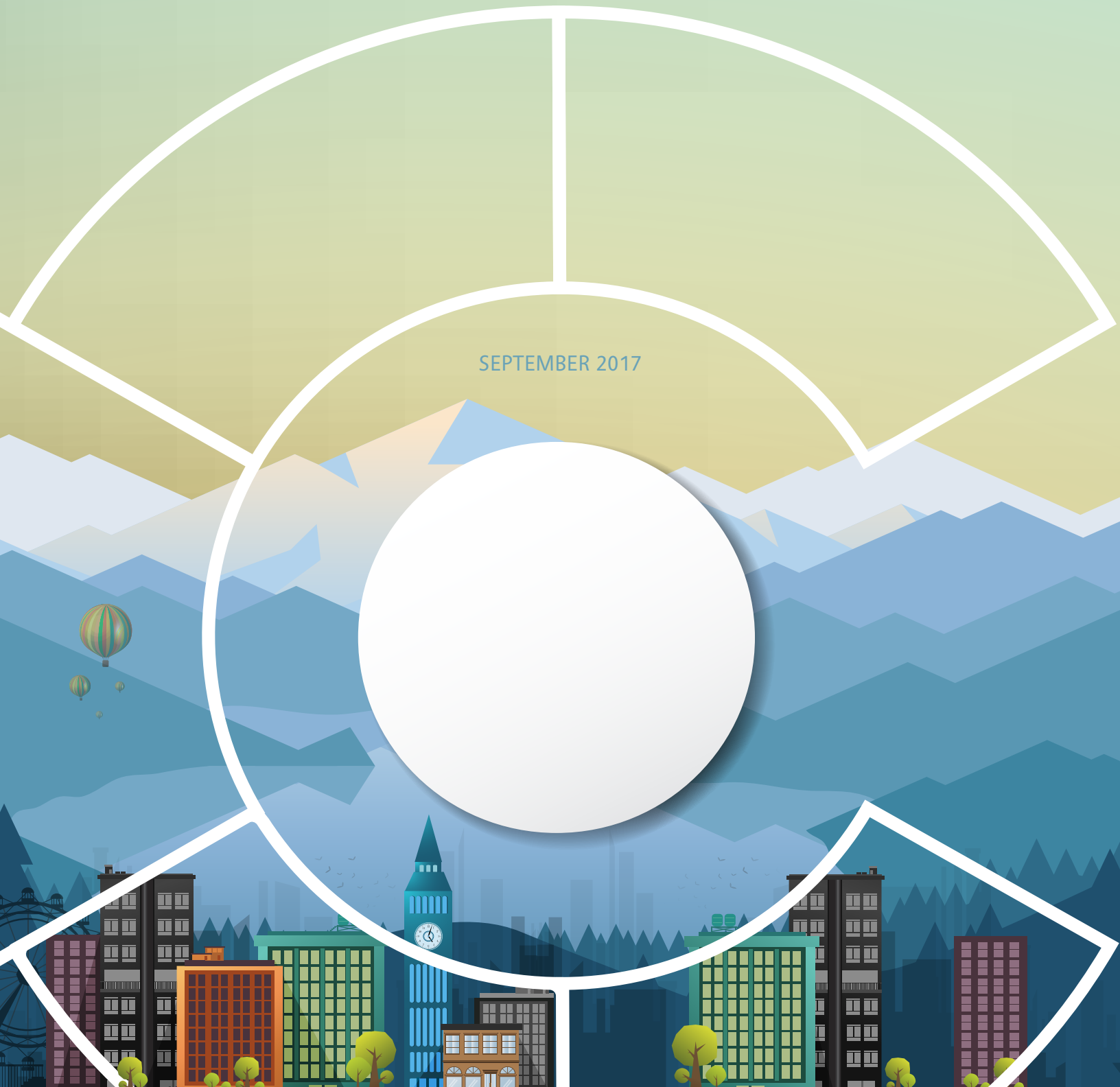


OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

A touchstone for our state's future

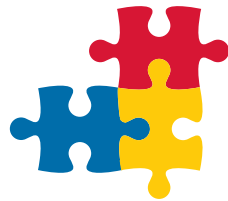
SEPTEMBER 2017





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OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Colorado's economy has experienced tremendous growth and change in recent years, and the trend is anticipated to continue. According to the Colorado Business Economic Outlook for 2017, Colorado is projected to again be among the top 10 states in the nation for employment growth this year.¹ At the same time, Colorado's unemployment rate is hovering right around 3 percent, lower than the U.S. rate of about 4.5 percent and the lowest since Colorado began recording, meaning our employment market is very tight.^{2,3}

But growth isn't the full story. The types of jobs available in Colorado – and the necessary education and skills to succeed in those jobs – are also changing. By 2020, 74 percent of our jobs in Colorado will need a worker with some post-secondary credentials.⁴ As of 2014, just over 54 percent of Coloradans have a post-secondary credential.⁵ ***In order for Colorado to maintain its competitive economic advantage, we need to find solutions to effectively cultivate our own workforce. In short, we need all hands on deck if we are to move our state forward.***

This economic imperative is the driving force behind the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce's leadership in the **Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative (DOYI)**, a multi-sector approach to creating a pipeline of educational and employment opportunities for Colorado's youth, ages 16 to 24, who are disconnected from education and employment.

The Initiative has found early success in implementing and supporting programs in the Denver metro area to help young adults complete their high school equivalency tests, take the next steps in their post-secondary education and find and retain jobs. However, solving this challenge long term and at scale requires system-level changes. ***This report examines Colorado's recent progress and identifies opportunities to change state-level public policy in the areas of education and workforce development to strengthen Colorado's economy and support vulnerable youth at the same time.***

The good news is that there has been a lot of positive, bipartisan policy activity in the areas of education and workforce development in Colorado recently. There is momentum and policy "infrastructure" to build upon. That said, much more work lies ahead, particularly in developing and executing specific strategies to support opportunity youth within the domains of education and workforce development.

We hope that this report will be a useful tool to policymakers and advocates alike in identifying opportunities for policy action, establishing shared criteria for evaluating those opportunities and, ultimately, in advancing our shared goals of ensuring Colorado's economy is strong, our workforce vibrant and all our young people have every opportunity for success.

In partnership,

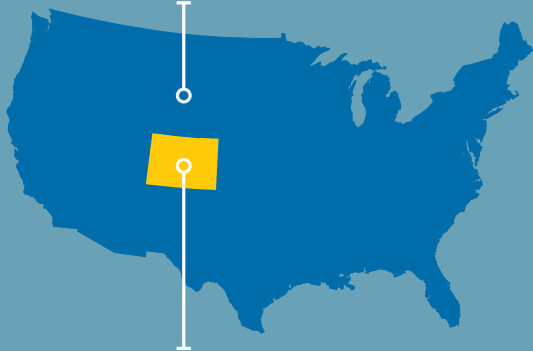
Kelly J. Brough
President and CEO
Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce

Lorena Zimmer
Talent Pipeline Director
Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative

WHO ARE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

16 - 24 year-olds not in school or in the workforce

5.5 million American youth



65,300 or 10% of Colorado youth

WHY DOES THIS POPULATION MATTER?



