# LAUNCHING INNOVATION LOCALLY

**Reflections from Project LAUNCH**
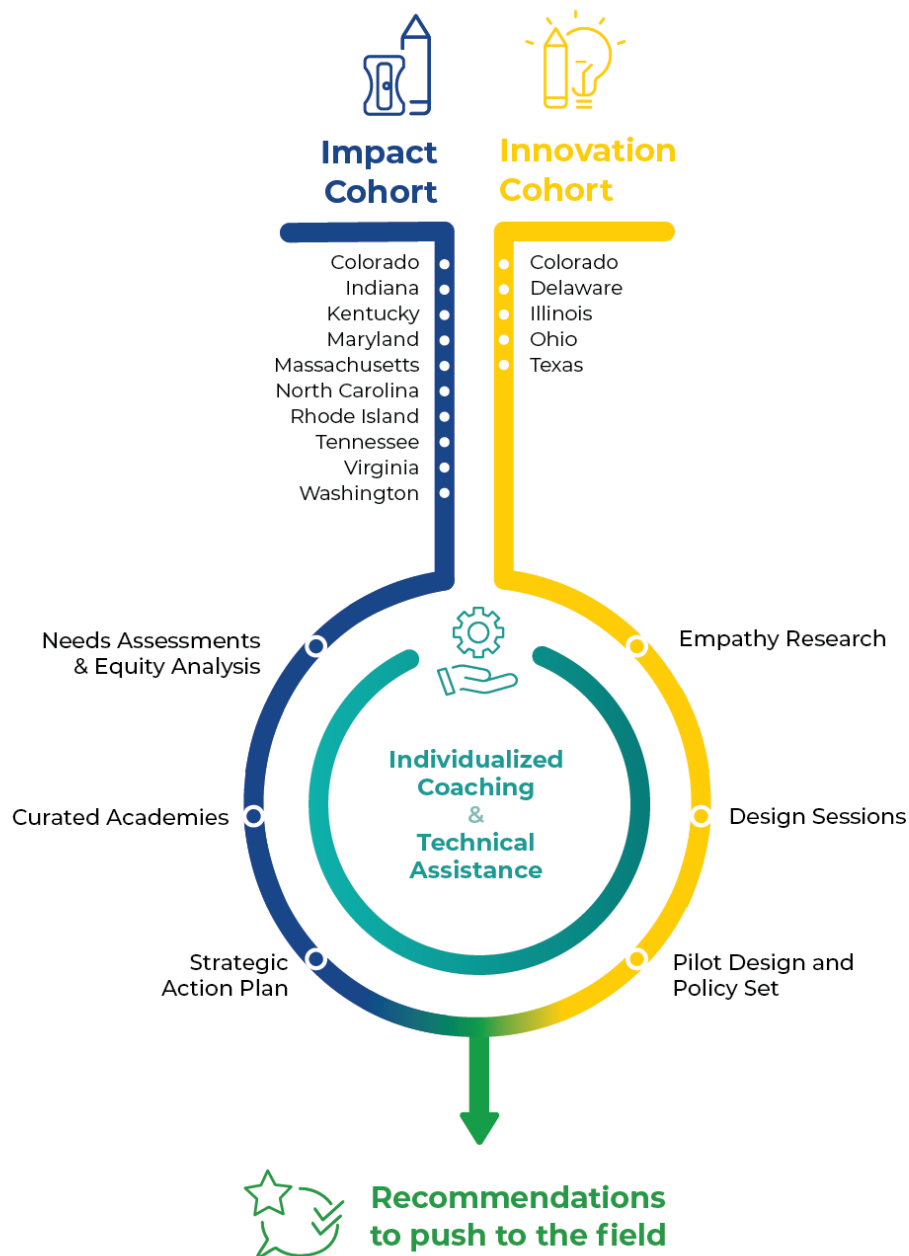
COLORADO
**SUCCEEDS**

# INTRODUCTION



Like many states, Colorado is coming off a period of significant investments and attention to pandemic recovery through education and workforce innovation. The state has an extensive history of collaborating across sectors and agencies to pass policies that unlock innovation and reward the building of more career-connected learning experiences from K12 to postsecondary to workforce.

However, too often the promise of these programs is unrealized, and reach is limited due to a variety of reasons, including lack of implementation resources, short-term grant funding, lack of awareness among education providers, duplicative and unaligned efforts, and complex application and reporting barriers—which became evident through empathy research. In 2023, Colorado created the Secondary, Postsecondary, and Workforce Integration Taskforce to recommend better ways to connect and align disparate postsecondary and workforce readiness programs. Nicknamed the "Big Blur Taskforce," the group released a report of thirteen critical recommendations in December 2023, and advocacy partners began working in partnership with the state department on passing several pieces of legislation in 2024.

