



Discussion guide for community conversation in Denver, Colorado, October 20, 2007, sponsored by Regis University's Institute on the Common Good, the Colorado Civic Canopy, Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation, and Rocky Mountain PBS.

This discussion guide is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for the upcoming small group conversations. Please remember that the discussion is not a test of facts, but rather an informal dialogue about your perspectives on the issues.

ISSUE: HOW SHOULD WE IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES IN COLORADO?

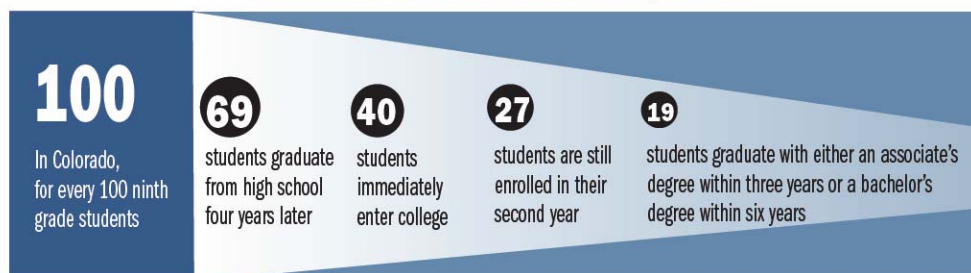
The public education system has always been a primary mechanism for individual Americans to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. In the 21st century, however, numerous concerns have arisen concerning the quality and direction of the public education system. The political, economic, and social realities of today place a unique set of pressures on public schools, and a variety of ideas are being considered to improve our public education systems.

One particular concern nationwide, as well as here in Colorado, is the dropout rate. Few would disagree that high school graduation is critical to future success in education, work, and citizenship. Nonetheless, about one-third of Colorado students never graduate high school, and only 19 percent of Colorado students graduate from college (see Figure 1). The impact of dropping out is clear, as those without a diploma not only earn much less over their lifetimes than graduates, but also are statistically less healthy and more likely to be unemployed or incarcerated.

The problem is complicated by the fact that graduation rates differ significantly based on race and income. According to the U.S. Census, dropping out is six times more likely for students from low-income families, and in Colorado, African-Americans and Hispanics graduate at a much lower rate than Whites and Asians (see Figure 2). Closing this "achievement gap" is also a key issue for educators across the country.

Colorado Governor Bill Ritter has identified education as the state's number one priority, and has specifically pledged to reduce the drop out rate and close the achievement gap. In 2007, the governor convened the bi-partisan P-20 council, which focuses on exploring reforms to the Colorado education system from preschool to higher education graduate studies. Education was also a prime focus of Gov. Bill Owens and legislators on both sides of the aisle. Your deliberations today will help provide the P-20 council, state legislators, and Colorado school boards with useful information concerning the opinions and concerns of the Colorado people.

Figure 1: Colorado's Education Pipeline*



*Source: The Bell Policy Center (2002) and Colorado Children's Campaign.

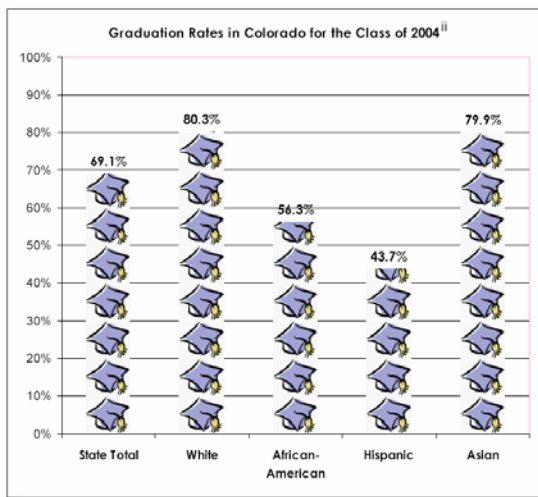


Figure 2: Source: Colorado Children's Campaign

Today you will be considering four different approaches to improving Colorado graduation rates. The approaches are not mutually exclusive—you won't be asked to pick one of the four—but they do represent distinct directions in which schools and policymakers could focus. In the morning, your small groups will be asked to spend some time thinking about what you like and what concerns you about each approach, and to develop questions for the expert panel that will join us after lunch. In the afternoon, you will continue the conversations about the approaches, identifying what common ground developed in your group, and what key tensions or tradeoffs existed that must be addressed.

APPROACH 1: DIVERSIFY THE FOCUS AND RELEVANCE OF EDUCATION

This first approach is based on the notion that the nature of U.S. workplace has significantly changed, and the education system must adapt in order for U.S. students to remain competitive. Supporters of this approach argue that the low-wage factory and service jobs of a generation ago are no longer readily available, as many of them have been moved to developing countries with much cheaper labor. Technology has replaced other jobs. The U.S. economy now demands more high-skilled labor, and the students that do not acquire these skills will be disadvantaged compared to their international cohorts.

Supporters of this approach argue that we must step back, and reconsider the knowledge, skills, and attributes that truly matter today, and develop multiple pathways to long-term success for students. In particular, they question the overriding focus on preparing all students for higher education. While continuing the work of college prep, high schools must also connect more with local businesses and community colleges, and develop more internships, work study programs, and technical and career preparation courses. They believe that a major cause of dropouts is that many students simply do not see the relevance of the assignments and focus of current educational practices on their lives.