WORKFORCE ISSUES

- In 2020, **74%** of Colorado jobs will need some post-secondary credentials
- As of 2014, just over **54%** of Coloradans had a two-year degree or higher
- Workers are exiting workforce at a substantially higher rate than those entering
- Historic unemployment lows make hiring challenging



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

- In 2016, **10,530** students in grades seven to 12 dropped out
- **12,456** students failed to complete high school
- **38%** of those who failed to complete may never attain a high school credential



ECONOMIC COST

- Annual taxpayer cost estimated at **\$13,900** for each opportunity youth
- Annual societal cost at **\$37,450** for each opportunity youth
- Total compounding costs over an average lifespan reach **\$1.5 trillion** for taxpayer burden (**\$4.75 trillion** in societal costs)

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Colorado is considered a national leader in supporting the education-to-employment pipeline, but much more needs to be done. This report finds that, among many efforts, Colorado could consider:



Evaluating existing efforts to determine best practices and needed course corrections

Opportunities include: Implementing a comprehensive analysis of existing Colorado initiatives to determine the impact.



Adopting targeted strategies to close opportunity gaps for at-risk youth

Opportunities include: Increasing or eliminating the school attendance age limit and expanding the reach of programs intended to create pipelines to the workforce by ensuring they serve youth who have already left the educational system.



Making strategic investments and financing changes for education and workforce programs

Opportunities include: Changing the student count data in the school finance act to ensure schools are paid for serving students throughout the school year.



Harnessing the power of local innovation

Opportunities include: Supporting expansion and replication of best practices within successful dual high school and college enrollment programs.



Enhancing data collection and alignment to ensure more efficient and effective service delivery

Opportunities include: Ensuring uniform data transparency requirements for all types of higher education schools to empower students.

WHO ARE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

Opportunity youth, formerly referred to as “disconnected” youth, are adolescents and young adults, ages 16 to 24 years old, who are neither in school nor working. Many of these young people have the intent and motivation to succeed, but lack the opportunities and family and social support networks to help them get back on track. The circumstances that led to their classification as opportunity youth are varied, but this diverse population shares the unfortunate commonality that they are disconnected from the structures and systems that are intended to prepare them for a successful transition to adulthood and a productive future.

They are referred to as opportunity youth because of the tremendous economic and social opportunity cost associated with their absence from education and employment. As Gen. Colin Powell and his wife, Alma Powell, stated in a 2012 report, opportunity youth “represent enormous untapped potential for our society.”⁶

Opportunity youth are

1 in 7

young adults – about

65,300

Coloradans (10%) and

5,500,000

Americans (13.8%)
ages 16 to 24.

Source: “Zeroing In On Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in America’s Cities,” Kristen Lewis and Sarah Burd-Sharps, Measure of America, June 2015.

A 2011 economic analysis quantified that untapped potential in terms of both direct taxpayer burden and broader social cost. It found that each opportunity youth represents an immediate taxpayer burden of \$13,900 per year and an immediate social burden of \$37,450 per year in 2011 dollars. Those costs compound over time. “Once each opportunity youth turns/becomes 25, he or she will subsequently impose a future lifetime taxpayer burden of \$170,740 and a social burden of \$529,030. Thus, the immediate burden is only a fraction of the future loss in potential: on average, only one quarter of the burden is incurred in youth (up to age 24); three-quarters is incurred afterward (ages 25-65).”⁷ The report went on to say that in aggregate, this population imposes a total taxpayer burden of more than \$1.5 trillion and an aggregate social burden value of \$4.75 trillion.⁸ These numbers are so large they are difficult to fully comprehend, but they do make a compelling case for why state policymakers, responsible for allocating limited tax dollars, should engage actively to help prevent Colorado kids from becoming disconnected and helping disconnected youth to re-engage: **the cost of inaction is too great.**

It was estimated that in 2015, one in 7 young adults in America – about 5.5 million Americans or 13.8 percent of people in this age range – are opportunity youth.⁹ In Colorado, the opportunity youth population is estimated to be 65,300 young adults or 10 percent.¹⁰

National research has found that the disconnection rate is markedly higher for African Americans (21.6 percent), Native Americans (27.8 percent) and Latinos (16.3 percent) than it is for whites (11.3 percent) and Asian Americans (7.9 percent).¹¹ The same report, which focused on the experiences of opportunity youth in America’s major urban centers found similar disparities in Colorado Springs and Denver.¹²

Over their lifetime,
each opportunity youth will cost taxpayers



\$170,740

with an overall social burden of

\$529,030



Source: “The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth,” Clive R. Belfield, Henry M. Levin and Rachel Rosen, January 2012

As noted before, there are many reasons that lead to youth disengaging from education and employment. Some of the subpopulations and/or characteristics of youth who are at a greater risk for becoming opportunity youth include:¹³

- Youth in **foster care**
- Youth who are **homeless**
- Youth who are **immigrants**
- Youth in the **juvenile or criminal justice system**
- Youth who identify as **lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender**
- Youth who are **parenting**

These are, of course, not exclusive categories. Youth may be part of two or more of these groups at one time and/or may transition from one category to another.



A Snapshot of Key Colorado Education and Workforce Data

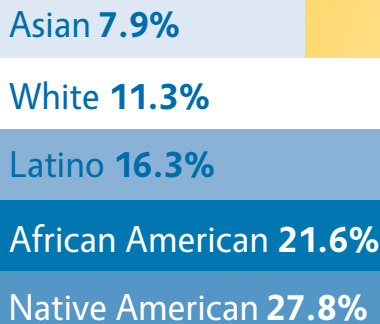
Given what we know about those most likely to become opportunity youth, it is not surprising to see Colorado's educational and workforce data show that minority youth and those who are low-income, homeless, migrant and/or in foster care are more likely to disconnect from education and employment. This section provides a snapshot of key Colorado data as a foundation to understanding our policy landscape.

In aggregate, there is good news to report on the K-12 education front. According to 2015-16 school year data from the Colorado Department of Education, the annual dropout rate is at an all-time low of just 2.3 percent, and the four-year high school graduation rate is up to 78.9 percent – an increase of 6.5 percentage points since 2010.¹⁴ Colorado is headed in the right direction in reducing dropout rates and supporting students in on-time completion of high school for the student population as a whole.

However, despite these encouraging trends, the data shows that there is still much work to be done, particularly in supporting minority and at-risk students. While the overall dropout rate was at an all-time low, there were still 10,530 Colorado public school students in grades seven to 12 who dropped out in the 2015-16 school year.¹⁵ Dropout rates were higher for minority students, as well as students who were in foster care, homeless, migrant or English language learners.¹⁶

There are many public policies that relate specifically to the challenges facing certain opportunity youth in these subgroups. While policy changes intended to impact risk factors for disconnection are important, they are not the focus of this paper. Rather, this paper looks exclusively at the educational and workforce systems from which youth have become disengaged and focuses on policy opportunities to prevent disconnection and/or foster reconnection.

YOUTH OF COLOR ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE DISCONNECTED