At the same time, several national pathways intermediaries and philanthropic partners were preparing to roll out a pathways initiative to help states, regions, and communities seize this unique moment. **Project LAUNCH is a national college and career pathways initiative that strives for every learner to have access to, and the supports needed to succeed in high-quality and equitable pathways.** There were two national cohorts, Impact and Innovation, and Colorado was the only state to represent both.
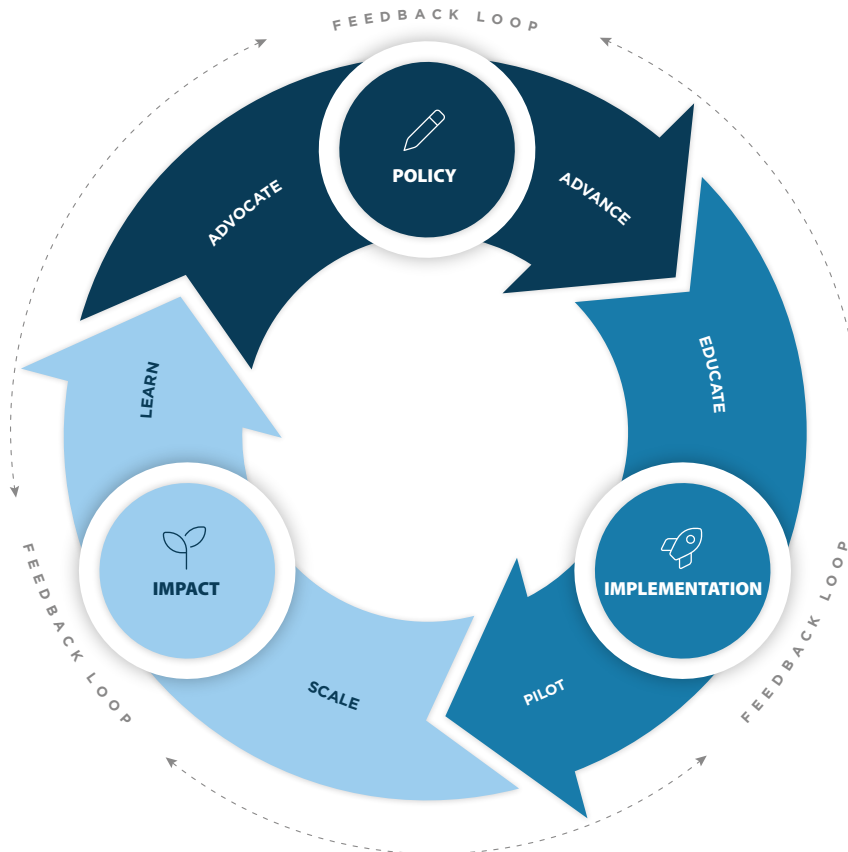
The Colorado Impact team was designed to deepen the work of the "Big Blur Taskforce;" and the Innovation team designed to move the work forward by designing an innovative new pilot to implement in the field, creating a policy-to-practice feedback loop. Ultimately, the goal was for states to pilot and test new approaches that stretch the bounds of the existing system to transform the space between 11th grade and the workforce and put the onus on the systems to support seamless transitions between sectors, rather than putting the onus on the learner to navigate these critical transition points. Both Colorado teams had cross-sector representatives spanning education, government, business, and advocacy and implementation intermediaries, and Colorado Succeeds was selected to lead the Innovation team.

**Impact Cohort**

- Colorado
- Indiana
- Kentucky
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- North Carolina
- Rhode Island
- Tennessee
- Virginia
- Washington

**Innovation Cohort**

- Colorado
- Delaware
- Illinois
- Ohio
- Texas

**Individualized Coaching & Technical Assistance**

Needs Assessments & Equity Analysis

Empathy Research

Curated Academies

Design Sessions

Strategic Action Plan

Pilot Design and Policy Set

**Recommendations to push to the field**

National intermediary partners supported the cohorts over two years as they worked to seed and grow next-generation models that could transform pathways systems leading to better economic outcomes and focus on policies and strategies that help achieve greater scale and sustainability.

The purpose of this paper is to share Colorado Succeeds' insights from playing a lead intermediary role throughout two years of facilitated design and partnership work through the LAUNCH Innovation Cohort, including actions, mindsets, and barriers—both real and perceived—to be aware of. It will also further inform the field about local innovations with huge potential for scale and provide tangible recommendations for how; and offer other ideas on best practices or innovations in policy and practice still needed.

**LAUNCH represents a critical example of why Colorado Succeeds' theory of change centers on a robust and inclusive policy-to-practice feedback loop to continuously learn from students, families, and communities so that the policies we pass and the programs we design meet the unique needs of diverse learners and a diverse workforce.**

FEEDBACK LOOP

ADVOCATE
POLICY
ADVANCE
LEARN
EDUCATE
IMPACT
IMPLEMENTATION
SCALE
PILOT

FEEDBACK LOOP

FEEDBACK LOOP

*Thank you to the many partners who contributed to the design and implementation processes for this project, including all members of Colorado's LAUNCH Innovation team, our dynamic colleagues and coaches at JFF, and the numerous philanthropic partners who continue to encourage innovation and systems change.*

# LAUNCHing Innovation

User-centered design that blurs boundaries, generates new types of collaboration, and provides opportunities for scale

## BACKGROUND: HOW DESIGN THINKING LED TO AN INNOVATIVE PILOT IN A RURAL MOUNTAIN RESORT COMMUNITY

During the first year of LAUNCH (2023), the Innovation Cohort engaged in a robust design thinking process to identify the most pressing needs pertaining to pathways innovation through conducting empathy research. The second year (2024) focused on designing an innovative pathways pilot, leveraging LAUNCH's innovation criterion and engaging in several technical assistance opportunities to strengthen concepts and prepare for pilot implementation.

