporate navigation into the legislation (and explore ways to share navigational support with other state programs geared towards students in this age range) and resource it with additional funding. This critical role coordinates information across all stakeholders from students, districts, post-secondary institutions, and state entities.

Introduction

In the rapidly changing education landscape, identifying new and more personalized ways to support a diverse population of learners is becoming a broader focus for policymakers and practitioners alike. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront many of the challenges that learners have been facing prior to the pandemic and continues to highlight the need for more expansive and ecosystem-based approaches[1] to support students' academic, mental, social, and emotional health. Innovative approaches to supporting a variety of ways young people engage with their learning and the spaces in which they learn are becoming much more varied. One such path Colorado is exploring is to focus efforts on supporting young people from low-income backgrounds who graduate high school early with public funding toward their post-secondary and vocational goals.

In 2021, the Colorado General Assembly passed SB21-1061
, which created the Early High School Graduate Innovation Program, now Path4Ward, to create a path for low-income students who graduate high school at three and three-and-a-half years to have[2] access to public funding to use toward their academic and career goals. By directing the funding to include various learning options such as vocational programs, college/universities, training programs, and apprenticeship programs, Path4Ward highlights a state-level approach to investing in more experiences for students exploring paths between secondary, post-secondary, and career spaces. By thinking differently about how to support the goals of students in a variety of ways that are rooted in approaches that take a more holistic recognition into account of students' values, motivations, and dreams, Path4Ward offers an example where we can learn more about what students who graduate early desire as they explore post-secondary and career learning opportunities in both traditional and non-traditional ways.

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1   The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development. (2019). From a nation at risk to a nation at hope: Recommendations. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Nation-at-Hope.pdf

2   Concerning Successful High School Transitions, no. 106, S.B. https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb21-106https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb21-106

Path4Ward Progam Overview

2.1 Implementation Partners

In the Summer of 2022, Colorado Succeeds convened a group of partners to support the direct implementation and technical assistance of the Path4Ward program. Colorado Succeeds raised philanthropic funds to support the work of additional partners beyond the scope of the legislation and to increase student access to resources not outlined in the legislation, such as navigational support and supplemental learning dollars. These philanthropic funds, alongside the funds appropriated by the legislation, provided the capacity to launch the work of Path4Wards implementation partners, who each played distinct roles. Throughout the 2022-202 implementation year, partners met as needed to celebrate highlights, discuss needs, and troubleshoot challenges.

Colorado Department of Higher Education
Administrating the legislative implementation of the program's requirements through disbursing funds to post-secondary institutions on behalf of participating students and supporting district implementation.

Colorado Succeeds
Fundraising philanthropic grants to support implementation, setting the direction and scope for implementation partnership, and engaging with a national Path4Ward advisory board.

Zero Dropouts
Providing navigational support to eligible and participating students, supporting relationships with participating schools and districts, and communicating with parents/guardians. as needed.

RESCHOOL
Providing evaluation and learning support around student experience and implementation partnership. Supporting in the disbursement of additional learning dollar funds to students who request them.

Path4Ward Progam Overview

2.2 Students and Networks

To receive Path4ward funds, eligible students must meet the following criteria:

- Qualify for free and reduced-price lunch or
- Qualify for a Pell Grant and
- Begin a qualified post-secondary program within 18 months of graduating early

222 Eligible Students *As of August 2023*	**46** Participating Students *As of August 2023*	**~16** Opt-Out or Expired Eligibility *As of August 2023*

Eligible Students
Students who are identified as eligible to participate in the program by school districts but who have not yet engaged with Zero Dropout's navigation supports.

Participating Students
Students who are both eligible and pursing approved secondary programs or those who are in process of receiving Path4Ward funds.

Opt-Out or Expired Eligibility
Previously eligible students who have decided to opt out for reasons such as joining the military or enrolling at at a non-approved program. This also includes students who are no longer eligible due to not enrolling within 18 months.

S**ource:** This information was gathered by Zero Dropouts. For a much more detailed report about the above engagement trends, please take a look at this report developed by Zero Dropouts.

Student Network of Influence

Students interacting with Path4Ward engage with an ecosystem of support.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS

COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

PEER AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

STUDENT
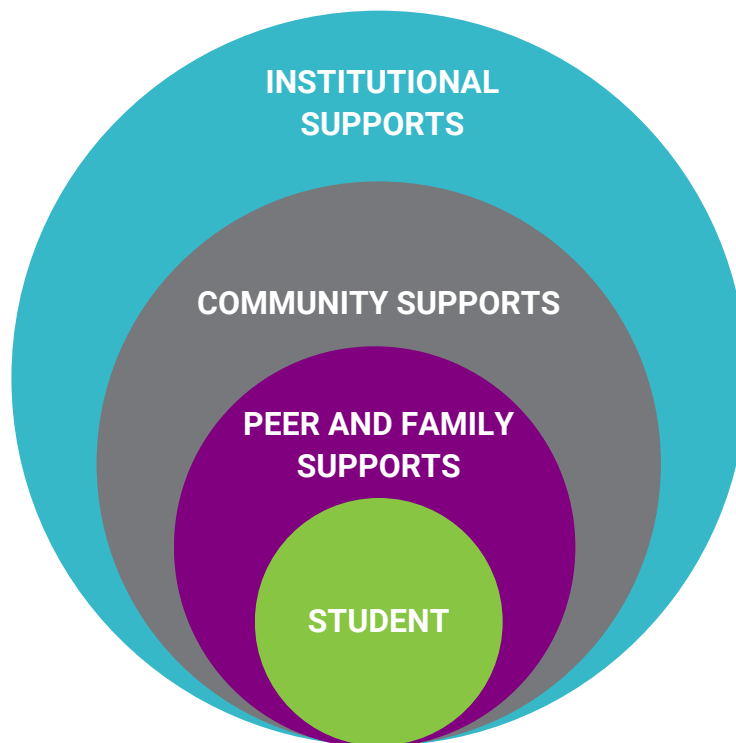
Path4Ward Progam Overview

2.3 Schools and Districts

Partnering with schools and districts across Colorado was a critical component of implementing Path4Ward. Six partners across Colorado participated in the 2022-2023 year and represented a mix of rural, suburban, and urban geographies. Schools and districts completed an application process and were selected by a selection committee spearheaded by the Colorado Department of Higher Education. Throughout the year, implementation partners regularly interacted with school and district representatives in various ways, including data gathering, student outreach, and parent outreach.
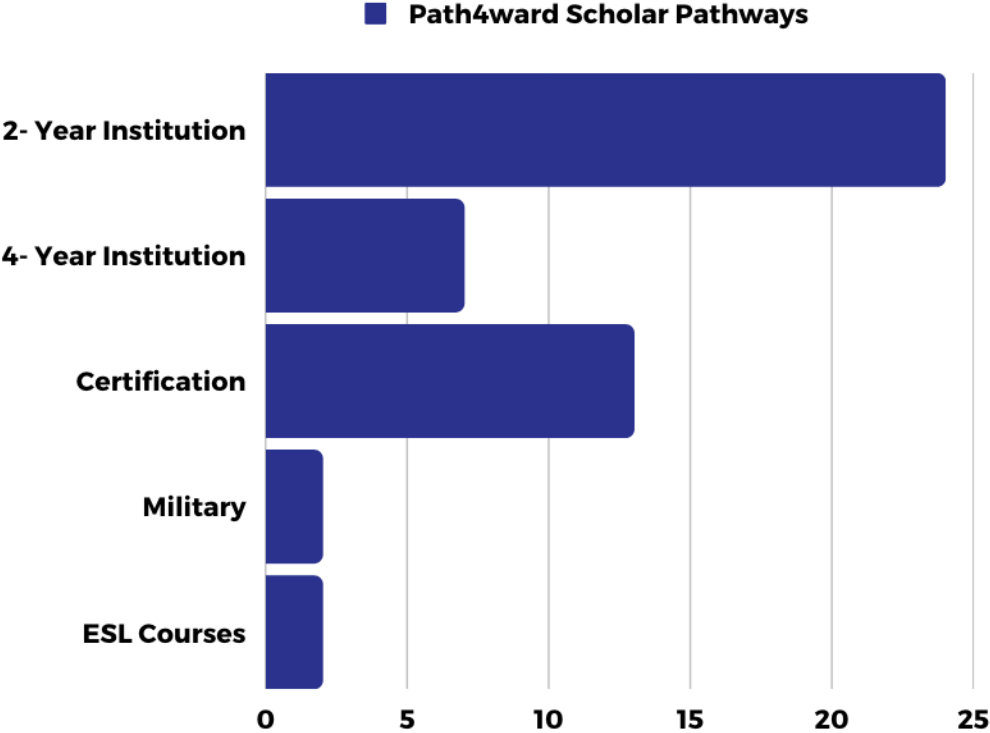

Please refer to the appendix for a complete list of schools and districts.

Path4Ward Progam Overview

2.4 Post-Secondary Institutions

In total, there were 20 qualifying post-secondary institutions students in Path4Ward chose to enroll in during the 2022-2023 implementation year. These institutions constituted a mix of two-year institutions, four-year institutions, and vocational education programs.

Figure 1. Chart of student post-secondary enrollment by program type. This chart is taken from this report developed by Zero Dropouts.

Please refer to the appendix for a complete list of post-secondary institutions.

2.5 Advisory Board

To support the big-picture thinking behind Path4Ward and broader advising around student-centered pathways, Colorado Succeeds brought together a group of advisors to share learnings, ideas, and questions during the implementation year. Members of the advisory group represented local and national organizations focused on exploring the challenges and possibilities of a program like Path4Ward and expanding the intersections between education and opportunity.
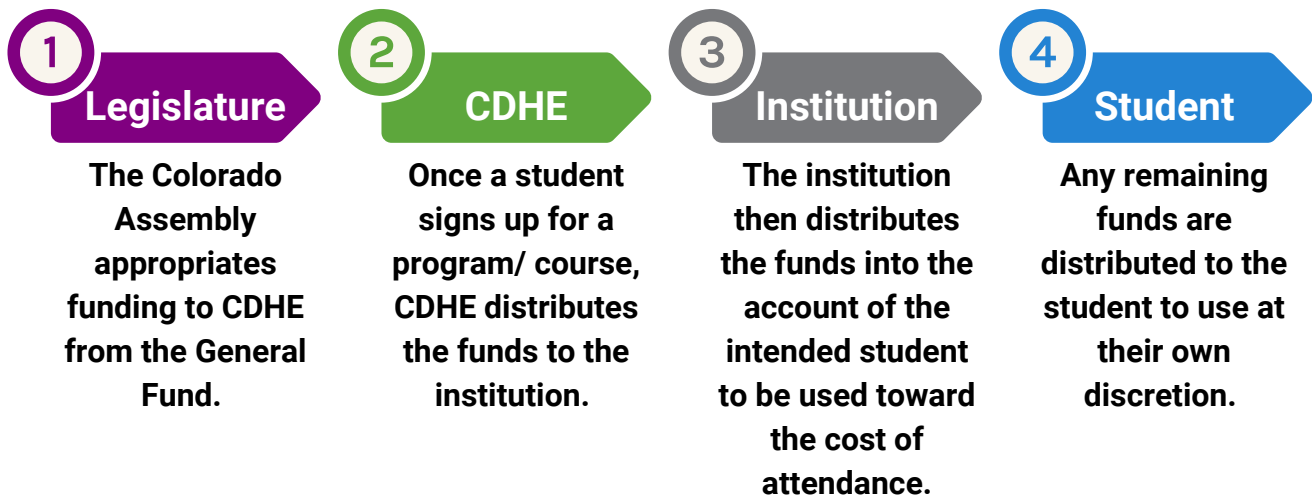
Path4Ward Progam Overview

2.6 Funding

As outlined in the Path4Ward legislation, funding for students and districts in this program is allocated in the following ways:

- *"A student who graduates prior to their fourth year of high school receives the greater of 75 percent of the FY 2021-22 average state share of per pupil revenue or $3,500, as determined during the 2021 legislative session."*
- *"A student who graduates prior to the second semester of their fourth year receives the greater of 45 percent of the FY 2021-22 average state share of per pupil revenue, or $2,000."*
- *"A participating Local Education Provider (LEP) receives 25 percent of the FY 2021-22 average state share per pupil for each student who graduates prior to their fourth year."*

Funding Flow

1 Legislature

The Colorado Assembly appropriates funding to CDHE from the General Fund.