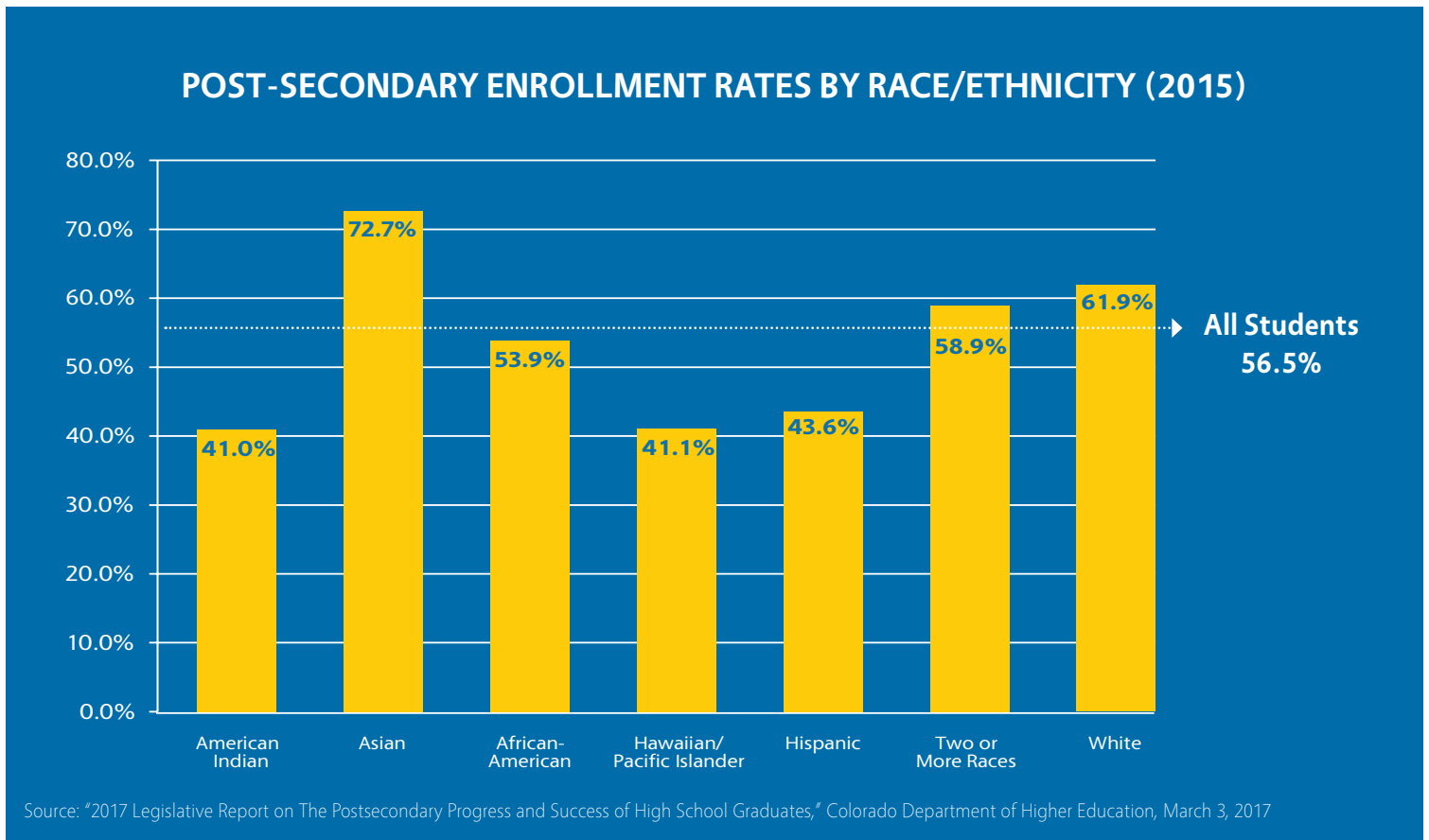
Source: "Zeroing In On Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in America's Cities," Kristen Lewis and Sarah Burd-Sharps, Measure of America, June 2015

Similarly, there are alarming disparities in the four-year graduation rates among racial and ethnic groups and distinct student types. The four-year graduation rate in 2015-16 for white students was 84 percent and 86 percent for Asian students, but it stood at just 62 percent for American Indian students, 70 percent for Hispanic students and 72 percent for African American students.¹⁷ When you look at four-year graduation rates for specific types of students, the data is even worse: economically disadvantaged students: 64.2 percent; students with limited English proficiency: 58.7 percent; homeless students: 52.7 percent; and students in foster care: 33.2 percent.¹⁸

Data on dropouts and four-year completion are only part of the picture relevant to the discussion about opportunity youth in Colorado. The Colorado Department of Education tracks information about students who fail to complete high school in the standard four-year timeframe. High school completion includes all students who graduate plus those who attain a high school equivalency, such as a GED.¹⁹ In the class of 2016 statewide, there were 12,456 students who did not complete high school.²⁰ Of these students, more than half (6,656 students) were still enrolled at the end of the school year and retain the opportunity to complete in the five, six or seven-year timeframe.²¹ While it is great to see that over 53 percent of those non-completers remain in the educational pipeline, 5.7 percent reported exiting high school to prepare for a high school equivalency, but had not finished by the end of the 2015-16 school year.²² A whopping 38 percent, or 4,740 students, were classified as “unrecovered dropouts.”²³ It is this student population that we are most concerned with for the purpose of this work.

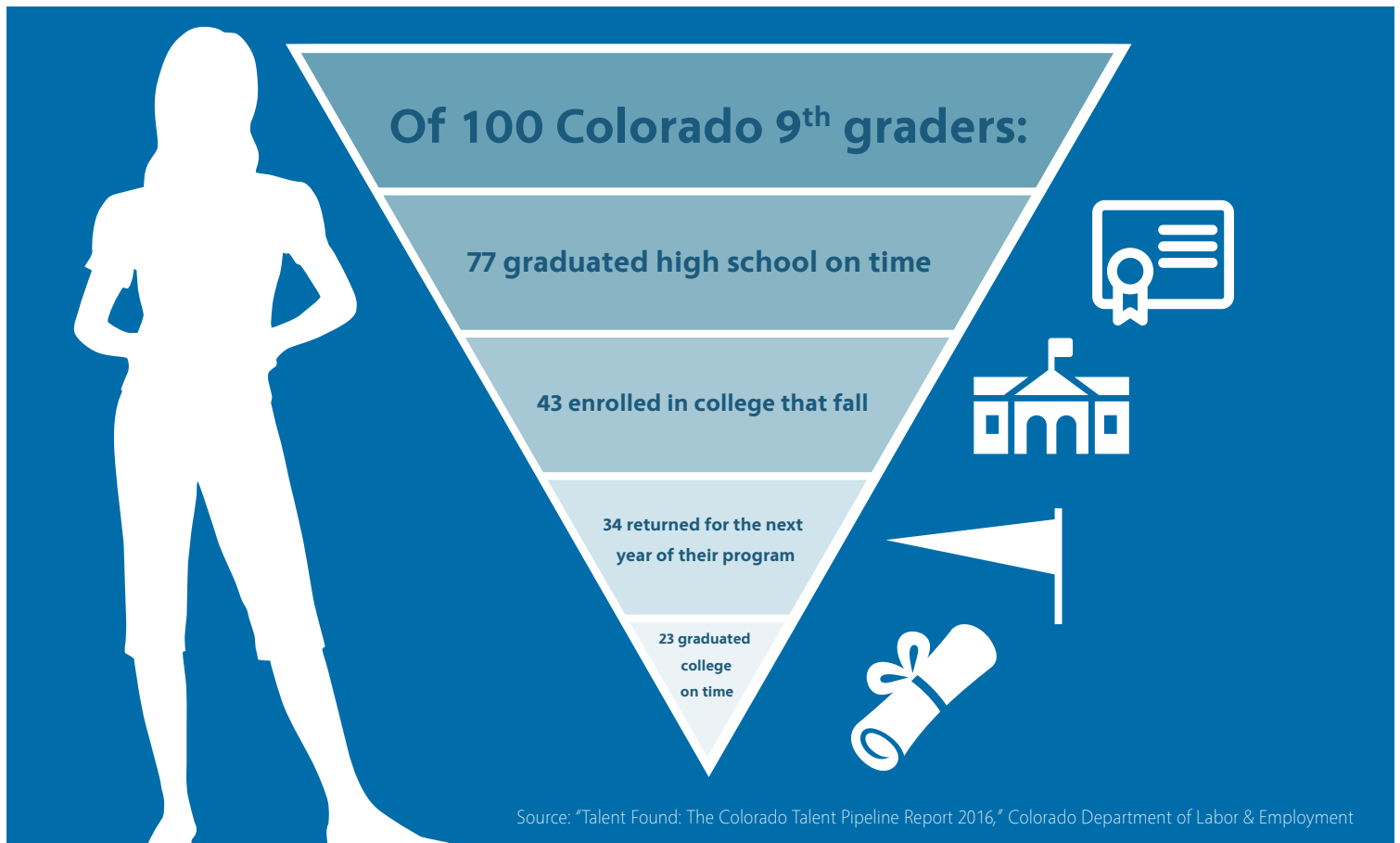
Given what we know about the educational requirements for Colorado’s jobs, it is important to understand which students are successfully transitioning to higher education. The total number of students who graduated from high school in Colorado in 2015 was 53,128. According to the Colorado Department of Higher Education, only 56.5 percent enrolled in a post-secondary institution in Colorado or out-of-state in the fall immediately following their graduation and 43.5 percent did not.²⁴ There is very little data available to describe the paths taken by those who did not enroll in a postsecondary institution following high school graduation.