**LAUNCH Innovation Process**

Phase 1: Design Thinking

| JAN–DEC 2023 | FEB 2023 | FEB–MAY 2023 | MAY–JUNE 2023 | JUNE–DEC 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empathy Research | LAUNCH Kick-Off & Design Session #1: DEFINE | Problem Identification Feedback & Data Collection | Design Session #2: IDEATION<br><br>Design Session #3: PROTOTYPING | Early Prototyping & Feedback Collection<br><br>LAUNCH Summit & Design Session #4: TEST<br><br>Design Session #5 |

Phase 2: Pilot Implementation

| JAN–MAR 2024 | APR–JULY 2024 | AUG–DEC 2024 | DEC 2024 | JAN–MAY 2025 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Refine & Formalize Pilot Concept | Prepare for Implementation | Pilot Implementation | Evaluate & Examine Policy Levers | Continuous Improvement |

**Empathy Building**

The state was lucky to have a number of outreach efforts underway in conjunction with local task forces that were collecting data from learners, businesses, and education leaders. The findings from these empathy-building efforts became the foundation of the design-thinking process. The following table shows key problems of practice for each participant group:

| Group | Key Problems of Practice |
| --- | --- |
| Students (including specific insight from Latino males) | • Competing priorities: desire to get a job, need to support family<br>• Concerns with the long-term ROI of credentials<br>• Less interested in traditional pathways and traditional college preparation approaches due to lack of belonging and understanding |
| Employers | • Employers are less likely to prioritize credentials and degrees and more likely to be looking for specific job experience and skills.<br>• Overall employers think demand for non-degree credentials, postsecondary certificates and bachelor's degrees are most likely to grow.<br>• Businesses are interested in partnering more closely with education providers. |
| Education Professions | • Leaders believe that career connected learning has the potential to transform lives by giving students skills and experiences that will make them successful beyond high school, however there are risks in the current system that make some leaders hesitant to expand these programs.<br>• There are inherent biases in who has access to career connected learning and the population often looks different than the general population, often those most likely to benefit from it are not accessing it.<br>• Students need to have choice within career pathways exploration. |

**Problem Identification**

During the problem identification phase the team honed in on three key challenges:

► Not all students were accessing pathways programming, and many families and students didn't even know what it was or how to navigate it, if they did, they didn't necessarily see themselves in it. Many efforts to expand programming didn't target groups who needed it most.

► There are a lot of perceived barriers to more systems integration across programs, like data access, the accountability system and funding, but it was unclear whether these things were actual barriers or perceived barriers.

► K12 innovation campuses, which are beginning to proliferate, are largely driven by reimagining high school CTE and not more deeply connected in design and implementation to higher education and workforce strategies overall.

**Early Prototyping**

The team leveraged the LAUNCH Innovation Criterion shown below and began to formulate a pilot concept. Colorado Mountain College, who was already on the team, identified the need to bring on a rural school district to incubate the pilot, as the empathy research highlighted that challenges for students are amplified in rural communities. The team conducted a landscape analysis and reached out to local rural school districts, selecting Summit School District in Summit County who were excited to leverage the opportunity to make their pathways aspirations a possibility. Once the original team set the vision, leaders from these organizations reconstituted the team, along with their staff and deeper project management support from Colorado Succeeds, to help this vision become a reality.

| 1 FOCUS ON SPECIFIC USERS | 2 BLUR BOUNDARIES |
|---|---|
| Each pilot will be designed, researched, tested, iterated, and implemented with a specific user—a teacher, learner, employer, caretaker—at the center. Focusing on a specific user ensures that design team empathizes with the needs and ambitions of those most impacted by the pilot. | With the user in mind, the pilot should blur the traditional boundaries one experiences when navigating the K-12, higher education, and workforce systems. Blurring boundaries is essential to reducing barriers for those who are, or have been, marginalized and for driving collaboration across sectors. |
| 3 GENERATE NEW TYPES OF COLLABORATION | 4 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCALE |
| Systems-level strategies demand new kinds of collaboration and new ways of working. Thus, the third criterion for innovation is the extent to which pilots include new partners and/or new partnerships in the design and delivery of the intervention. | Finally, the potential impact of the pilot will be considered in terms of breadth, depth, and sustainability. As pilots, we encourage and expect variability—some aspects of pilots will work as predicted, some will not; some will aim for a transformational practice for a specific group, some will aim for subtle, key shifts for the masses. Scale will ultimately depend on the end users and state's context, but all states will design pilots with the potential to be sustained and expanded if they are successful. |

**See the Colorado LAUNCH Site Profile and a brief video capturing the empathy research and key components of the project design here.**

## THE COLORADO INNOVATION TEAM

Colorado Succeeds was tasked with bringing together a cross-sector team to engage in a design thinking process to define and develop an innovative pilot project to test new approaches to transformation education and workforce pathways systems.