2 CDHE

Once a student signs up for a program/ course, CDHE distributes the funds to the institution.

3 Institution

The institution then distributes the funds into the account of the intended student to be used toward the cost of attendance.

4 Student

Any remaining funds are distributed to the student to use at their own discretion.
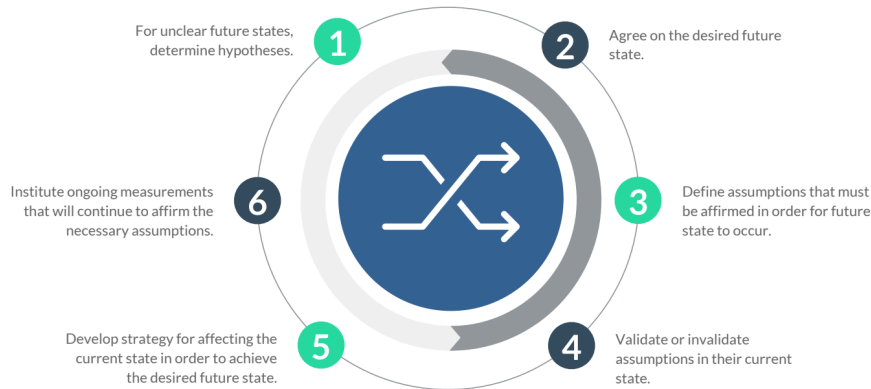
Research Design

3.1 Discovery Driven Process

We conducted a mixed-methods study approach to learn about the experiences of various stakeholders. RESCHOOL uses a discovery-driven process, the Future State Design Cycle, to help us capture data and develop insights. This process allows us to determine a hypothesis of a desired future state and to define and test assumptions in service of the desired future state. In doing so, our process is iterative and evolutionary-based.

Figure 2. RESCHOOL's Future State Design Cycle

Future State Design Cycle

1. For unclear future states, determine hypotheses.
2. Agree on the desired future state.
3. Define assumptions that must be affirmed in order for future state to occur.
4. Validate or invalidate assumptions in their current state.
5. Develop strategy for affecting the current state in order to achieve the desired future state.
6. Institute ongoing measurements that will continue to affirm the necessary assumptions.

At the start of the school year, implementation partners collaborated to establish a desired future state and a list of assumptions and actions for achieving it. For Path4Ward, the desired future state was that:

> **"Participating students in the 2022-2023 implementation year will have the resources to engage in the post-secondary learning option of their choice fully".**

We continually reviewed these assumptions throughout the program and categorized them as "Validated," "Invalidated," "In Progress," or "Yet to Be Uncovered" based on available information. This assessment was part of our mixed-methods approach to understanding the current realities of stakeholders and their relationship to the desired future state. The following section will explain the research methods we used.

Research Design

3.2 Methods

We gathered learnings through a blend of interviews, participant observations, focus groups, and surveys, which included students, parents, navigation partners, government partners, and technical assistance partners during the first implementation year. Each qualitative study method undertaken in the research design of Path4Ward required a different procedure; we outline each below.

Interviews

We interviewed implementation partners from the Colorado Department of Higher Education, Zero Dropouts, and Colorado Succeeds. Our analysis focuses on the organizational level, and our questions also allowed space to learn more about the various functions of different roles within each implementation partner group. We wanted to understand the full scope of efforts embarked on by each implementation partner. We conducted interviews with each participant in each organization and, in one case, met with two participants from one organization. In describing how we would utilize the viewpoints provided in each interview, we emphasized that the perspectives offered would remain anonymous and that we would not attribute comments to any participants. Interviews were conducted virtually and lasted between 30 minutes. We conducted eight interviews and spoke with nine individuals between November 2022 and August 2023.

Focus Groups

We conducted two in-person focus groups with 11 students in April 2023. Each focus group lasted one hour and we promised anonymity to each participant. Each participant was compensated $50 for their time. We sought out participants with Zero Dropout's help by putting out a call for participants through email and text communications.

Participant Observation

To better understand the student experiences within a peer-driven navigation model, we conducted one observation of a peer-driven meeting. We introduced ourselves, gained consent, and took notes.

Research Design
3.2 Methods

Surveys
In gathering viewpoints from parents, we worked with Zero Dropouts to identify the most appropriate approach to learning more from their perspectives, as they were their main point of contact. We decided to conduct a survey that offered a mix of closed and open-ended questions to allow room for explaining their responses as needed. We provided each survey participant with a $50 Visa gift card as a stipend to compensate for their time and sharing of information.

We also gathered survey data from Colorado school district representatives who participated in a session last Fall. This data was collected as part of a feedback opportunity to learn more about their needs and wants. Those who completed the survey represented a mix of schools and districts already participating and those who had yet to formally participate.

Primary Sources
Throughout the implementation partnership, several documents were created to keep track of where partners were in their processes process. These documents include implementation partner meeting notes, question trackers, collaborative information documents, and assumptions trackers. Each document was reviewed as part of our learnings and insights.