When you compare the 2015 K-12 graduation data with higher education enrollment data, you see a notable drop-off in the number of Hispanic and low-income students who made the transition from high school to higher education. Specifically, the high school class of 2015 was 27.8 percent Hispanic and 27.3 percent qualified for the federal free-and-reduced-price lunch program; however, of the 2015 college-going students, only 21.4 percent were Hispanic and 20.1 percent qualified for the federal free-and-reduced-price



lunch program.²⁵ While 2015 enrollment rates increased for all racial and ethnic groups over the previous year, except Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, African American, Hispanic and American Indian students enrolled at rates well below the state average.²⁶ The vast majority – 75 percent – of 2015 high school graduates who enrolled in college did so at a four-year institution. Just 25 percent enrolled in a two-year institution. Asian and white students were most likely to enroll in a four-year school, while Hispanics were most likely to enroll in a two-year college.²⁷

Whether you transition to higher education is one metric of success, but persistence in higher education is even more important in terms of job preparation. Students who drop out of college are most likely to do so during or immediately after the first year, so looking at the first-year persistence rate is an important indicator. The overall first-year persistence rate for Colorado students graduating in the spring of 2014 was 80.2 percent, as compared to the overall national retention rate of about 70 percent.²⁸ The first-year retention rate ranged from 64.3 percent for American Indian or Alaskan Natives to 88.3 percent for Asian students.²⁹ Ultimately attaining a credential is critically important in workforce readiness. Data from the Colorado Department of Higher Education shows that approximately 52 percent of Colorado students attain some level of credential within six years of enrolling in an institution of higher education.³⁰



Not surprisingly, the disparities in academic achievement that we see in education data persist in employment data. According to U.S. Census Bureau data reported in the 2016 State of Working Colorado report, the highest rates of joblessness and underemployment in 2015 were among racial and ethnic minorities, young workers and less-educated Coloradans. In 2015 the unemployment rate for African American Coloradans was 11.5 percent, almost three times the 4.1 percent unemployment rate for white workers.³¹ Latino workers fared better than their African American counterparts with an unemployment rate of 6.4 percent, but that is still more than 2 percent higher than the white unemployment rate.³² There are similar disparities in underemployment: African American Coloradans experienced underemployment at 17.1 percent and Latino workers at 13 percent, while white Coloradans had an underemployment rate of just 8.1 percent.³³

From all this data, it is clear that educational and employment experiences in Colorado vary significantly based on race/ethnicity, income and life circumstances. As we consider strategies to support opportunity youth, we must realize that targeted policy approaches, designed to meet the needs of youths from varied backgrounds, are essential.

Colorado's Workforce Needs

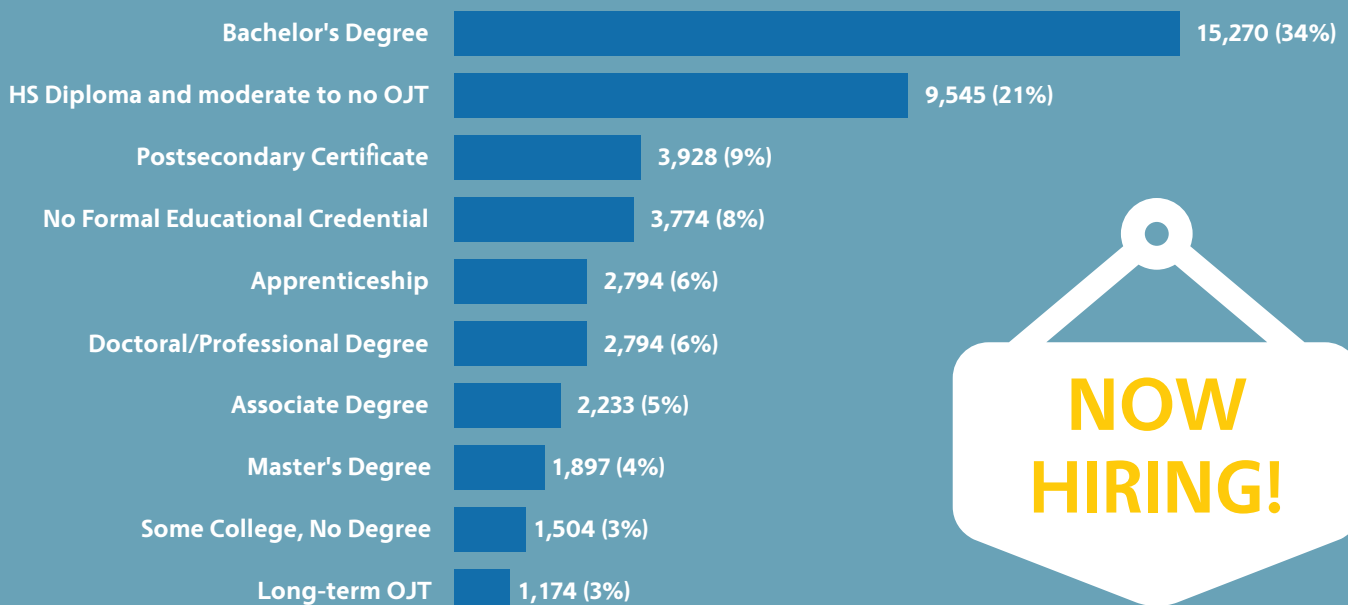
Understanding what employers need from the workforce and how those needs are evolving is essential in understanding what will be most effective in policy efforts to improve education and workforce development outcomes.

Demographic changes in Colorado are impacting the availability and nature of our future workforce. The labor force in Colorado is continuing to increase, but at a slower rate of growth than in the past.³⁴ And while Colorado has historically had a younger population than the nation as a whole, aging Baby Boomers will change Colorado's age distribution rapidly. Occupation clusters with the largest number of workers who are 55 years or older include office and administrative support, sales, business and finance and education, training and library services.³⁵

As our workforce ages, we are also seeing an increase in diversity. By 2050, Colorado's workforce will near a 50-50 balance between white and non-white populations.³⁶ This is particularly significant when we consider the racial disparities in high school completion rates, higher education attainment and employment rates between African American and Latino Coloradans and their white counterparts. As we consider our workforce policies, we cannot ignore the impacts that these changing demographics will have on demand for labor and the need to ensure targeted educational strategies to ensure our young people of color are not left behind.