**Design Team & Advisory Members**



COLORADO SUCCEEDS

COLORADO Department of Higher Education

Colorado Education Initiative

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

REACH UNIVERSITY

SUMMIT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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**Implementation Team**

COLORADO SUCCEEDS

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

SUMMIT SCHOOL DISTRICT

*Project Lead*
Project Management & Thought Partnership

*Pilot Partner*
Project Design & Implementation

*Pilot Partner*
Project Design & Implementation

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**National Intermediary Partner**

Jobs for the Future

*LAUNCH Coach*
Facilitation & Thought Partnership

## LEVERAGING NEW PARTNERSHIPS TO PILOT NEW INNOVATIONS

With the support of Colorado Succeeds, JFF, and the national cohort of LAUNCH participants, CMC and Summit developed a pilot implementation plan leveraging the empathy research and design thinking process established in year one.

**Essential Question**

*How can we unite siloed systems and collaboratively design education-to-employment pathways that address economic mobility inequities and improve outcomes for Latino males and their families, driven by community insights, in a scalable and sustainable manner within a rural mountain resort region?*

**Baseline Data that Informed Design**

- ▶ 45% of Summit County high school students are Hispanic/Latine.
- ▶ 26% of Hispanic/Latine students are in concurrent enrollment.
- ▶ Latine students in concurrent enrollment have a 20% drop, fail, withdraw rate.
- ▶ Counseling and advising systems are disconnected.
- ▶ Data is not being leveraged to drive strategy, programs, and services.

**Theory of Change**



| Two siloed systems come together to co-design an education-to-employment solution to improve outcomes for Latino males | User-centered design of pathways programming | Empathy building + community engagement | • Improved education and economic outcomes for those furthest from opportunity |
| Codified through partnership charter outlining shared vision, goals, anticipated outcomes, and roles and resources | Ongoing feedback loop for continuous improvement | | • Homegrown Talent Pipeline begins to improve |
| | Data & outcomes transparency | | • Exemplary statewide & national model for truly blurred pathways |
| | | | • Policy recommendations |

**Shared resources & capacity | Funding, spaces, staff, data**

**Pilot Implementation Plan**

## Shared Data Infrastructure

Leverage CMC and Summit Data Sharing Agreement for the first time by co-creating a cloud-based shared data infrastructure.

## Industry-Aligned Pathways Programming

Successful implementation of new industry-aligned pathways programming, identification of shared staff and spaces, Latine youth and industry partner engagement, and development of new work-based learning infrastructure.

## Culturally Relevant Counseling & Advising Framework

Improve postsecondary and career outcomes through a collaborative and culturally relevant counseling and advising framework across CMC and Summit School District.

## Youth, Family, & Stakeholder Engagement

Ensure all programming and communications materials are co-created with/informed by Latine youth, their families, and key stakeholders such as industry partners and community-based organizations in Summit County.

# Reflections from the Field
## What we learned about partnership and policy

We know that true innovation and systems change takes time and resources. But, what we learned after a short period of time engaging in Project LAUNCH is that oftentimes the secret to unlocking the potential for true innovation and systems change already exists and requires very little to begin leveraging towards the ultimate goal.

Referred to as "Launch Levers" from the initiative partners, policy, funding, partnerships, data, and equity are the key elements to achieving truly innovative and blurred systems (Advance CTE, Education Strategy Group, ExcelinEd, Jobs for the Future, New America; Launch Levers Summary Handout, 2024).

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### LAUNCH LEVERS AT A GLANCE

- **Policy** stems from best practices in the field and are data-driven. Incentives are provided to support policy implementation, and outdated or ineffective policies are removed.
- **Funding** is leveraged across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems to ensure alignment and optimization. Flexibility is provided to promote innovation, but programs are continuously monitored to ensure effectiveness and equitable practices.
- **Partnerships** are fostered across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce with the support of a neutral intermediary who leads coordination efforts. Each partner has clear roles and responsibilities, and a plan is in place to support transitions through periods of change.
- **Data** is readily available to support real-time and long-term decisions. Shared metrics are identifies across education, economic development, and labor market.
- **Equity** is fundamental in pathways program design. Clear strategies are in place to ensure pathways are flexible and portable, and targeted supports are in place to address systematic and individual barriers.

Source: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oaqiPzCwWdV_g7R8OYzMYTgVZxCXkKNM/view

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The following reflections from the field highlight each of the levers from a policy and programmatic perspective. They demonstrate the power of courageous conversations to unlock new mindsets, behaviors, and dispositions; and how these can lead to highly effective partnerships that overcome many barriers to innovation—without any additional capacity or resources. We also reflect on the critical role a shared vision plays in a high-quality implementation plan. Lastly, much was learned on the policy front, encompassing institutional, local, and statewide policy takeaways for the field.

## THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP:
## COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS & CRITICAL MINDSETS

Years of implementation work in the field, and particularly in rural communities, has validated one major unlock to overcoming barriers to progress—leadership mindsets and dispositions. When those in positions of power choose to behave differently and work together towards a shared goal, perspectives shift about the why, the what, and the how. More seems possible with less, and the north star of what's best for learners takes center stage. In a case study on the Sturm Collaboration Campus in South Denver written by Arapahoe Community College and Jobs for the Future, it was discovered that at the heart of big systems changes "were shifts in how adults decided to work together differently—they pushed themselves beyond coordination into authentic collaboration." Further, leaders and institutions advancing innovative models collaboratively often emulated the "four network principles for collaboration success."