Secondary Sources
We reviewed and analyzed secondary sources of student data that Zero Dropouts provided, including onboarding interviews and student surveys. Zero Dropouts conducted initial interviews with participating students and sent surveys to students periodically.

Insights and Learnings

4.1 Student and Parent/Guardian Experience

We gathered perspectives from students about their overall experiences, from their motivations to their experiences with peer-driven navigation and their experiences with funding. We also gathered views from parents and guardians as they support their children and are affected by how they experience Path4Ward. This section includes our insights from both student and parent feedback.

4.1.1 Student Experience

This section focuses on students' perspectives of Path4Ward. Through focus groups, participant observations, surveys, and secondary data, we captured their experiences in various ways to provide an understanding of their experience of Path4Ward thus far.

Motivations and Values

Student motivations for graduating early and participating in Path4Ward varied from desiring rigorous academic spaces to needing to fast-track their timelines to support themselves and their families. There is no "one kind" of Path4Ward student.

Students described their learning journeys differently based on what was most pertinent to them during our engagements and when they decided to graduate high school early. Some students shared that their decision to graduate early was primarily to begin their studies toward their chosen career paths. Others expressed wanting to be in learning spaces where they could have more academically challenging experiences. Furthermore, some students shared that extenuating circumstances influenced their decision to graduate early in their personal and family lives, pushing them to fast-track their timelines.

Insights and Learnings

Motivations and Values

Some students expressed contemplation about graduating early in their reflections and cited missing high school social events and hardships associated with post-secondary life (e.g., academic, personal responsibilities, career, etc.) as factors that have made some question their decision.

We learned that some students are contemplating whether they made the right decision to graduate early. They shared their worry that they made the wrong decision to graduate early, with some stating that they wished they would have waited to graduate early. Students expressed missing senior high school highlights such as sports games and prom, while others shared their hardships in navigating school and life beyond high school as reasons for their contemplation.

Motivations and Values

Students are aware of and pull from their unique and contextual definitions of success that align with their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals.

One of the questions we posed to students in the focus groups inquired about their thoughts on their futures. We asked students, "If someone could predict your life in 1-2 years, what would you want to know, and what do you think it would look like?" Each student gave a different answer that showed they wanted to know if they had overcome the most pertinent barriers in their lives and the most pertinent goals they wished to attain. The majority of these answers were in alignment with their academic goals. Some of their responses included overcoming procrastination, passing courses, conferring their degree, persevering, keeping their commitments to themselves, and being happy. Their reflections highlight how students orient themselves toward academic and personal success as they navigate their post-secondary experiences.

Insights and Learnings

Navigation and Support

Camaraderie is integral to the experience from inception. Students described the benefits of being part of the navigation group as connecting with others, diversifying their friend group, and supporting others as they navigate similar experiences.

Many students we spoke with described the benefits of being part of the navigation group as being able to meet and engage with their peers in ways that support their experiences in navigating post-secondary life as early high school graduates. They mentioned that despite knowing of others who may have been in a similar position as early graduates, they described the support they received as part of their peer groups and from navigators as unique and welcomed. The ability to have camaraderie amongst the group was something they saw as a great value of the program.

Navigation and Support

Path4Ward outreach approaches matter, and students expressed a range of feelings from delight to skepticism upon learning about Path4Ward from various sources, including cold calls from navigators and direct communication with staff from their high schools.

Students shared that one of the things that would make Path4Ward better is the outreach model that the school staff creates. Students who learned about Path4Ward from staff members at their high schools expressed that they were happy to know about this resource and trusted the messenger. Some students did not learn about the program through their high schools and instead received calls or emails from Zero Dropouts. Some students who learned about the program directly through navigators shared that since they did not know about the program and did not know the navigators, receiving information from them created feelings of skepticism. They shared that this skepticism could be alleviated in future years if school staff played a more prominent role in outreach or if current or former Path4Ward students were part of outreach efforts.

Insights and Learnings

Navigation and Support

While appreciative of the responsive support from navigators, some students wanted more structured support around transitions from secondary to post-secondary life in areas such as time management, study skills, and personal finance management.

While the peer-driven model emphasizes the expertise amongst a community of peers navigating similar experiences, some students also wanted more structured support from navigators. Students expressed wanting support from navigators and other advisers alike, including their post-secondary institutions, to learn skills that would ease some of the challenges they were experiencing, such as how to study for a college course, manage time, and prevent procrastination. Students also wanted more structured resources around other topics, such as managing money and dealing with stress. Students saw the potential of their navigation groups as sites of more detailed knowledge and resource sharing.

Navigation and Support

Navigation groups had a different experience depending on whether they were held virtually or in person. Each has its own highlights and unique challenges.

Navigation groups were held both in-person and virtually. Students who participated in the in-person meetings expressed how they have cultivated community with their peers through meaningful and honest conversations with one another and sharing ideas. The frequency of these meetings happened on student terms and was often on a bi-weekly. Students who participated in virtual meetings expressed having difficulty engaging with their peers in that setting. They shared wanting more opportunities to interact with their peers in their Path4Ward navigation group in person and named social outings as one potential way to have touchpoints with one another. Exploring ways to engage in-person and virtual navigation groups as part of a statewide program is an opportunity with a lot of potential to explore what flexible and deep engagements can look like.

Insights and Learnings

Navigation and Support

Many students are invested in supporting their peers and future students through Path4Ward and want to be part of outreach efforts.

Students shared a desire to participate more actively in supporting future student experiences by offering to speak to prospective Path4Ward students themselves. They shared with us that their experience as part of the inaugural cohorts of Path4Ward provides them with a unique vantage point that they would like to share with students who may be considering the program. As some students are willing to be part of recruitment and outreach efforts, this presents an opportunity to explore this further.

Funding

Path4Ward funding timelines and delays could have been more transparent for some students as communication around this was unclear at the onset and impacted their program experience.

