

## 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



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# 2024 Accountability EdPapers: Local Context Matters

March 2024

*Colorado is a state rich with geographic and cultural diversity. A one-size-fits-all model has never been consistent with our state's traditions, and education is no exception. In this paper, we examine the critical importance of acknowledging the local context of a school district as we define and measure school quality.*

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

## LOCAL CONTEXT MATTERS

Colorado has prioritized the importance of local control of school districts and schools since the drafting of the state Constitution. Article 15 created local school boards with the goal to depoliticize instruction, and these governing structures have long represented the value that those closest to the students and families are best equipped to make decisions about education in their communities. Colorado is one of only six states to articulate an explicit commitment to a governance model that honors local relevance. In a state where over 880,000 students attend 178 districts ranging in size from 26 students in Kim (located in southeastern Colorado) to 88,235 students in Denver, the way we serve our students must be informed by local priorities.

At CEI, we've long been interested in models of school accountability that set some common measures but aspire to recenter the priorities that make each district unique. This approach would make tradeoffs — a bit less complete numerical comparability in exchange for a bit more robust, relevant, contextual learning. It could also allow for comparability *in context* across schools and systems who are after similar outcomes, therefore allowing state and national actors to make good on long-promised learning agendas. Read on for a bit more about what this might look like in a future accountability system and why we believe high school measures may be the right place to start.

## WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE — AND TO WHOM?

In our 2018 EdPaper [To Whom Are Schools Most Accountable?](#), we named the tensions in the answers to this question — whether schools are most accountable to students and their families, local taxpayers, the school district, the state, or some combination of these stakeholders, who often have widely varying interests between and across them. In that paper, we talked about the critical importance of embracing the families in our communities with curiosity and empathy and engaging authentically with their interests and desired outcomes.

CEI continues to partner with school districts who elevate the voices of families and communities in our work. One of the most powerful opportunities to see this value in action is when school districts adopt a graduate profile, working collaboratively across the entire community to build a vision of what students will be capable of when they graduate from the high school in their district. We have had the privilege to support nearly 50 communities as they built their graduate profiles over the years.

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We know other districts across the state have taken on the same task, and many things emerge in common — families want their students to be equipped with the skills to be successful in life beyond high school. We believe it is critical to continue to share some common measures around these skills and knowledge, captured through common assessments. But often, what really defines a graduate profile is what emerges through the engagement process with teachers, students, families, and community members. Across this work, communities have a vision for student success that is more than just a test score. Our colleagues in the charter school space, who often start schools from scratch, know this well: a clarity of purpose anchors a school community. The charter and specialized school space also reminds us that, for example, the measures of quality in a classical academy may differ in important ways from a dual language school or a career pathway center.

In [our last paper](#), we explored the concept that as our state accountability system attempts to measure school quality, it often fails to recognize or incentivize what matters most to families and communities, and the value of local measures surfaces the question about the purpose of an accountability system generally. We know the [HB23-1241 Task Force on Accountability, Accreditation, Student Performance, and Resource Inequity](#) is working to answer this question, wrestling with the fact that accountability systems, whether they are designed to or not, play a multitude of roles — from transparency to funding, support, continuous improvement, and more. Realistically, the usefulness of a system is often defined by the consumer of the data. Do we want a system designed for federal purposes that families and communities struggle to use with ease or sufficiency? Or a system designed for families and communities, that leaves the state and federal purposes and processes a bit less linear?

This is why it matters so much what we measure: because we will report that information, and it will become part of the narrative of public education. If it matters what we measure, then it is just as critically important to measure what matters. And as Colorado has established time and time again, our communities play a crucial role in determining what that looks like in their schools.

## STUDENT-CENTERED ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM

The idea of infusing local context into school quality determinations is not novel. While the current accountability system in Colorado captures a uniform series of metrics, the early roots of accountability were much more localized and focused on reporting inputs and outcomes to communities. This was before the first performance frameworks were adopted in 2010, making school quality focused on quantifiable measures against state academic standards and federal education requirements, and losing the local focus. It wasn't long, though, before our long-standing commitment to learning from those closest to the work resurfaced, and in 2015, Colorado began to pursue the [Student-Centered Accountability Program \(S-CAP\)](#) to allow for shared learning and connection across districts. Five rural districts pioneered the S-CAP program (launching officially in 2016): Buffalo-Merino, Buena Vista, Kit Carson, La Veta, and Monte Vista — all unified by a vision for a more comprehensive approach to defining and communicating system, school, and student success.