### Mission, Not Organization

Systems leaders adopt strategies and tactics to achieve a common goal through collective action.

### Humility, Not Brand

Systems leaders and organizations work alongside their peers as equals and willingly share space when their partners are better positioned to lead.

### Trust, Not Control

Trust and shared goals are far more important than formal control mechanisms such as contracts or accountability systems.

### Node, Not Hub

Systems leaders see their own organizations as one part of a larger web of activity directed toward a cause, not as the hub of the action.

Source: Jane Wei-Skillern and Nora Silver, "Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success," The Foundation Review 5, no. 1: 121–129, https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-12-00018.1

After trust and empathy was established among new leadership across both institutions, Colorado Mountain College and Summit School District were able to have the courageous conversation that changed the trajectory of the partnership forever—*"We are not serving our Latine students and families. We are leaving them behind."*

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*"While our systems are guided by well-intended practices, many of these inadvertently create significant barriers for students—particularly for Latino students and families in our rural mountain communities—making it challenging for them to navigate and access the support they need to succeed."*

—Yesenia Silva Estrada, Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives, Colorado Mountain College

This acknowledgment reduced walls, renewed focus, and required active and urgent participation in developing solutions. One unique component of the LAUNCH team's process was to codify their relationship through a partnership charter. This document outlines a shared set of values, norms, and commitments, drawing upon respective strategic plans and highlighting key areas for growth and opportunity pertaining to the pathways development and community engagement activities developed as part of the pilot design process. The partnership charter, an evolved version of a Memorandum of Understanding or strict project agreement, signals a long-term commitment to a way of operating collaboratively that can live beyond individuals within the system. It is a strategic tool that high schools and CMC campuses across their footprint can replicate, along with any other unique budding partnerships.

**Ways You Can Transform Partnerships**

▶ **Begin with empathy-building,** which takes time and effort. We cannot assume everyone is coming to the table with shared experiences, and perceptions of needs and barriers may differ. Intentionally practice building empathy and seek clarity and understanding, then co-create a shared vision.

▶ **Focus on abundance, not scarcity.** It would be easy for rural communities to only focus on what they lack, but instead they find and leverage hidden assets to supercharge efforts, and fiercely collaborate to support students. Of course, more resources and capacity are always needed, but leading with an abundance mindset has unlocked positive outcomes time and time again.

▶ **Find meaningful ways for everyone to contribute at the right times.** Visioning, strategic planning, national cohorts—activities that are typically reserved for leadership only. To truly breakdown internal people barriers (that oftentimes ensure the status quo remains) we need to engage everyone on our teams—at the right times and in the right ways. Identify ways unlikely contributors can participate in a brainstorming conversation; pair up new duos to push their thinking and un-silo departments; allow staff to see their expertise be elevated in new ways or in new spaces.

▶ **Prioritize sustainable structures that will withstand leadership transitions.** Leadership buy-in on vision is critical, but we should also focus on building processes that permeate culture and are operationalized, so that the constant churn of staff we see so often in education does not threaten progress.

An important component of this story that should not be overlooked is the rural context of the communities these institutions serve. Colorado's rural communities face inequities that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic—high cost of living, limited access to infrastructure and economic opportunity, geographic isolation, diverse populations, lack of childcare, long commute times, and dependency on natural resources and tourism—to name a few. There is no hiding who gets left behind in these communities, it is starkly apparent in day-to-day life and makes collaboration across sectors and institutions even more urgent and necessary to identify sustainable solutions and ensure their rural communities continue to thrive.

And while there are challenges to rural contexts, we also know that our rural communities and education-to-employment systems are vital to the success of the entire state. As documented in the recent Elevating Rural Colorado report, smaller contexts can achieve scaled results quickly and offer many lessons for larger systems such as a strong sense of community and identity, schools serving as the hub of innovation, entrepreneurial thinking, and system agility.

Colorado Succeeds deeply respects and celebrates our rural communities and economies, and hopes this piece inspires the entire field to lean into the spirit of rural.

## THE POWER OF SHARED VISION, RESOURCES, & CAPACITY

Once leaders across Summit and CMC built trust and were able to identify the problem they wanted to solve, coalescing around a shared vision was the next step. The LAUNCH pilot design process encouraged an acute focus on picking one target user, in this case, Latino male students, and designing solutions with and for them to improve the entire system and outcomes for all. Without an acceptance of needing to do better for this population, the status quo was imminent.

Further, the essence of this innovation was blurring boundaries between K12, postsecondary, and workforce; and collaborating in new ways, such as bringing staff together to identify barriers and co-create solutions. While this may not sound all that innovative, it isn't common practice and shouldn't be overlooked. It's not about the what, but rather the how. For example, regular connection points and opportunities to be brought into the visioning process for staff who typically remain isolated in their role—concurrent enrollment coordinator, campus dean, high school principal, family liaison—was a critical factor in harnessing shared understanding and vision for the work.