It is essential to have more reliable and transparent timelines on when funds will be available and having clarity on their main points of contact regarding their funding. Throughout the implementation year, students, parents, and implementation partners all expressed the needs and implications of having apparent funding timeline distributions in ways that support each's goals. For students, this meant attending the institution of their choice and accessing resources to fund their learning needs. Some students became distressed when unable to receive funding promptly. Some students were concerned about how delays in funding could impact their ability to attend their program or school. We learned that some parents intervened and advocated for their students the most when there were concerns around funding. Almost all students worked an additional job while attending school, and some expressed worry about potentially using personal money instead of Path4Ward funding.

Insights and Learnings

Funding

The implementation partnership offered supplemental learning dollars outside of the Path4Ward funds, and students who accessed learning dollars regarded them as supportive of their experiences as they needed immediate funding for learning resources (e.g., books, meal plans, program equipment, etc.).

RESCHOOL provided additional funding of up to $500 per student for those encountering financial roadblocks. Supplemental funding intended to cover emergent expenses that could not wait for Path4Ward funding distribution. Students were awarded learning dollars upon completing a brief application, and once approved, funding was distributed directly to them via a bank transfer, a check, PayPal, or Venmo. Twelve students applied for and received learning dollars. Students listed their usage of the learning dollars on secondary program-related expenses such as books, meal plans, program equipment, etc. Students shared that having learning dollars available was beneficial as there were funding delays from Path4Ward to post-secondary institutions. Their total additional expenses range from about $250 to $700.

4.1.2 Parent/Guardian Experience

Over the implementation year, Zero Dropouts hosted parent nights at various schools across the participating districts to create awareness and share more information regarding Path4Ward with potential students and their parents/guardians. In addition, Zero Dropouts' outreach to parents of current students throughout the program varied depending on the needs and wants requested by parents. To better understand the perspectives of parents/guardians, we administered a survey to parents of current Path4Ward program participants and received nine responses. Learnings from the survey include the following:

Insights and Learnings

Parents /Guardians

Parents/guardians expressed that the program's direct communication with students(via their high schools and navigators) and sharing of post-secondary educational options are strengths.

In their survey responses, parents/guardians recognize the emphasis on supporting students with this opportunity and believe that directly communicating with students and providing information about options is a strength of the program. We learned that some parents also thought that learning about the Path4Ward program increased their knowledge of education options after their student graduated. As the program is still in its early stages, this is still early information and there is an opportunity to explore this more.

Parents /Guardians

Some parents/guardians wanted more frequent and comprehensive communication throughout the process (e.g., one-on-ones) and more access to informational resources (e.g., scholarships and programs).

Parents/guardians said they still wanted better and more frequent communication from the program throughout the process (e.g., one-on-ones) and more access to resources (e.g., program-specific information and scholarship collaboration). The methods of communication that were the most helpful were forms of direct contact. Most parents indicated that emails were most beneficial, while others expressed that phone calls and text messages were the communication methods of choice.

Insights and Learnings

Parents /Guardians

Parents/guardians cited schools as the main information channels about the Path4Ward program.

When asked where they received information about Path4Ward, most parents/guardians surveyed responded that they received information about the program through their student's school. Parents also stated they learned about the program from Zero Dropouts (note: one referred to this as learning about it from a "recruiter"). In addition, students were the first source of information about Path4Ward to some parents. As most parents surveyed received Path4Ward information through the schools, supporting more direct and formalized relationships with staff at the school (e.g., counselors, teachers, and front staff) with knowledge about the program would aid in information access to parents.

Insights and Learnings

4.2 Implementation Partnership

As a reminder, the implementation partnership consisted of four organizations: CDHE, Colorado Succeeds, Zero Dropouts, and RESCHOOL. This section details the insights gathered by RESCHOOL through interviews and regular meetings with CDHE, Colorado Succeeds and Zero Dropouts throughout the year.

Collaboration

Collaboration and open communication are key strengths and values of the cross-organization partnership and are critical to the success of the program implementation.

In our interviews with implementation partners, all partners provided reflections on how this partnership offered immense value professionally, personally, and logistically. Partners mentioned the benefits of developing new relationships with and collaborating with organizations and partners they may have yet to work with. Partners also expressed their appreciation for engaging with multiple perspectives offered by various members of partnering organizations throughout the year when discussing highlights and challenges of different aspects of the program in its implementation. By building rapport, many partners mentioned how having regular spaces to interact leads to more information and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, several partners' reflections included the desire to continue communicating more transparently about each partner's internal organizational capacity and workstreams, division of responsibilities across partnerships, and further areas of collaboration.

Coordination

There is an opportunity to further the promises of collaboration by clarifying and defining roles to improve coordination around tasks such as data sharing, data ownership, and capacity building as the implementation partnership continues into the following year.

Each partner mentioned that their responsibilities included collecting relevant data and information for their scope of work within the partnership. However, some partners wanted more clarity about where

Insights and Learnings

Coordination (continued)

There is an opportunity to further the promises of collaboration by clarifying and defining roles to improve coordination around tasks such as data sharing, data ownership, and capacity building as the implementation partnership continues into the following year.

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each partner's data collection and ownership began and where they ended. They wanted to spend more time coordinating and reconciling outstanding questions around data responsibility and overlap to be more transparent and efficient in their workstreams. The most significant attention area around data coordination was sharing certain parts of student information across partners due to its confidential and private nature. Throughout the year, partners shared that they were brainstorming and iterating around how to sufficiently share information through other means that protected students' confidentiality and privacy while supporting the workstreams of all those who interact with them via this partnership, particularly navigators.

Sustainability and Funding

Implementation partners expressed the opportunities and challenges of having the navigational, evaluative, and supplemental funding elements of this scope of work funded by philanthropic dollars for a finite amount of time.

