

## About CEI

CEI's mission is to **champion, empower,** and **ignite** Colorado leaders to deliver on the promise of public education to develop thriving young people and flourishing communities.

We have built our reputation through three primary roles: implementation expert, strategic partner, and statewide convener.

## About This Series

CEI is publishing a new series of Accountability EdPapers throughout 2024 to share lessons, reflections, and recommendations about the future of high school accountability in Colorado.

EdPapers will explore:

- Honoring local relevance
- Prioritizing actionable and timely data
- Rethinking the role of high-stakes testing
- Promoting cross-system learning and transparency
- Keeping equity at the forefront



[coloradoedinitiative.org](http://coloradoedinitiative.org)

# 2024 Accountability EdPapers: Welcome Back to the Conversation

February 2024

*In spring of 2018, Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) launched a series of EdPapers to ignite conversation about accountability in Colorado. Since then, some things have changed and some things have remained disappointingly stagnant, but the moment is ripe to breathe new life into improving the way we talk about and measure school quality in our state.*

*This paper is the first of our new series of 2024 Accountability EdPapers.*

## WHY THIS SERIES

CEI's new strategic plan was informed by a deep engagement process with our partners, stakeholders, and admired leaders in education. Our long-term vision is that all young people in Colorado exit K-12 education boldly taking their next steps toward hopeful, equitable, and prosperous futures. This requires an education system that delivers on the promise of public education to develop thriving young people and flourishing communities.

We received clear feedback from our most innovative and equity-minded partners that the significant lack of alignment between what our state says are priorities (for example: career-connected learning and applied problem solving) and the way our current policy framework creates incentives for opposing behaviors is a top challenge facing K-12 education in the next five years. Colorado must address this disconnect for school district leaders to scale and sustain career-connected and student-centered learning models.

Working this year in nearly 100 school districts across Colorado, 70 of which are implementing efforts related to transforming the high school experience, CEI has a rare opportunity to capture a 30,000-foot view on what's working and what is overdue for evolution in high school quality measures. As a result, for the first time in CEI's 16-year history, we are committing significant resources to elevate best practices, barriers, and collective wisdom from our practitioner partners into state policy conversations.

We don't believe we have the answers to every question — in fact, the unique and local practices across the state demonstrate that there are often many right ways to solve a problem. As CEI reenters the conversation about accountability policy in Colorado, we are excited to partner with teams and individuals who have kept this work at the forefront. We have engaged a diverse group of education leaders and experts in assessment from across the state to act as an advisory council to CEI. This council includes superintendents and district-level leaders from school districts spanning the state's geography, a principal from a small rural school district, and assessment and evaluation experts who have worked in school districts and research institutions across the state. Together with postsecondary leaders and a parent representative, the council, acting as individuals sharing their expertise and experiences, meets regularly and informs the positions CEI takes around high school quality measures.

Contact: **Amber Elias**

Vice President, Policy and Partnership

Cell: 720.369.3691

Email: [aelias@coloradoedinitiative.org](mailto:aelias@coloradoedinitiative.org)

This paper is the first of a new series that CEI will publish in 2024 that will set the context for our lessons, reflections, and recommendations about the future of high school accountability in Colorado.

## WHY NOW

In our 2018 EdPaper series, we expressed an urgent call to action to address accountability in Colorado. Since then, urgency is unchanged, but we believe the moment has ripened, particularly as it relates to high school measures. “[The Big Blur](#)” has entered Colorado’s vernacular to describe the need to strategically intersect secondary, postsecondary, and workforce opportunities for students. This concept prompted the [HB 22-1215 Task Force](#), which met over the last year and issued its [report in December 2023](#), recommending streamlined approaches to college and career-connected opportunities for high school students, increased support for implementation of these opportunities, and aligned accountability measures to better reflect the recommendations themselves.

The 1215 Task Force’s work was an important part of this conversation, and it reflected the increasing tension between the significant investments Colorado is making to advance increased relevance and partnership across sectors (such as the Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) Education Fund, Rural Coaction, and Opportunity Now), and our current K-12 accountability metrics that do not recognize or incentivize the work or outcomes these collaborative efforts can hold for students and communities. As this lack of alignment mounts, the need to address the disconnect becomes even more urgent.