After key areas of focus were identified—data, pathways programming, counseling and advising, and community engagement—the team began to crosswalk existing resources and identify resource gaps, including staffing, infrastructure and learning spaces, and funding for things like professional development and new culturally relevant materials and supplies. With leadership buy-in at the top and grassroots vision from staff, it became a fairly simple exercise to pinpoint new ways they could collaborate and share resources, such as ensuring the new Summit Schools pathways seamlessly bridged to CMC's course offerings and staff capacity; as well as the under-leveraged resources that already existed between systems, such as their data sharing agreement.

With a shared vision and staff capacity, the details of the pilot plan seamlessly came together. A new cloud-based data infrastructure and regular analysis informs the development of new collaborative counseling and advising structures to ensure the goal of increasing representation and success of Latino male students in concurrent enrollment can be achieved. This informs continuous improvement to pathways programming, along with how students, families, and the community are engaged in the process.

**Ways You Can Braid Vision, Resources, and Capacity**

▶ **Consider the principles of design thinking** or human-centered design when determining your target user, problem statement, and solution(s) to test to create a shared vision that is feasible, aspirational, and will resonate with key stakeholders. In other words, don't skip any steps if you want to find success when building a collaborative vision and solutions.

▶ **Don't reinvent or dilute your identity in order to collaborate.** Be clear about your core values, operating norms, and what you bring to the table. If you have a clear organizational strategic plan or goal in mind, name it. It is likely there are more similarities than differences, and these assets, behaviors, and mindsets can be leveraged when creating shared vision or a partnership charter.

▶ **Collaboratively crosswalk existing resources that could be better utilized.** This includes staff roles and time allocation, physical spaces and equipment, programming, and monetary resources. Have transparent enough conversations across organizations to have productive conversations about opportunities for how to better leverage existing assets. This further emphasizes and abundance mindset and also helps pinpoint gaps to prioritize.

▶ **Give data center stage.** Data-driven decision-making is not purely about looking at historical data, but also about predictive analytical data to inform future decisions. This type of predictive, tech-enabled modeling is critical for education systems as it enables them to anticipate trends, identify at-risk students, optimize resource allocation, and design targeted interventions that enhance student success and institutional effectiveness. Evolving practices away from reactive reflections on data to more future-looking information with a focus on equity, educators can address emerging challenges and adapt to changing needs of the community quicker. Embedding data-driven decision-making into an equity framework not only promotes accountability but also fosters a culture of continuous improvement and inclusivity, driving long-term, meaningful change.

## THE POWER OF LOCAL AND STATE POLICY

In December 2023, in the middle of the innovation cohort, the 1215 "Big Blur" Task Force released a set of recommendations for state and local policymakers and practitioners. The report included thirteen recommendations organized into four key buckets. While some of these recommendations may be best addressed through state legislation, this partnership shows that education leaders and key partners can simultaneously move forward meaningfully to improve outcomes locally.

The LAUNCH project also included an Impact Team led by the Colorado Department of Education, who spearheaded taking the task force recommendations and more fully integrating them into a plan for implementation and action. This Impact Team served as a cross-section of state agency, advocacy, school and district leaders who were critical in informing how the state could better align and expand access to college and career pathways.

## 1215 RECOMMENDATION SET #1

**Program Modernization**

1. Streamline program administration of similar programs,

2. Consolidate reporting,

3. Establish a robust state-wide data system, and

4. Update Colorado's accountability performance framework to reflect the importance of postsecondary and workforce readiness programming.

The LAUNCH Innovation partnership illuminated the following as it relates to these recommendations:

- ▶ **Data sharing is feasible at a local level.** During this project, CMC and Summit School District identified that they already had a data sharing agreement in place, which could facilitate the exchange of critical information. However, these agreements were not being leveraged by staff. Additionally, federal privacy laws provide many allowances for sharing data if it meets specific criteria (a common misconception). Since the legal barrier was already addressed, the main challenge was ensuring partners had the expertise and willingness to work together. Once the partners aligned on a common goal, they worked together to create a system that synchronizes information across institutions based on jointly developed specifications. This allows each partner to access real-time data to better meet the needs of students.

- ▶ **Shifting mindsets as much as shifting systems.** While data is essential for measuring the outcomes and impact of pathways, an accountability system is not the sole barrier to implementing postsecondary and workforce readiness (PWR) programs. In this project, despite a significant focus on new pathways programming, the current accountability system was not a major topic of discussion. Both partners had already committed to expanding and improving PWR programming prior to joining this initiative. For many districts or partnerships, the accountability system can be a barrier to prioritizing PWR programming initially. However, even with changes to the accountability system, this project highlights that shifting mindsets is necessary, and such shifts can be more challenging to achieve than policy changes.

- ▶ **A lot of time is spent navigating and maximizing the existing mix of programming.** The LAUNCH partners each have significant expertise around PWR programing; however, navigating the different ways each program could be maximized takes a lot of resources and outside capacity and training. Without more streamlined programs and equitable access and funding, particularly for rural communities, it will continue to be a consistent place where partners will need to focus and adapt.