The *Talent Found: The Colorado Talent Pipeline Report 2016*, TalentFOUND, provides an annual snapshot of jobs that have high annual openings, above average growth rates and offer a living wage. The 2016 report finds that higher-income "top jobs" are concentrated in the fields of health care, business and finance, information technology and engineering.³⁷ Middle-income jobs are concentrated in construction, office and administrative support, health care support and education.³⁸ While the greatest percentage of "top job" openings require a bachelor's degree (34 percent), a significant portion are available to people with a high school degree and moderate to no on-the-job-training (OJT) (21 percent).³⁹ The percent of job openings available for people with a postsecondary certificate is 9 percent and with an apprenticeship is 6 percent.⁴⁰

TOP JOBS SHARE OF JOB OPENINGS BY TYPICAL EDUCATION NEEDED FOR ENTRY



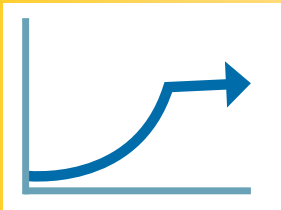
Source: "Talent Found: The Colorado Talent Pipeline Report 2016," Colorado Department of Labor & Employment

To advance policy change to support opportunity youth in Colorado, you must understand these key baseline facts:



There are an estimated **65,300** opportunity youth in Colorado who represent huge potential to strengthen our workforce and our economy.

This population is diverse in nature. They are disproportionately living in poverty and facing life circumstances that make it harder for them to maintain a connection to traditional education and employment pathways. Data on dropouts, graduation rates, higher education enrollment and persistence rates and employment rates clearly show the disparity of experiences of different groups of youth.



Colorado's workforce is growing, but at a slower rate than in the past, meaning we need even more intentional strategies to ensure our residents are prepared to fill the jobs of the future and Colorado's economy remains robust.

Demographic shifts in our state's population will change the face our workforce. The aging Baby Boomers and increasing diversification of Colorado's population means that the workforce of tomorrow will look different.



This data tells us that we need new, **thoughtful and targeted strategies** that will close opportunity gaps for youth of color and those facing adversity, as well as ensure a well-prepared workforce for the jobs of the future.

POLICY AND OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Recent Colorado Progress

Over the past decade, Colorado has passed a number of important bills to change our state’s educational and workforce development policies. These bills have covered a wide range of topics and created a broad and strong foundation for improving educational outcomes and strengthening our workforce development system. Among these are innovative pieces of legislation like Senate Bill 10-191, which focused on greater accountability for educators and principals and enhances education for students. National advocates have identified Colorado as a leader in adopting state-level policies to support youth in completing their education and successfully transitioning to employment.

Colorado’s success is due in no small part to strong, consistent, bipartisan leadership in this work. Gov. John Hickenlooper (2011 to present) and his predecessor, Gov. Bill Ritter (2007–11), have both been stalwart champions of education and workforce policies to strengthen Colorado’s economy and provide opportunity to its residents. Recent legislation in the areas of education and workforce development has been sponsored by a wide range of legislators and has, by and large, enjoyed bipartisan support in both chambers of the Colorado General Assembly. Authentic, bipartisan support has been a critical aspect of the success in advancing this work in Colorado with nearly even numbers of Republicans, Democrats and unaffiliated voters. Further, there is a strong and growing interest in strategies to strengthen the education-to-employment pipeline among diverse stakeholder groups from the business, education and youth success advocacy communities in Colorado, as evidenced by the level of engagement in and support for the Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative.

Just as there are many different circumstances that lead youth to becoming classified as opportunity youth, there are many public policies that relate specifically to certain groups of opportunity youth addressing those circumstances which contributed to them being disconnected from education or employment. While policy changes intended to impact risk factors for disconnection are important, they are not the focus of this paper. Rather, this paper looks exclusively at the educational and workforce systems from which youth have become disengaged and focuses on policy opportunities to prevent disconnection and/or foster reconnection. And so, the policy recommendations included here are specifically focused on educational and workforce development policies relevant to youth success.

LOOKING AHEAD: POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

While Colorado’s policy efforts to strengthen the education-to-employment pipeline have been robust over the last several years, challenges persist around engaging certain groups of youth – including youth of color and low-income youth – in meaningful career pathways. Further, there has been insufficient focus on programs to reengage youth who have already become disconnected from education or employment. As such, there is room to build on Colorado’s progress to date and pursue additional policy change to further support Colorado’s workforce. This policy change may be pursued through legislation, regulation, executive action, partnerships and/or agency initiatives.

Future policy efforts should be considered in five key areas. Those include, in no particular order:



Evaluation of existing efforts to determine best practices and needed course corrections



Targeted strategies to close opportunity gaps for at-risk youth



Strategic investments and financing changes for education and workforce programs



Harnessing the power of local innovation



Data collection and alignment to ensure more efficient and effective service delivery

LAWS ENACTED TO STRENGTHEN OUR EDUCATION-TO-EMPLOYMENT PIPELINE

Between 2009 and 2017 Colorado enacted more than 25 new laws to strengthen our education-to-employment pipeline. A complete list of relevant, enacted laws is included in the appendix of this paper. Below are six representative bills to highlight the breadth of work and bipartisan support. The Chamber supported a number of these bills.

<p>House Bill 09-1319, Concurrent Enrollment Public School Students Reps. Massey (R) and Merrifield (D) / Sen. Williams (D)</p>	<p>This bill authorized school districts to partner with institutions of higher education to offer college courses to qualified high school students. The bill set a basic framework for the program, including establishing a maximum concurrent enrollment tuition rate, but leaves a significant amount of discretion to local education leaders to determine the parameters of programs in their communities.</p>
<p>House Bill 13-1165, Creation of a Manufacturing Career Pathway Reps. Wilson (R) / Sen. Heath (D)</p>	<p>This legislation required cross-agency collaboration to design a robust career pathway, inclusive of multiple opportunities for obtaining cumulative skills and certifications, for students seeking employment in the manufacturing sector.</p>
<p>House Bill 14-1384, Higher Education Tuition Assistance Reps. McNulty (R) and Pettersen (D) / Sens. Crowder (R) and Ulibarri (D)</p>	<p>This bill established the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative, a state program housed in the Colorado Department of Higher Education, designed to use state funds to leverage local private resources to make college accessible and affordable for Colorado students. The program focuses on providing both financial assistance and support services to help Colorado students from low and middle-income families successfully navigate higher education and secure the certificate or degree they are seeking.</p>
<p>Senate Bill 14-205, Talent Pipeline Working Group Rep. Young (D) and Sen. Newell (D)</p>	<p>This legislation required cross-agency collaboration to assess workforce development needs across sectors, build talent pipeline development infrastructure, establish sector partnerships to develop career pathways programs in key industries and leverage data systems to improve alignment across state agencies. Further, the bill required the publication of the state’s annual talent pipeline report.</p>
<p>House Bill 15-1170, Increasing Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Reps. Kraft-Tharp (D) and Wilson (R) / Sens. Heath (D) and Hill (R)</p>	<p>Every year, the state evaluates the performance of public schools and districts based on a set of performance indicators, including a measure of the degree to which students complete high school prepared for postsecondary education and workforce (referred to as the postsecondary and workforce readiness – PWR – indicator). This bill changed the way the Colorado Department of Education calculated the PWR by including the percent of students who enroll in a postsecondary education program in the school year immediately following graduation, thus broadening the indicator to reward schools for preparing students to pursue a non-traditional pathway. The bill also created a new position, Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Statewide Coordinator, to serve as a link between state agencies and educational institutions in implementing innovative programs to support students.</p>
<p>House Bill 16-1289, Incentives to Complete Career Development Courses Reps. Duran (D) and Esgar (D) / Sens. Crowder (R) and Garcia (D)</p>	<p>This bill created the Career Development Success Pilot Program at the Colorado Department of Education to provide financial incentives for participating school districts and charter schools to encourage high school students to enroll in and successfully complete qualified industry certificate programs, internship or pre-apprentice programs and advanced placement courses. The pilot program is set to repeal Sept. 1, 2019.</p>



Policy Focus: Evaluation & Course Correction

The volume of recent activity and diversity of legislative sponsors shows the depth of interest in this topic. While there is momentum behind the work, it is important to note that much of this work is nascent. Most of these policies have not been in place long enough to really evaluate their effectiveness or understand the impact they're making individually or collectively. Moving forward we must protect the policies in place, giving them the time and space needed to work, but also ensure attention to and investment in evaluation to understand their impact.