Now in its eighth school year of implementation, S-CAP has grown to three more cohorts of rural school districts, 22 in total, who all work to expand the definition of student success. Cohorts learn from each other as they share their priorities, identify root causes of barriers, and name evidence of implementation and impact. One of the powerful components of S-CAP lies in the deep reviews of not just outcomes, but inputs — systems, resources, and strategies in a school and a district that set teachers and students up to be successful — and success is defined based on the school district's unique priorities, determined by their local school boards. Their self-identified plans are then monitored through robust site reviews and community survey results, allowing for immediate and actionable feedback to drive improvement. It's easy to devalue a system based largely on inputs and school quality reviews until one looks far beyond rural Colorado, to recognize that most of the countries

who have leapfrogged the United States on education outcomes have done so through a deep, nationwide, attention to improving inputs.<sup>1</sup>

### **Spotlight: Holyoke**

Holyoke Re-1J, a rural district serving approximately 560 students in northeastern Colorado and led by Superintendent Kyle Stumpf, joined S-CAP Cohort 1 in 2018 after learning from the early implementation of the core districts. Holyoke students are more diverse than state averages, representing 56% eligible for free or reduced lunch (compared to the state average of 40%); 52% students of color (compared to a state average of 49%); 25% are English learners (state average 15%); and 16% are students with disabilities (state average 12%).<sup>2</sup>

This year, Holyoke has identified four strategic priorities:

1. Foster a Positive, Inclusive Environment
2. Enhance Professional Communication and Collaboration
3. Establish and Implement an Aligned Curriculum that Optimizes Instruction and Ensures Student Learning
4. Engage Stakeholders as Partners in the Success of Every Student

Each of these priorities reflects the unique needs of the district that matters to Holyoke staff and community. Holyoke also has a [Graduate Profile](#) proclaiming that each graduate will demonstrate Professionalism, Career Connectedness, Social and Emotional Competence, Effective Communication, and Perseverance.

The connections between [S-CAP priorities](#) and the Graduate Profile emerge to create a full picture of Holyoke's vision of success, and their efforts are impacting the community in meaningful ways. In Holyoke's S-CAP, they have named a goal to increase capstone/certificate achievement and concurrent enrollment offerings. In partnership with Northeastern Junior College (NJC) and the Northeast BOCES, students are now able to access many courses that prepare them to enter the workforce in their community or pursue additional education beyond high school, including a Commercial Driver License (CDL) preparation program that allows students to complete all required training hours and prerequisites to prepare them for the CDL licensure exam upon turning 18. Through the NJC partnership, a driver from Sterling, Colorado, brings a semi-truck to Holyoke twice per week to instruct students in a truck retrofitted for instruction. This program, launched in January of this year, has already attracted such interest in the community that two different businesses in Holyoke are now interested to sponsor the purchase of a semi-truck that can remain in Holyoke, used for instruction of students during the day and in courses for community members in the evening. In return, the businesses have asked for the opportunity to interview newly certified drivers/students, keeping skilled talent in the community.

Another example of the career-connected learning opportunities in Holyoke is highlighted by the story of a bilingual Latina student who completed an internship with a local attorney during her last year of high school. Allowing her to explore a career as an attorney, her internship provided practice experience in her chosen field, and she still works for the law firm several days each week while pursuing postsecondary education that will ultimately prepare her for law school. She is committed to returning to Holyoke as an attorney.

### **Spotlight: West Grand**

West Grand School District 1-JT sits in Kremmling, Colorado, in the northeast part of the state. Led by Superintendent Liz Bauer and serving approximately 393 students this year, West Grand joined S-CAP in Cohort 2, eager to learn from the core districts and those in Cohort 1. In West Grand, 36% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (based on self-reporting by families); 29% are students of color; 16% are English learners, and 11% are students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way](#), Amanda Ripley, 2014 (highlighting the educational systems in Finland, Korea, and Poland, which emphasize elevation of the teaching profession and equitable resource prioritization as key to successful outcomes). | <sup>2</sup> Student demographic information from 2023 Performance Framework Snapshot, [cde.state.co.us/code/accountability-performancesnapshot](https://cde.state.co.us/code/accountability-performancesnapshot) (search Holyoke).

West Grand adopted its [Profile of a Learner](#) around three priorities: Excellence in Learning, Excellence in Leadership, and Excellence in Engagement, and specifying that its graduates will be knowledgeable, empowered, adaptable, inquisitive, connected, open-minded, and partners, with a foundation for opportunities to grow and excel. As it built its [S-CAP priorities](#), alignment came easily:

1. Excellence in Learning: high-quality curriculum, appropriate resources, professional development, and high-quality instruction and learning.
2. Excellence in Engagement: collaborative community partnership, relevant and rigorous learning opportunities, ownership of learning, and career exploration and pathways.
3. Excellence in Leadership: prioritizing growing student, adult, and community leaders; future-focused; telling the story of West Grand and the profile of a learner.