## 1215 RECOMMENDATION SET #2

**Access & Awareness**

1. Develop a web-based platform that can serve as a single source of information about career pathways,

2. Create a comprehensive communications strategy to raise awareness of the value of postsecondary and workforce readiness programming,

3. Additional investments in personalized career navigations, and

4. Deploying technology-enabled advising and coaching tools.

▶ **Local partnerships drive collaborative strategies to address large challenges**. As part of this initiative, Summit Schools developed a new pathways model that used both local empathy research and labor market data to ensure industry-alignment and relevance. Then the teams, both Summit and CMC, did a full pathways mapping process to connect curriculum, concurrent enrollment, work-based learning, and careers. Now, the teams are focused on identifying shared staffing models across the priority pathways as well as shared learning spaces— both existing infrastructure/buildings and ways to build or redesign new spaces— to ensure pathways are meaningful and culturally relevant to the region. Key industry partners will continue to be engaged throughout the process, through CTE advisories and new strategies to create a continuous feedback loop to inform coursework as well as develop a new work-based learning program (processes, experiences, tracking platform, and staff). Lastly, the pathways process will also require new marketing materials designed for Latine students and families and with a dissemination. All these outcomes were accomplished through work the district and the college already do as part of good practice and planning, and, more than anything, an aligned goal and commitment to work together made these things possible.

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*"The Launch Initiative provided multiple opportunities for the Colorado Impact team to learn from and collaborate with the Colorado Innovation team, and these conversations have led to statewide work and improvements for all learners and districts, including better-informed, more learner-centered postsecondary and workforce readiness policies, and provided space for us to develop and then unite around a common statewide vision."*

—Danielle Ongart, Assistant Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education

## 1215 RECOMMENDATION SET #3

**Sustainable Funding**

1. Having consistent and reliable funding annually, and

2. The importance of supporting start-up costs and creating incentives for education providers to change their programming.

▶ **Leveraging asset rich partnerships when financial resources are limited.**
A critical part of this project included going to the voters of Summit County to pass a bond that would allow Summit School District to build a new pathways facility and other infrastructure, maintenance, and equipment. The measure did not pass, but the partners remain committed as ever, as they built a partnership and project plans that were not contingent on a bond, but focused on the target population and ultimate vision. Moreover, without any real financial investment throughout the LAUNCH project, the partners have been able to accomplish a huge body of work together. To get to the next phase of implementation, CMC and Summit will continue to better leverage and reallocate existing resources, work within budget contexts, and hope to identify new sources of funding now that they have a clear and collaborative vision with potential for scale.

## 1215 RECOMMENDATION SET #4

**Partnership**

1. Growing partnerships across regions through regional intermediaries,

2. Expanding sector partnerships and other programs that engage business, and

3. Providing assistance to employers to offer high-quality work-based learning programs.

▶ **Bringing business to the table from the beginning is essential.** And, truly employer-led solutions design processes are even better. From the beginning, the project partners knew they not only needed to un-silo K12 and higher education, but also industry. And while the new pathways programming was informed by labor market data and conversations with key industry stakeholders, there is more to be desired in terms of meaningful and ongoing business engagement. In education, the tendency is to create a program and then ask for participation. A sustainable, industry-aligned strategy ensures business is at the table for empathy research, solution design, and implementation.

▶ **Honor the role of business intermediaries.** The talent ecosystem is robust, but few entities serve as the voice, convener, and connector of business. Intermediaries such as industry associations, chambers of commerce, and economic development councils, as well as budding regional collaboratives and workforce centers, hold vital information and relationships. It is important for education partners to collaborate with these intermediaries early and often to leverage critical data, insights, and trends; engage employers in a more coordinated way; and capture added capacity and resources to move the work forward.

▶ **Keep business principles in mind when designing policies and programs.** Colorado Succeeds and several critical partners formed the Education-to-Employment Alliance in 2023 and released a report outlining several recommendations to improve Colorado's talent development system. The business principles include: (1) Prioritize learners, not systems, structures, or institutions; (2) Ensure industry alignment by meaningfully engaging the industry as a co-creator; (3) Integrate and recognize career-connected learning and in-demand skills; (4) Leverage and scale innovative non-traditional education and training models; and (5) Create more transparency of pathways programming outcomes.

▶ **Streamline and incentivize employer participation in pathways and career-connected learning.** In addition to several policies that have been passed in Colorado to incentivize business engagement, including the Work-Based Learning Incentive Program and tax credits for apprenticeship expansion, local partners continue to think deeply about how they can attract and retain business support for their pathways initiatives. While the answer is straightforward—make it easy, demonstrate the ROI, fill talent gaps—it becomes complicated with the sheer amount of programs, activities, paperwork, and red tape. It is critical that partnerships working to transform education and talent systems reduce barriers to entry and streamline solutions to build a homegrown talent pipeline, produce transparent outcomes data, and improve access to economic mobility for all.

# Where to Next?
## Locally contextualizing a statewide vision

Colorado Succeeds and its many advocacy and implementation partners who played a role in both the LAUNCH project and the 1215 Task Force look forward to the next phase of the work—taking a set of statewide recommendations and lifting up local learnings to guide both policies and programs in more learner-centered and equitable ways that focus on outcomes, not outputs.