To the extent possible, evaluation efforts should be holistic, looking not only at how policies are implemented individually, but how they are working together to impact specifically identified population outcomes relevant to opportunity youth. Recognizing that different agencies hold primary responsibility for implementing different policies, it is important that there is alignment in the evaluation efforts to ensure we are defining and measuring success in the same ways. Colorado has a number of existing interagency and cross-sector collaborations already working in this space, including the Colorado Workforce Development Council and the Business Experiential Learning (BEL) Commission, which are uniquely positioned to identify shared population-level metrics for success and coordinate evaluation efforts to understand how Colorado's existing policy framework is or is not meeting the needs of our opportunity youth population.

SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY CHANGE

- **Implement Comprehensive Evaluation.**

The Colorado Departments of Education, Higher Education and Labor and Employment all do good work in implementing and evaluating policy and programs with fidelity and each periodically report back to the legislature about the outcomes and results of priority initiatives. However, they typically do so independently and within existing resources. While cross-agency collaboration is encouraged and valued today, as is evidenced through the work of the Colorado Workforce Development Council, the BEL Commission and the creation of staff positions to coordinate across agencies, it could be strengthened by implementing a comprehensive, cross-agency evaluation of Colorado's recent policy efforts to create a stronger and more effective education-to-employment pipeline to determine what is working, what is not and what next steps Colorado could pursue to further strengthen efforts, with a specific eye toward analyzing the effectiveness of partnership and alignment across systems serving opportunity youth. To be most impactful, the evaluation should encompass the work of multiple state agencies and should be managed by the Colorado Workforce Development Council. The report should be made public and presented to appropriate committees of the Colorado Legislature.

- **Require Annual Reporting Specific to the Opportunity Youth Population Within Existing Department Reports.** Policies and programs designed to benefit opportunity youth reside within multiple state agencies. In accordance with statute, those agencies produce high-quality reports with data relevant to the experience of opportunity youth, including, but not limited to: *Talent Found: Colorado Talent Pipeline Report*, the *State Policy Report on Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement*, and *Legislative Report on the Postsecondary Progress and Success of High School Graduates*. While these reports are helpful in understanding the experience of opportunity youth today, this population is not the primary focus of these reports, and the data is spread across multiple reports, released at different times each year. Without mandating the development of a new report, the agencies responsible for producing each of these existing reports could include a section specifically related to data and information on opportunity youth and could work together to coordinate their content to ensure alignment across the reports. Doing so would bring specific attention to opportunities to better support this population across multiple agencies.



Policy Focus: Closing Gaps for Specific Populations

As noted in the background section of this paper, data is showing some encouraging trends overall in educational attainment and employment in Colorado. However, we know that opportunity youth are most likely to be in population groups still struggling. Further, the review of recent policy activity in Colorado has shown a focus on keeping students in school – strategies to prevent them from becoming opportunity youth – rather than strategies to engage youth who have already disconnected from the educational and employment systems. As such, we need more intentional policy focus on and investment in strategies to support youth at-risk of disconnection across K-12, higher education and workforce development, as well as strategies to re-engage those who have already fallen out of the education to employment pipeline.

In the education realm, there are promising efforts to provide the kind of targeted support opportunity youth require, including a focus on competency-based education, which could facilitate easier transitions across districts and less onerous pathways for dropouts to re-engage and complete their high school degrees; alternative education campuses designed to provide wrap-around supports for non-traditional students; and the creation of the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative, which is supporting local communities in making higher education more affordable and attainable for low and middle-income Colorado families. Bridging the educational and employment worlds, Colorado is a national leader in establishing work-based education and training programs that facilitate career pathways for students through sector partnerships. In workforce development, we see signs of innovation to ensure those who need training programs most can access them, whether it be through offering programs in the evenings and on weekends or by providing transportation.

SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY CHANGE

- **Change the School Attendance Age Limit.**

Colorado law states that free public education shall be available to students between the ages of five and 21 years old (Colorado Revised Statutes 22-1-102). As such, students who have dropped out of school and are interested in re-engaging can only do so up to their 21st birthday. After that age, school districts are no longer funded by the state to serve students. This policy effectively puts a time limit on the chance for disconnected youth to re-engage and complete their high school diploma. While Colorado's age limit of 21 years old is largely in line with other states, Texas allows students between the ages of 21 and 26 to enroll if they are "admitted by a school district to complete the requirements for a high school diploma" (Texas Education Code 25.001) and there are a handful of states that have no statutory age limit to access free public education (District of Columbia, Kansas, Nevada and Tennessee). California law allows certain charter schools that have specific programming developed and delivered in partnership with workforce development programs to enroll students of any age. Colorado could opt to eliminate the maximum age limit to which free education must be offered out-right, to all students or could look at a more narrowly defined window for extended age eligibility. For example, Colorado's existing Dropout Recovery Program, a dual-credit high school completion program operated by a community college and designed to serve students who have dropped out or are on the verge of dropping out, currently serves students 16 to 21 years old. Age eligibility for students who otherwise meet the Dropout Recovery Program criteria could be raised or eliminated. Another more limited approach would be to develop policy similar to California's and allow certain schools and programs that have a specific workforce development component to enroll students of any age.

- **Require Strategies to Broaden Reach of Youth Served by Work-Based Learning Programs.**

Colorado is a leader in establishing career pathways in specific industries through public-private partnerships. Today, we have active sector partnerships in many fields including health care, construction and manufacturing. Partnerships are implemented through leadership at the community level and reflect local priorities. The Colorado Workforce Development Council supports a network of partnerships that share best practices. In some, but not all cases, these partnerships engage opportunity youth. At the state level, the BEL Commission works to create experiential learning opportunities specifically for students in school. Whether through sector partnerships, local workforce boards, the BEL Commission and/or the Colorado Workforce Development Council, more should be done to establish specific strategies to reach out-of-school youth and offer them work-based learning opportunities.



Policy Focus: Strategic Investments & Financing Changes

Relative to other states, Colorado's investments in education (K-12 and higher education) and workforce development are quite low. Colorado ranked 42nd out of 50 states in adjusted per pupil funding for K-12 education according to a 2016 report from Education Week Research Center⁴¹ and ranked 47th out of 50 states in per pupil funding for higher education in 2014-15.⁴² Colorado's workforce development activities are almost exclusively federally funded.

While we know additional investment does not guarantee better outcomes, the reality is that systems with limited resources have less flexibility in targeting their investments to serve specific populations. As a result, the default is to support the majority population and, by definition, opportunity youth are a minority group because they aren't on a typical educational or employment pathway.

However, beyond additional investment in education and workforce development, it is important to examine how existing education and workforce development resources are being spent. Within existing budgets, there are opportunities to create more flexibility in how K-12 per pupil operating revenue (PPOR) is spent to meet the needs of opportunity youth. Specifically, this could include unbundling PPOR for high school students to enable students to take courses not offered in their school.

SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY CHANGE

- **Remove Rigid Revenue and Funding Policies from State Constitution.** Tax and revenue policy decisions have direct and consequential impacts on our state's ability to invest in infrastructure, education and other key pillars of our economy. Today, Colorado's legislators are severely limited in their ability to make critically important investment decisions about Colorado's future. This is because embedded within our state constitution is a set of constrictive and conflicting tax and spending policies that limit overall state revenue and expenditure growth, establish rigid ratios pertaining to the allocation of property tax revenues and require set expenditure growth for education. Unless and until these constitutional constraints are removed or significantly reformed, it will be impossible for policymakers to make the necessary investments in our education and workforce systems and targeted spending to support opportunity youth.
- **School Finance Act: Count Date.** School districts in Colorado are primarily funded through per pupil revenue (PPR) determined by a student census count conducted once a year in October. This means that schools receive funds based on the number of students in the school on a given day or, in some cases, a small number of days in October. The single count date taken early in the academic year creates a perverse incentive for schools to build their student population early in the year and then allow at-risk or high-needs students to drop out without financial penalty. Further, there is a disincentive for schools to re-engage disconnected students later in the year, as they do not receive funding for those students if they were not enrolled and in attendance on the count date. It's for these reasons that the Chamber supported SB13-213, the Future School Finance Act, which would restructure PPOR to an average daily membership model and would require funding to follow the student.

Other states have implemented alternative models including multiple count dates or count periods, which count the student population two or more times per year, and average daily attendance or average daily membership policies, which determines school funding based on attendance or enrollment throughout the year rather than at a given point in time. There are pros and cons to each approach and financial "winners and losers" based on the approach taken, but from a student retention and re-engagement perspective, the single count date model is deeply flawed. In 2017, the General Assembly passed and the governor signed into law, House Bill 1340, which establishes a two-year legislative interim committee to study Colorado's approach to school finance. The charge to the interim committee is broad and covers a host of issues relevant to opportunity youth, including the count date. Members of the school finance interim committee could prioritize addressing the count date and mandate that Colorado move to a new count date mechanism as a stand-alone policy change or in concert with other revisions to the School Finance Act.

It is important to note that Colorado legislators have studied and debated the count date issue in recent years. The General Assembly passed legislation in 2010 directing a study of count date mechanisms (Senate Bill 10-008, Average Daily Membership Study, Johnston/Scanlan), which resulted in a report prepared by the Colorado Department of Education and presented to the General Assembly in January 2011. The report included a set of six policy recommendations, including adding more count days and adopting membership as the basis for the count. The recommendations from this study were factored into the proposed School Finance Act revision passed through Senate Bill 13-213, which would have been enacted if Amendment 66, a statewide education tax increase proposal, had been approved by voters. However, because Amendment 66 was defeated, the revised School Finance Act was not implemented and Colorado retains a single count date mechanism for allocating school revenue.



Policy Focus: Harnessing the Power of Local Innovation

Colorado is a local control state with four workforce planning regions, 64 counties, 179 school districts and 466 colleges and universities. The upsides of local control include opportunities for innovation at the local level and chances to share best practices and learn from each other across communities. The downside is that the experiences in seeking support and resources for opportunity youth across the state may vary significantly from community to community and the opportunity for statewide policy impact is more limited.

While we don't want to lose the value of local innovation, we believe more can be done to create a culture of learning to ensure that best practices are shared so that all youth can benefit from programs and services that are most effective. Further, there are some functions that can be more efficiently handled at the state level without detrimental impact to local communities. Like the opportunities in data collection and alignment section, which follows, this is an area where policymakers must strive to balance competing priorities.

SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY CHANGE

- **Technical Assistance and/or Incentive Funding to Support Innovation at the County and School District Level to Braid Public Funding Sources.** Opportunity youth almost always face complex needs outside and in addition to their educational and job training needs. Often, it is impossible to comprehensively address the needs of vulnerable populations, including opportunity youth, through a single program or funding source. Luckily, many opportunity youth are likely to qualify for multiple social support programs, such as health care benefits through Medicaid, food access assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), financial support through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and/or work support programs funded by the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Many of these programs are administered at the local level through county governments, just as Title I dollars to support low-income students in K-12 education settings are administered by local officials in school districts and job training funds provided through WIOA are implemented by county workforce development agencies. It is up to local leaders to determine the best ways to leverage the various public funding sources available support vulnerable populations, including opportunity youth, but state leaders could offer technical assistance and/or incentive funds to encourage and nurture collaboration and innovation across local agencies.
- **Expand Dual Enrollment Programs & Replicate Best Practices.** Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to enroll in college-level courses and earn credits at no cost to them. These programs are designed to help smooth the transition between K-12 and higher education, increasing retention at this critical transition point, reducing remediation needs in higher education and decreasing the number of students who fail to complete high school, as well as the amount of time required for a student to obtain a postsecondary credential. In 2009, Colorado passed House Bill 09-1319, which established a specific statewide dual enrollment program known as Concurrent Enrollment. According to the Annual Report on Concurrent Enrollment, released in April 2017, 35,713 students participated in some type of dual enrollment program in the 2014-15 school year, including 25,534 students

who participated specifically in concurrent enrollment.⁴³ Concurrent enrollment programs are successfully attracting students who have historically been underrepresented in higher education. In 2015-16, as compared to the prior year, participation in concurrent enrollment programs increased among Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (21 percent increase) and Hispanic students (7 percent increase). While the momentum behind these programs is impressive and encouraging, we also know that implementation of concurrent enrollment has varied significantly across the state because program success hinges on individually negotiated local partnerships between school districts and postsecondary institutions. Best practices could be standardized and shared statewide in concurrent enrollment programs, provide technical assistance to districts and postsecondary institutions in executing partnership agreements and support high school teachers in receiving the credentials necessary to teach concurrent enrollment courses.



Policy Focus: Data Collection & Alignment

In order to develop and evaluate meaningful public policy, the state needs a way to collect and share data on the opportunity youth population. Colorado's existing data infrastructure is limited and siloed.

Given the nature of who opportunity youth are, many will come in contact with multiple state agencies and programs designed to help them reestablish connections to education or employment. However, there are distinct data collection systems for K-12 education, higher education, unemployment benefits, training and job placement, human services benefits management and criminal justice. Individuals are identified differently within these systems: K-12 education uses a unique student identifier number, while most other systems use social security numbers. With limited exceptions, these systems do not connect or interface. In some cases, data sharing agreements have been signed to allow agencies to provide aggregate information for population tracking purposes, but that data is typically not person-specific, nor shared in a real-time manner, limiting its usefulness. These data system limitations make it more difficult to efficiently and effectively serve the young person who is interfacing with multiple agencies and programs. Further, it limits the ability of agencies to effectively evaluate and adjust programming.

Historically, efforts to expand data collection or better link existing data systems have been met with resistance for two primary reasons. First, there are costs (financial and other resource costs) to improving interoperability of data system. Second, and perhaps more fundamental, there is a strong commitment to protecting individual privacy, particularly for minors, and suspicion about how data will be used. While there is certainly some validity to those concerns, Colorado lawmakers have tended to make policy decisions aimed at protecting privacy at the cost of implementing highly effective programs that can more efficiently serve youth across various government programs and systems. We must endeavor to strike a more balanced approach that will ensure individual privacy, while at the same time building data infrastructure to facilitate more efficient, effective program administration and support.

SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY CHANGE

- **Ensure Uniform Data Transparency Requirements to Empower Students.** Higher education is expensive and it can be difficult for students to gather the information necessary to make smart choices about which programs are best for them. In recent years, Colorado has seen dramatic growth in the number of Private Occupational Schools, which are private institutions, nonprofit and for-profit, providing vocational, technical or occupational skill training. The Division of Private Occupational Schools at the Colorado Department of Higher Education is responsible for regulating these schools. Today these schools are only required to publicly disclose program offerings and a schedule of tuition and fees. In contrast, public institutions of higher education are required to disclose much more detailed information about their programs, costs and outcomes. The state could implement uniform data transparency requirements for all types of schools, private and public, so that prospective students could more easily compare programs and make better informed decisions regarding what postsecondary school or program is the best investment of their time and resources. It is important to note that legislation on this topic was introduced in the 2017 session, Senate Bill 17-118, Concerning Consumer Information on Postsecondary Training; however, it failed to progress out of its first committee.

BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY YOUTH POLICY AGENDA

As we develop and implement an actionable agenda to support opportunity youth, we recognize we must remain nimble in evaluating policy proposals and opportunities for change. The following framework of value statements and policy criteria is provided as a tool for policymakers and advocates to use in advancing this work.

VALUES

These are the core beliefs that underlie and should be reflected in policies to support opportunity youth.

Our economy is changing and evolving. In order to maintain our competitive advantage, we must ensure Colorado's workforce is prepared with the education and skills to compete and succeed.

Individuals with higher levels of education and training have greater earning potential and opportunity to attain and maintain self-sufficiency, creating a more secure future for themselves and their families and delivering better health and educational outcomes for their children.

Our greatest success comes when we work across sectors (public, private and nonprofit) in partnership.

We can develop strategies that will support the needs of industry and individuals. We embrace a "both/and" approach to ensuring our companies have the workers they need and every Coloradan has the opportunity to work in a great job.

Our employers see themselves as playing a critical role in participating as co-creators and producers of talent – not just consumers of talent.

We must use data to guide policy decisions and allow new policies time and space to work.

Effectively addressing this issue requires that we seek best practices and innovative ideas and rigorously evaluate our efforts while taking the long-view and measuring our effectiveness over decades and generations.

POLICY CRITERIA

These questions are useful in evaluating and prioritizing policy opportunities within the focus areas of education and workforce development.

Does the policy fall within the broad categories of education or workforce development?

Recognizing that we value and support both prevention and reengagement strategies, does the policy focus on preventing disengagement or fostering re-engagement of young people ages 16 to 24?

Is this policy advancing a differentiated or targeted strategy to effectively engage or reengage and support the specific opportunity youth population (or youth particularly at-risk of becoming disconnected), as opposed to a general or "one-sized-fits-all" approach?

Is this policy generally supported or directly encouraged by the community of opportunity youth or their direct service providers as a needed change that will produce the greatest good for the largest number? Similarly, do business interests believe this will strengthen the workforce they seek to hire?

Is this policy supported by data? If a body of data or evidence does not yet exist, is there a plan for evaluating the policy's effectiveness?

What are the political chances of success for this policy?

Can we develop a strong, clear narrative that engages people about this issue and does not isolate people based on partisan politics?

THE ROAD AHEAD

Whether you believe that Colorado has a moral imperative to help and support future generations and assist them in reaching their goals, or you find relevance in the societal costs of disconnected youth, or you are compelled by the concerning workforce data, there are myriad reasons to engage with solutions around engaging or reengaging opportunity youth.

These young people represent a significant portion of Colorado's population, and without them, our ability to nurture and grow our workforce becomes challenging. If we are committed to the bright future each of us wants for our state, some measure of our effort must be directed to supporting opportunity youth, their issues and needs and their ongoing and improved success.



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APPENDIX

Enacted Education and Workforce Development Legislation Directly Relevant to the Opportunity Youth Population in Colorado 2009 to 2017

2009

- **HB09-1243**, Measures to Raise the Graduation Rate in Public High Schools, Representatives Middleton (D) & Massey (R) / Senator Bacon (R)
- **HB09-1319**, Concurrent Enrollment Public School Students, Representatives Merrifield (D) & Massey (R) / Senator Williams (D)

2010

- **SB10-154**, High Risk Students in Alternative Education Campuses, Senator Sandoval (D) / Representative Middleton (D)

2011

- **SB11-111**, Educational Success Task Force, Senator K.King (R) / Representative Massey (R)
- **SB11-133**, Discipline in Public Schools, Senators Hudak (D) & Newell (D) / Representative Nikkel (R)

2012

- **HB12-1146**, Funding for Dropout Recovery Programs, Representative Nikkel (R) / Senator Giron (D)

2013

- **HB13-1005**, Basic Education and Career Technical Education Pilot Program, Representatives Fields (D) & Buckner (D) / Senator Todd (D)
- **HB13-1165**, Creation of a Manufacturing Career Pathway, Representative Wilson (R) / Senator Heath (D)
- **SB13-033**, In-State Classification of Colorado High School Graduates (also known as the ASSET legislation), Senators Giron (D) & Johnston (D) / Representatives Duran (D) & Williams (D)

2014

- **HB14-1384**, Higher Education Tuition Assistance, Representatives Pettersen (D) & McNulty (R) / Senators Ulibarri (D) & Crowder (R)
- **SB14-205**, Talent Pipeline Working Group, Senator Newell (D) / Representative Young (D)

2015

- **HB14-1085**, Adult Education and Literacy Programs, Representative Fields (D) / Senator Zenzinger (D)
- **HB15-1170**, Increasing Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness, Representatives Kraft-Tharp (D) & Wilson (R) / Senators Hill (R) & Heath (D)
- **HB15-1230**, Innovative Industry Workforce Development Programs, Representatives Lee (D) & Foote (D) / Senators Heath (D) & Cooke (R)
- **HB15-1270**, Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools, Representatives Duran (D) & Foote (D) / Senators Todd (D) & Woods (R)
- **HB15-1271**, Mobile Learning Labs Workforce Development, Representatives Lontine (D) & Hamner (D) / Senators Marble (R) & Donovan (D)
- **HB15-1274**, Creation of Career Pathways for Student, Representatives Garnett (D) & Melton (D) / Senators Kerr (D) & Woods (R)
- **HB15-1275**, Career & Tech Ed in Concurrent Enrollment, Representative Winter (D) / Senators Heath (D) & Marble (R)
- **HB15-1276**, Skilled Worker Outreach, Recruitment & Training, Representatives Pabon & Williams / Senators Cooke & Heath
- **SB15-082**, County Workforce Development Property Tax Incentives, Senators Marble (R) & Hodge (D) / Representatives Moreno (D) & Lawrence (R)
- **SB15-138**, ASCENT Program Funding, Senator Donovan (D) / Representative Wilson (R)

2016

- **HB16-1287**, CDLE Apprenticeship Study, Representatives Rosenthal (D) & Wilson (R) / Senators Cooke (R) & Kefalas (D)
- **HB16-1289**, Incentives to Complete Career Development Courses, Representatives Duran (D) & Esgar (D) / Senator Garcia (D) & Crowder (R)
- **HB16-1302**, Align with Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act, Representatives Duran (D) & DelGrosso (R) / Senator Newell (D)
- **HB16-1429**, Alternative Education Campuses – Criteria for Designation, Representatives Pettersen (D) & Wilson (R) / Senator Kerr (D)
- **SB16-077**, Employment First for Persons with Disabilities, Senator Kefalas (D) / Representatives Ginal (D) and Primavera (D)

2017

- **HB17-1194**, Technical Changes for PTECH Schools, Representative Foote (R) / Senator Cooke (R)
- **HB17-1301**, No Withholding Student Transcripts for Library Fines, Representative Michaelson Jenet (D) / Senators Holbert (R) & Fields (D)
- **HB17-1340**, Legislative Interim Committee on School Finance, Representatives Lundeen (R) and Garnett (D) / Senators Hill (R) and Moreno (D)