CDHE, as part of the legislation, is responsible for administering funds and reporting to legislators on the progress of fund distribution and students. The legislation does not include funding for navigation, evaluation, and supplemental learning dollars. During our conversations, partners posed questions about the sustainability of the current philanthropic approach for these components, both financially and capacity-wise. We heard wonderings about future sustainability alongside partners' reflections about how much time they dedicate to working on Path4ward alongside their other job responsibilities outside the partnership that align with their broader organizational missions. Many partners discuss their hopes for ways to sustain the scopes of work currently made available through philanthropy via avenues that include legislation revisions around this program to allocate funding for components such as navigational support.

Insights and Learnings

4.3 Program Structure: Legislative

As Path4Ward came about through a legislative process, this section focuses on insights about the program's components outlined by the legislation, primarily funding flow, CDHE's role, and district participation.

4.3.1 CDHE and Funding

As mentioned, eligible students who participated in Path4Ward received state funding to pursue their post-secondary aspirations. CDHE's responsibilities included reporting student and funding data to the legislative body as outlined by the legislation and distributing those funds to eligible post-secondary institutions and programs, who then directed those funds into student accounts for the cost of attendance. Learnings from this experience during the year include the following:

Funding

There were multiple reasons for delays in the distribution of funds to post-secondary institutions and, therefore, to students.

Even though there was a desire for students to receive their funding on time, several things could not be anticipated since Path4Ward is a new program requiring significant support in design and implementation. There were delays between the application of funds to students' accounts between CDHE sending funds to post-secondary institutions and those institutions applying those funds to student accounts. The reasons for these delays need to be further explored as we did not have deep engagements with post-secondary institutions. As the legislation also allocated less than one full-time CDHE employee to support the implementation of Path4Ward, the lack of staff capacity and managing multiple work streams across the department contributed to growing pains around the distribution of funds. In addition, different levels of access to confidential information, such as Free and Reduced Lunch and Pell Grant eligibility, and the rapid increase of Path4Ward eligible students in recent months have contributed to delayed timelines.

Insights and Learnings

Funding

As the original legislation determined eligible students as those who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) or as those who are eligible for a Pell Grant, a recent policy change in Colorado which allows for all Colorado students to receive free lunches is an opportunity for the program think differently about how to determine eligibility for the program beyond free and reduced lunch status.

In our conversations, we learned that student eligibility for Path4Ward and many other programs for students in K-12 that require proof of eligibility based on income status have been dependent on information provided by the completion of applications for free and reduced lunch at schools and districts. Implementation partners raised that the recent change in Colorado law that allows all Colorado students to receive free lunch, as outlined by The Healthy Meals for All ballot measure, now requires the program to think differently about how to capture eligibility information so that Path4Ward funds will reach the intended students. The reliability of FRL status as a marker of access to resources for students and families who may need them, such as Path4Ward, is becoming less reliable. New ways to establish that resources are equitably distributed need exploration in the coming years. Additionally, as eligibility for Pell Grants requires completing a FAFSA application, partners outlined that access to resources that may support filling out that form is variable across a student's support ecosystem.

4.3.2 Schools and Districts

Schools and districts are essential to the Path4Ward experience for students and implementation partners. In their capacity, they provide information and identification to CDHE and navigators about three and three-and-a-half-year graduates who meet eligibility requirements to receive Path4Ward funds. In November 2022, Colorado Succeeds organized a virtual half-day convening to understand school and district contexts and perspectives as they were rolling out or in the middle of exploring whether they would roll out Path4Ward. Following the convening, district representatives who participated were asked to complete a survey to learn more about their views on the programmatic and logistical aspects of launching Path4Ward in their districts. We gleaned the following from survey respondents and implementation partners:

Insights and Learnings

Schools and Districts

School districts in the state are an essential piece of the Path4Ward experience for implementation partners, students, and parents. In their capacity, districts provide information and identification to CDHE and navigators about students who meet Path4Ward eligibility requirements. For some students and parents, they were the initial trusted source of information about the program.

Path4ward outlines that participating districts receive 25% of the per-pupil funding districts would have received per full-time student for each student who has graduated early. In our conversations, we learned from implementation partners that cultivating relationships with districts in ways that allow for streamlined sharing of relevant data and information contributed to better experiences in the implementation process and better coordination around Path4Ward outreach. We learned from some students and parents that schools are the sites where they first learned about Path4Ward and its offerings.

Schools and Districts

School and district buy-in is integral. Various factors impact the capacity and motivations of districts and the extent to which they can provide adequate resources to support Path4Ward, including funding, staff capacity, etc.

Each school and district is unique in its contexts, access to resources (funding and staff), and coordination of internal systems. Across schools and districts of all sizes and geographies, we heard that there is a level of coordination between the district offices and the schools (typically with counselors) to identify students eligible to participate in Path4Ward. Identifying students eligible for this specific program tends to happen alongside other kinds of eligibility screening for other state programs students might qualify for. Path4Ward exists in an ecosystem of different programs available for students, and schools and districts are in a position to juggle coordinating outreach and support efforts around all of those. Furthermore, other factors, which include keeping up and communicating with students who have graduated from their campuses and needing clarity around when they would receive funding allocated by the legislation, were factors districts considered.

Insights and Learnings

4.4 Program Structure: Non Legislative

In addition to the legislative components of Path4Ward, local organizations added capacity to the program's implementation to ensure that participating students could access additional resources to support their journey. This section covers insights into the program that were not legislatively bound but were part of the implementation, specifically navigational support.

4.4.1 Navigational Support

Zero Dropouts provided navigation support to students throughout the implementation year, including cultivating a peer-driven environment to support students in their transition into post-secondary life and connecting them to eligible programs and other opportunities. While navigation was not a part of the legislation and was not required for students to receive funds, we learned that it is a critical component of the implementation process and the student experience. Furthermore, creating navigation support without a robust design embedded in legislation presented some challenges. This section discusses our learnings around strengths and areas of opportunity with navigation support during the 2022-2023 implementation year.