The LAUNCH process, including design thinking and leveraging key innovation criterion to create a local pilot rooted in overcoming policy and equity barriers, can be replicated in any region looking to improve systems as well as outcomes for their learners, families, and economies. Further, the specific components of the partnership between an institute of higher education and rural school district can be replicated and scaled—building a partnership with a foundation of empathy, trust, and transparency and codifying it through a partnership charter; finding innovative ways to collaboratively leverage staff, assets, and financial resources; and staying hyper focused on a specific target user in order to improve outcomes for all.

**Colorado Succeeds hopes that the great work of the national LAUNCH initiative will continue, with investments made directly to the local partners ready to implement this work.**

In addition to learning from and supporting local implementation, Colorado Succeeds has developed a "roadmap" to achieving the 1215 recommendations. It serves as a quick snapshot of the recommendations, 2024 policy and advocacy milestones achieved, and what's being prioritized for 2025.

**It is vital that partners across the state—in education, government, business, and philanthropy—continue to center around the shared vision of what's possible for our learners and economies if we transform our systems to align funding, accountability, impact, and outcomes.**

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## EVERY COLORADO LEARNER ON A PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

### VISION

Colorado Succeeds is committed to strengthening policy and practice and rethinking the boundaries between high school, college, and career to continue improving outcomes for students on their path towards economic mobility.

**We believe that every Colorado high school student have no-cost access to opportunities that support them in reaching their full potential, including:**

1. In-demand industry credential attainment

2. College credit that is part of a defined postsecondary workforce readiness (PWR) pathway, and

3. High-quality work-based learning (WBL) opportunities

# OUR POLICY & PRACTICE ROADMAP TO '1215' RECOMMENDATION ACHIEVEMENT

| | RECOMMENDATION | 2024 MILESTONE ACHIEVED | 2025 MILESTONE IN PROGRESS |
|---|---|---|---|
| **PROGRAM MODERNIZATION** | Streamline program administration, all postsecondary and workforce programs in CDE under PWR umbrella | **POLICY** Study costs of delivering pathways programs (HB24-1364) | **POLICY** Policy prototypes and stakeholder activation plan developed and implemented for policy passage |
| | Create single, streamlined PWR program reporting structure with annual report | **POLICY** Study costs of delivering pathways programs (HB24-1364) | **POLICY** Strengthen programs aligned to outcomes; streamline application and reporting by measuring similar outcomes |
| | Establish and utilize statewide longitudinal data | **POLICY** Create SLDS infrastructure (HB24-1364) | **ADVOCACY** Better Data for Better Decisions Coalition and working groups support implementation |
| | Update PWR measures in accountability framework (data and weights) | **ADVOCACY** Monitor recommendations to the 1241 Accountability Task Force | **POLICY** Revisions to K12 accountability system's PWR metrics aligned to 1241 Task Force |
| **ACCESS AWARENESS** | Develop and execute a comprehensive communications strategy to raise awareness and interest about personalized pathways | **ADVOCACY** Statewide coalition strategy planning time developed with Accelerate ED (Bill + Melinda Gates Foundation) partnership | **ADVOCACY** Meet with coalition partners to form shared learning community and begin to name access and awareness strategy |
| **SUSTAINABLE FUNDING** | Ensure there is guaranteed, reliable, and consistent funding for PWR programs | **POLICY** Study costs of delivering pathways programs (HB24-1364) | **POLICY & ADVOCACY** Understand impacts of streamlining for total available funding and identify best practices for leveraging existing resources |
| | Create additional innovation fund to cover start-up costs and program costs to incent expansion | **POLICY** Study costs of delivering pathways programs (HB24-1364) | **POLICY** Research and development; unlikely to move without additional funding sources |
| **PARTNERSHIP** | Define and invest in regional intermediaries to lead PWR partnerships | **POLICY** Create Regional Talent Development Summits (HB24-1365) and tax credits for employers offering apprenticeships (HB24-1439) | **IMPLEMENTATION** Provide technical assistance to support employers implementing work-based learning through regional intermediaries |
| | Expand investment in Sector Partnerships for employers to share common workforce needs | **IMPLEMENTATION** Pilot Project SCALE with Association of General Contractors & promote Talent Pipeline Management | **IMPLEMENTATION** Provide support for sector-and-regional-based strategies across in-demand industries |
| | Support employer engagement in high-quality work-based learning | **IMPLEMENTATION** WBLIP + Provide technical assistance to support employers implementing work-based learning | **IMPLEMENTATION** Use sector and regional intermediaries to provide employer support for work-based learning |

## CONNECT WITH US

If you would like to learn more or get involved with the coalition work happening in 2025, connect with us!

## ABOUT COLORADO SUCCEEDS

Colorado Succeeds is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of business leaders invested in improving schools, changing educational outcomes for all students, and shaping the future of Colorado's workforce. Since 2006, Colorado Succeeds members have worked to build a system where learners are educated to their greatest potential, employers can recruit homegrown talent, and policymakers are responsive to critical needs. We believe great schools are good business.

Learn more at coloradosucceeds.org.

*A final note of thanks to all who participated in this project and continue to lead the work in their organizations, systems, and communities. Your efforts will impact the state of Colorado for years to come. We deeply appreciate you.*