The synchronicity of these priorities is directly informed by the community's input and values, creating a definition of opportunity and success in West Grand that extends beyond the metrics on the district performance framework. As a result of this focus, West Grand has implemented Capstone for All, positioning Capstones as a meaningful summation of an enriched high school experience — and not just a lesser pathway to graduation — and students are thriving with this renewed focus. One graduate took a concurrent enrollment Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) course taught by the district nurse, and she used the course for her capstone and passed with honors. This student went on to work as a CNA in the local hospital and is now in nursing school. Another student and promising athlete began to struggle with significant mental health struggles and focused his capstone on how art helped him navigate his own challenges. Both the process and the product of this culminating demonstration showed his readiness to thrive after high school.

## LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM GRANT PROGRAM

In 2019, the Colorado legislature continued its effort to infuse local relevance to accountability systems and adopted the [Local Accountability System Grant Program](#) — designed to incentivize the pilot and adoption of supplementary accountability tools for districts and networks across the state. In 2022, 40 districts/sites participated in the program and have reported the following themes:

1. Local accountability systems allow for timely and actionable data, available immediately for improvement efforts.
2. Evidence that participating districts offer to supplement the state's system is generally both more expansive and more nuanced than what is measured statewide, informed by local context and values.
3. Many participating systems prioritize student-level indicators, such as engagement, well-being, and graduate profile skills to capture whole child growth.
4. The systems and structures that offer collaboration with peers (like S-CAP does) come with supplemental professional learning benefits.<sup>4</sup>

These pilots supplement the current system, and do not substitute for the requirements that currently exist in state and federal law, even though the goals, efforts, and data resulting from local accountability efforts often feels more urgent, more relevant, and more holistic than the district and school performance ratings.

<sup>3</sup> Student demographic information from 2023 Performance Framework Snapshot, [cde.state.co.us/code/accountability-performancesnapshot](https://cde.state.co.us/code/accountability-performancesnapshot) (search *West Grand*). | <sup>4</sup> *Annual Report on Implementation of Local Accountability Systems: Year Two (January 2023)*, [Colorado Department of Education, p.4](#).

## ARE LOCAL MEASURES THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORKS?

With the benefits of these tools to drive continuous improvement based on local values and priorities, the future of accountability can become more localized and more fine-tuned. We believe in the principles woven into the fabric of our education system in Colorado — that local systems have an important role in determining how to educate the students in a community. If what we measure matters, then we must measure what matters to local communities in addition to the standards-based skills that every student in Colorado will need to be successful after high school.

In our [February EdPaper](#) we shared our focus on bringing alignment between the most innovative and equity-minded practices at high schools across Colorado and the state's accountability system. Local measures present a ripe opportunity to try different ways to measure quality, particularly in the high school space where more traditional measures are in flux or have fallen away over the last decade. The Graduate Profile work illustrates this perfectly because in Holyoke and West Grand, and in many Colorado districts, the community helped to inform what high school should look and feel like for students through that process, and now the districts are holding themselves accountable to what the community values through their identified priorities via local accountability pilots. As the state continues its learning agenda from these pilots, we encourage the creative experimentation of local measures that better reflect a relevant and career-connected experience for students.

This isn't to say that there aren't critical questions to answer as we move forward. For instance: Adding a local measure requires a rebalancing of current measurements — what stays, and what goes in the current calculation? Where would a local measure fit in? Should local measures even factor into a state measurement system or should they be reserved for continuous improvement efforts, while the state system tightens to solely meet the needs of transparency, accreditation, and support? How useful will a holistic local accountability system be if it remains purely supplemental, and districts must still focus efforts on the state performance framework as well? Will holistic measures and the innovation they drive be only available to those who already "succeed" on traditional tested measures?

While the answers to these questions might be as varied as the districts across our state, the time is ripe for inquiry. In the Colorado Department of Education's [Local Accountability System Grant Annual Report Year 3](#), the Department reported on the programs and progress of participating systems and shared recommendations from participating districts for state accountability shifts, including: capturing more metrics beyond state assessment data for continuous school improvement; building more opportunities to capture innovative school-level practices and student success metrics; avoiding a system that ranks schools based on single or limited academic measures; focusing on system-level improvements rather than solely student-level growth; expanding focus to whole child measures beyond academic performance; and requiring more meaningful community engagement around postsecondary and workforce readiness. CEI has shared many of these recommendations over the last six years and recognizes the opportunity that Colorado has now, through the efforts of the 1241 Task Force and our current momentum, to change the way we measure school success by honoring Colorado's legacy of local context. Taking this on for the entire K-12 education system can seem daunting, but carving out an experimental space in secondary grades allows for useful constraints.

We look forward to the conversations this spring with the leaders on our Accountability Advisory Council and with partners across the state as we continue to examine the possibilities of a changed high school experience for Colorado's students that aligns with a changed accountability system for our high schools. We invite you to be part of the conversation and share your thoughts with Amber Elias, CEI's Vice President of Policy and Partnership, at [aehias@coloradoedinitiative.org](mailto:aehias@coloradoedinitiative.org).