Navigation

As the first point of contact for students and parents participating in Path4Ward, navigators are privy to various highlights and challenges they experience. Navigators field questions about Path4Ward funding timelines, receive requests for additional support, and serve in an advisory capacity.

Navigator's proximity to eligible and participating students allows for a wide range of information and question sharing between navigators and students. Through our conversations with navigators, we learned that as the hypothetical "face" of the program to students, they are the frontline for questions about the program and other needs and wants that students and parents express. Navigators are receiving inquiries from students and parents about their funding status and timelines around their distribution to their respective accounts at their chosen post-secondary institutions. As they build relationships with students, they also serve in a mentorship and confidence-building capacity for many participants. As the role of the

Insights and Learnings

Navigation

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navigator continues to expand and be responsive to the logistical and broader needs of students, even in this implementation year, a better understanding of how this role continues to iterate and encapsulate a wide variety of roles and responsibilities in the coming years of the pilot could be beneficial in better clarifying the scope, scale, and ratio of a navigator to a student within the Path4Ward experience.

Navigation

Supports identified as key to navigation included clear channels for identifying and onboarding eligible students and clarity around student funding timelines and student status. As navigators interact with students, accurate and timely data sharing is essential.

Since navigational support for students is not part of Path4Ward's legislation, and Zero Dropouts is not legislatively bound to provide those services, they experienced unique challenges as navigators. Data sharing between Zero Dropouts, CDHE, schools, and districts required attention and reconfiguring every so often since navigators did not have access to confidential student information, such as FRL or Pell Grant status. Coordinating data in ways that reflected respect for student privacy and confidentiality required attention and iteration. Furthermore, coordination in data sharing sometimes presented difficulties in correctly assessing student eligibility status and having data across partners match. These challenges overall had an impact on student outreach and navigator experiences.

Insights and Learnings

Navigation

Navigators built relationships with participating districts, counselors, and staff and desire more support around building and deepening these relationships to support positive student experiences (e.g. outreach and training, administration and logistics, etc.).

Navigators shared that they regularly interact with district staff to ensure they provide options for eligible students to utilize navigational support should they decide to participate in Path4Ward and enroll in an eligible post-secondary institution. Navigators also shared that as Path4Ward continues to grow and as the year proceeded, they began receiving an influx of reports from districts of eligible students and needed to figure out how to adjust to the demand. Finally, the navigator's proximity to the districts provides a window into how each district is rolling out Path4Ward in varying ways, with some districts having designated Path4Ward staff and others having staff members add this responsibility to their current workloads. Exploring more ways to coordinate with districts around topics such as student outreach/handoffs and coordination around capacity/logistics was expressed to be desired by navigators.

Recommendations

As Path4Ward progresses into the remainder of its pilot years, measures to learn more about the experiences of students and the ecosystems of partners that support them will be key components to understanding the desired impact of the program. In its 2022-2023 implementation year, the collaborative efforts of the implementation partnership provided much knowledge generation around the logistics and systems involved in running this program well. The generous sharing of students' and parents' experiences during this implementation year provided valuable information about aspects of the program that supported their present and future goals and elements of the program that proved challenging. What is evident throughout all stakeholders we engaged with is that the Path4Ward program is a valuable opportunity and offers students resources that were previously unavailable. To strengthen the program experience in future years, we have summarized our learnings in a few possible next steps that would support building out the program's sustainability. Recommendations for consideration include:

Continue to capture user experiences and document the impact of the Path4Ward pilot.
As this program progresses into its five-year pilot, concentrated efforts to capture and learn more about the student and ecosystem experiences of those who are part of Path4Ward's implementation are needed. More research and evaluation around the ecosystem of implementation partners and student experience, parents, schools/districts, and post-secondary institutions to have more information to continue to iterate and learn about the experiences of the program.

Deeply explore student-centered approaches as part of the funding model.
Every Path4Ward student is different. Therefore, thoroughly exploring possible student-centered approaches to getting Path4Ward funding into students' hands would be valuable and provide a more seamless approach to funding their learning opportunities and needs. Engaging students and families in the design of this approach would help ensure that the created systems are equitable and accessible. Exploring these approaches could offer students options around which funding model may work the best for them, between direct funding to them, funding to their chosen and eligible institutions through CDHE, or even a combination of both approaches or others yet to be determined.

Recommendations

Explore student-centered approaches to bridging the transitional experiences between high school and higher education/vocation.

Students have thoughts and ideas about improving their transitions between high school and higher education/career. Investing in resources to deeply explore and uncover their perspectives and suggestions to prototype some of their student-centered approaches could benefit the program and expand navigational and implementation capacity. We heard from students about their recommendations to improve the program, as mentioned in the "student experiences" section in this report, and this scope of learning would require more time and resources to grasp and prototype them as part of the pilot.

Revise and update the Path4Ward legislation, as necessary, to reflect the learnings around implementation and to provide a better experience for students.

The program, as designed, needs to provide more resources for program administration and oversight for the full five years of the pilot. The amount allocated to CDHE as the administrator of Path4Ward funds is minimal, and there are no funds available now for navigation or to capture the impact of the pilot. The philanthropically funded cross-organizational collaboration among Colorado-based organizations to support the implementation of Path4Ward was a significant resource and necessity to launching the program and ensuring students knew about it. Since numerous responsibilities are coupled with specialized knowledge and skills across implementation partners and stakeholders, it would be pertinent to fund cross-collaboration beyond the initial and primary function of CDHE as the financial intermediary. Furthermore, resourcing navigational support with legislative funding should be considered as it is a critical component that coordinates information across all stakeholders, from students, districts, post-secondary institutions, and state entities, should be considered. By incorporating navigation into the legislation and exploring ways to share navigational support with other state programs geared toward students in this age range, there is an opportunity to explore ways to bundle options around students' interests and needs while sharing costs for this support across programs, rather than each one building it on their own.