While the conversation is not new, the momentum is building: During last year’s legislative session, HB 23-1241 launched its own Task Force to study and recommend changes to K-12 accountability systems. The [1241 Task Force](#) took shape and launched its work in the fall of 2023, and is scheduled to deliver an interim report in March 2024 with a final report and recommendations due in November 2024.

Along with the legislative actions, the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB), and Colorado Education Association (CEA) have partnered to make an accountability overview series available to school district teams to empower boards and district leaders to offer informed feedback about what’s ahead.

Businesses are clear about the workforce shortages and the impact on Colorado’s economy unless something changes about the way we support career development and postsecondary attainment in the state. For schools to prioritize the most impactful work for students, communities, and our state’s economy, we must measure what matters.

## WHY HIGH SCHOOL

CEI is choosing to focus its efforts and attention on bringing alignment to high school accountability specifically. While this isn’t to say that there aren’t evolutions to be made across the entire K-12 structure, our unique expertise lies in the deep connections we have with districts who have boldly reimagined the high school experience for their students but feel the tension of a mismatched accountability system. This mismatch between high school practices and high school quality measures leaves a wider gap than ever, and our communities deserve a more transparent accounting of what makes a high school experience excellent for students.

The typical high school experience of students has generally remained unchanged for decades, even while our world, our workforce, our communities, and our students have changed dramatically. Considering new technologies, an evolving set of demands in and of the workplace, and a new generation of students who are rightly rejecting experiences that will not set them up for success, the need to incentivize reimagined

experiences for our secondary students is more critical than ever. During our strategic plan development process our partners challenged us to pursue alignment between what works for students in today’s world, and how the state recognizes and incentivizes these efforts — or does not.

One example of the need for coherence is well demonstrated in Cañon City’s schools. Recognizing that the traditional high school experience didn’t meet the needs of many of its students, the school intensified a focus on career pathway options to bring relevance, engagement, and pride to its student body. Within three years of implementing an expansive offering of career pathways and relevant career-connected opportunities, Cañon City’s high school graduation rate went from 78 to 93 percent — all while making graduation requirements more rigorous. This is a tremendous accomplishment for the school and the community, and the school has been able to maintain this progress in the years since implementation. Yet the school’s School Performance Framework (SPF) rating stayed relatively flat — rated at what educators informally refer to as “yellow.”

The example in Cañon City highlights a school doing the right thing for students regardless of the lack of recognition for the efforts and outcomes in the state’s system. We see just as many examples where our current system incentivizes behaviors that constrict equitable and innovative opportunities for students who may stand to benefit the most. High schools with higher ratings (higher college matriculation, higher standardized test scores) are often more willing to implement innovative programs because their state performance results can absorb some level of risk. Demographically, these schools are most often serving primarily white students, with lower percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. By contrast, schools who stay on the margins of school performance ratings may be incentivized to focus solely on improving test scores, even if their students and communities may value and benefit from broader opportunities that keep students engaged and expand the definition of success after graduation.

Our communities deserve the full picture (and the benefits) of an enriched high school experience; our high schools deserve to have their efforts recognized and valued; and most importantly, our students deserve a rich slate of opportunities to position them to thrive in school and beyond. This is the promise of public education, and our system must move toward better alignment.

## WHAT’S AHEAD

In the months ahead, we will be publishing a new series of papers to take a deeper dive into these principles reflected in state and local systems:

- Honoring local relevance
- Prioritizing actionable and timely data
- Rethinking the role of high-stakes testing
- Promoting cross-system learning and transparency
- Keeping equity at the forefront

We are eagerly monitoring the work of the 1241 Task Force and are hopeful that this renewed series of EdPapers will be read as a partner to that work, encouraging bold action and creative solutions aligned to these principles, informed by leaders in the state closest to the work. Stay tuned next month, where we dive in to the unique and diverse local fabric of our state, and our thoughts on integrating meaningful local context into quality and improvement processes. We invite you to be part of the conversation. If you would like to engage, please reach out to Amber Elias, our Vice President of Policy and Partnership, via email at [aelias@coloradoedinitiative.org](mailto:aelias@coloradoedinitiative.org).