Supporters of this approach argue for policies such as:

- Increasing the focus on 21st century skills and “real world” learning, such as innovation, creativity, information and communications technology, emerging vocational skills, adaptability, leadership, self-direction, global awareness, and collaboration skills
- Decreasing the overriding focus on preparation for higher education
- Expanding partnerships and internships with local businesses
- Developing individual graduation plans or differentiated diploma options

Critics of this approach are concerned that an increased focus on workforce skills will distract from the broader purposes of a public education, such as basic skills and citizenship. They also fear that students may be “tracked” into careers rather than higher education too early, or for less than compelling reasons. Lastly, they are concerned with the lack of control and oversight that would result from the reliance on work study programs and internships.

APPROACH 2: DEVELOP AND SUPPORT HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING

The second approach focuses primarily on improving the quality of schools by developing and supporting high-quality teaching. Supporters of this approach believe that significant improvements can be made within the current system by building upon and utilizing a variety of “best practices” that have proven to be effective. These changes, they argue, would improve academic performance as well as the classroom experience, and thus enhance graduation rates. They contend that while a variety of factors are involved, poor academic performance remains the single strongest school-related predictor of dropping out. This approach assumes that all students can respond to excellent teaching, and teachers, who are on the front lines, will best be able to make the adjustments necessary to keep students engaged. Supporters also argue that relying on effective, evidence-based instructional strategies and management practices will be easier to monitor, track, and adjust as necessary.

Supporters of this approach argue for policies such as:

- Expanding the use of research-based approaches that increase student achievement and engagement
- Increasing effective use of technology
- Decreasing class sizes and creating smaller “learning communities” within larger schools
- Improving early childhood education
- Employing more vigorous recruitment strategies and professional development for teachers

Critics of this approach argue that it involves tweaking a system that needs more systemic change. They also question placing so much responsibility on teachers, rather than students, families, and communities.

APPROACH 3: PROMOTE THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MODEL

The third approach sees schools as having great untapped potential to become hubs of community life. They call for the development of “full service schools” that are used as community centers, to hold night classes for adults, as health care and career services centers, and to provide space for civic meetings, community exhibitions, and performances. Supporters seek to involve community members more closely in setting school policies and budgets. School issues should be seen as community issues, and vice versa. Communities must develop a sense of ownership of their schools, and schools and students a responsibility for their community.

Such schools would greatly increase the parental and community engagement with schools, an important factor for success. Community schools increase the availability of tutoring, mentoring, schools visits, seminars, and internships, and can provide extended learning time for key subject areas and at-risk students beyond the normal school day. Community schools focus on “real-world learning” through community problem solving and service. They can also support family literacy programs or early childhood education centers. Overall, the community schools vision provides an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development. While difficult to develop, there are plenty of tools and models available for individual communities to follow to get their residents involved.

Supporters of this approach argue for policies such as:

- Increasing parental and community engagement in schools in multiple ways
- Expanding social systems support through schools
- Increasing use of student volunteerism, service learning, and community projects
- Expanding after-school programs for students and parents

Critics of this approach warn that citizens do not have the time, experience, and/or knowledge to be heavily involved in schools. They argue that community schools would require additional work on all sides and would be difficult to coordinate. The curriculum is already strained thin trying to cover the basics, adding more expectations would only lower the overall quality of the work being done. Parental and community involvement is also considered too high an expectation when residents are struggling to make ends meet. Low income communities, therefore, would be less likely to be able to utilize the community schools model. In the end, they argue that more citizen involvement sounds good in theory, but often results in time wasted, endless bickering, and political wrangling.

APPROACH 4: CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The fourth approach calls for a focus on at-risk students. Pointing to the clear statistics that show dropout rates are much higher for minority and low income students, supporters of this approach argue that any major effort at improving the graduation rate must focus on closing that gap. In order to do so, economic inequalities between schools must be addressed. They claim that the current education system systematically provides the worst schooling to the children who need the most preparation. Lower income schools often have more difficulty attracting higher-quality teachers, must deal with more difficult and ill-prepared students, have less parent involvement, and have school buildings with more maintenance problems and costs.

Supporters of this approach argue for policies such as:

- Focused interventions and early warning systems for specific at-risk students and populations
- Increased use of mentor programs
- Insuring fairer distribution of resources for lower income schools
- Addressing root causes of inequality
- Exploring best practices used elsewhere that have been found successful to engage at-risk students

Critics of this approach argue that the importance of money is overemphasized, and contend that the problem lies with policies and people. They also believe it is unfair to expect one community to subsidize another community, and that the inequality between communities is a larger problem that cannot be efficiently solved through the school system. They are also concerned that focusing on “at-risk” populations can increase tensions and negative stereotypes, and that programs that disproportionately assist minorities or low-income students are often not politically sustainable. Resources are also minimized for high achieving students, thus causing flight from urban schools to private or wealthy suburban schools thus exacerbating the gap. Finally, critics argue that the ethnic achievement gap is partly caused by different historical experiences in the United States and ways of talking, thinking, and acting that may or may not be supported by schools. As a result, it will be very difficult if not impossible to eliminate differences in dropout rates across ethnic groups.