Appendix

1. Discovery Driven Process Assumptions

STUDENT ASSUMPTIONS

CATEGORIES	ASSUMPTIONS
VALIDATED	Young people who participate and who are eligible have clear intentions and goals around why they are participating in this program and those intentions and goals will be varied and individualized.
	Young people will run into areas of systemic barriers and will have to navigate necessary workarounds as needed.
	Young people eligible for this opportunity want to participate in a program like Path4Ward.
	Students will be interested in participating in student ambassador opportunities and these experiences will positively impact their experience with Path4Ward and their post-secondary learning and decision-making.
	There will be young people who choose not to participate in this program and we will know why.
IN PROGRESS	Students will be interested in participating in Peer Driven Change and these experiences will positively impact their experience with Path4Ward and their decicions around their post-secondary learning plans.
	We can create adequate support for students (navigational and financial).
	Young people will expand their networks and social opportunities.
	Young people will find that having access to learning dollars will make it easier and attractive for them to participate because they have access to funds immediately.
YET TO UNCOVER	Young people who are eligible will find this opportunity as a valuable way to gain skills, tools and resources needed to explore their career and personal life path interests.
	Young people will be advocates for themselves as they navigate this new program and path.
	Young people who participate in this program will continue down a purposeful path to their futures, post-Path4Ward as lifelong learners.
	Students who participate in Path4Ward will complete the program.
INVALIDATED	Young people will receive their Path4ward funds in a timely and effective manner so they will be used at their program of choice.

Appendix

1. Discovery Driven Process Assumptions

FAMILY AND PARENT ASSUMPTIONS

CATEGORIES	ASSUMPTIONS
VALIDATED	Families will empower and support their young people in this opportunity.
	Path4Ward partners will provide support to families in different ways (one-on-one, in person events, virtual events, etc) to understand Path4Ward and support their children.
IN PROGRESS	Families will request* access to people and information in order to understand Path4Ward and how they can best support their children.
	After engaging in the program for the implementation year, the Path4Wards team will be able to create a family engagement plan/strategy for subsequent years, aligned with what we've seen and heard families need most in order to engage in the program.
	Families whose children decide to participate in this program will have sufficient access to information and resources they need to engage in it.
YET TO UNCOVER	Families will find that Path4Ward and the partners engaged with it support their children's learning goals and interests.
	Families will expand their understanding of post-secondary options for their children and gain knowledge about how to resource and navigate their post-secondary learning paths.

Appendix

1. Discovery Driven Process Assumptions

CDHE ASSUMPTIONS

CATEGORIES	ASSUMPTIONS
VALIDATED	CHDE will have to navigate internal institutional structures to get this program off the ground.
YET TO UNCOVER	In time, CDHE will respond to the learnings and opportunities offered by students, navigators, parents and districts to improve this program in ways that can be more learner-centered.
	Post-secondary enrollment rates will increase over time as a result of students participating in this program.
INVALIDATED	CDHE will develop the capacity to interact directly with students.

ZERO DROPOUTS/NAVIGATOR ASSUMPTIONS

CATEGORIES	ASSUMPTIONS
VALIDATED	Staff will expand their networks and toolbox of resources.
	Staff will run into areas of systemic barriers and will have to navigate necessary workarounds as needed.
	Staff will test the application of peer-driven change concepts with this population.
IN PROGRESS	Staff support will lead to positive program experiences in Path4ward.
	Staff will evaluate their ability to change their way of supporting appropriate for peer-driven change.
YET TO UNCOVER	Staff support will lead to positive experiences in bridging the path between high school and higher education/career as students try this new opportunity.

Appendix

1. Discovery Driven Process Assumptions

DISTRICT ASSUMPTIONS

CATEGORIES	ASSUMPTIONS
VALIDATED	Some districts may need support from Path4Ward partners to apply to participate in the program as a new applicant.
	This program will be appealing to districts across the state (rural, urban, small, big, etc.) in the initial pilot.
IN PROGRESS	Path4Ward partners will provide programming for districts to support their understanding of the program and how to best support/recruit students to engage with it (virtual and in person opportunities).
	Districts will be sufficiently incentivized by the Path4ward PPR structure to promote it for their early graduates.
YET TO UNCOVER	Districts will find Path4Ward programming opportunities valuable.
	This program will be appealing to districts across the state (rural, urban, small, big, etc.) beyond the initial ones in the pilot.
	Districts and local schools will conduct outreach to students who might be good matches for this program in future years.
	Districts will expand their offerings and openness to ideas like Path4Ward, in service of creating more post-secondary learning opportunities for students, especially for students before their junior years so they can plan accordingly.
	Interested districts will be supported in reviewing and possibly revising their structures to allow for more students to reach early graduation and increase student access to these opportunities.

Appendix

2. List of Participating Schools and Districts

Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Aurora Public Schools

Charter School Institute Consortium
- The Academy of Charter Schools
- Colorado Early Colleges - Aurora
- Colorado Early Colleges - Colorado Springs
- Colorado Early Colleges - Douglas County
- Colorado Early Colleges - Fort Collins

Greeley-Evans School District 6

Harrison School District 2

Rural Consortium
- Canon City Schools
- Clear Creek Independent School District
- Cotopaxi School District RE-3
- East Grand School District
- Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1
- West Grand School District 1-JT

Appendix

3. List of Post-Secondary Institutions

Academy for Dental Assisting Careers

Aims Community College

Arapahoe Community College

Colorado State University

Colorado State University-Pueblo

Community College of Denver

Concorde Career College

Ed2Go

Elevate Salon Institute

Elysian Academy of Cosmetology

Front Range Community College

Independent Electrical Contractors Rocky Mountain Association (IECRM)

Institute of Business and Medical Careers (IBMC) College

Metropolitan State University Denver

Pickens Technical College

Pikes Peak State College

Pima Medical Institute

University of Colorado - Boulder

University of Colorado - Colorado Springs

University of Denver