



Conversation 2007:
SHAPING EDUCATIONAL
EXCELLENCE IN COLORADO

Report on Activities and Outcomes

February 2008

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Conversation 2007: an opportunity for all Coloradoans to help shape the future of education in Colorado from pre-school through graduate school.

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!

Starting the Conversation

The *Tough Choices or Tough Times* report proved to be a catalyst for change in Colorado education. The report sparked a national debate about how schools should function to ensure that students are prepared for the world of the 21st Century. In January 2007, nearly 700 Coloradoans attended a meeting with the report's lead author, Marc Tucker. This meeting, combined with the momentum generated by other education initiatives, propelled education change to the top of the agenda for state policymakers.

Much of that initial energy was channeled into Governor Ritter's P-20 Council, formed in May of 2007. House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, Senate President Peter Groff, Rep. Debbie Benefield, Rep. Tom Massey, and other leaders in both parties wanted to find a way to involve the public in conversations about a vision for education in Colorado for the 21st Century. With the support of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, their plan became the basis for Conversation 2007.

Through a partnership with the Colorado General Assembly and a coalition of public, private and non-profit leaders, the Civic Canopy designed and conducted a series of community-based conversations about preschool through graduate education. These guided conversations with members of local communities and elected representatives took place throughout the summer and fall of 2007. The goals of these meetings were to:

1. Identify common elements of understanding of our current system in an international, national, state and local context;
2. Hear diverse perspectives regarding what Coloradoans expect from an education system from preschool through graduate school; and
3. Provide qualitative data to on Colorado citizens' opinions and expectations for their education system to the Governor's P-20 Council, state legislators, educators, and policy makers.

The meetings began in June of 2007 and continued through November. Conversations took place in schools, libraries, chambers of commerce, churches, and town halls from Yuma to Grand Junction, and Fort Collins to Pueblo.

 **WANTED:** 

Colorado citizens to speak out on improving education, including:

• Goals • Priorities • Strategies • Next Steps

The Conversation Design

The statewide conversation unfolded in three phases, with each phase informing the next. **Phase 1** asked participants to define the goals of public education. This was conducted as an open dialogue that generated a list of ten broad goal statements. These statements captured close to 90 percent of all responses, signifying a broad, statewide consensus on the purpose for public education. In **Phase 2**, participants were asked to prioritize the goal statements that were generated in Phase 1 and to discuss strategies for achieving the agreed-upon goals. **Phase 3** was designed to share the results of Phase 1 and 2 with participants, and then generate suggested next steps to implement the strategies that would achieve the stated goals. A total of 29 meetings were held, plus a capstone meeting that brought together participants from each of the earlier conversations.



Linkages with and Lessons from Other Statewide Conversations

At the same time that Conversation 2007 convened citizens from across the state, other efforts were underway to mobilize citizens to contribute their ideas on improving and transforming Colorado's educational system. These included efforts by Great Education Colorado, The Council on 21st Century Learning, the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) "Blue Print Conversations," By the People, Speaker Romanoff's town hall meetings, and the Civic Mission of School's "Agenda 2010." Despite their unique goals and processes, all of these efforts taken as a whole suggest a strong overlapping consensus on a number of key points:

- We share the same broad goals for public education—to prepare skilled workers, responsible citizens, and life-long learners—and agree on most of the specific definitions of what these mean.
- We must work as partners, not opponents, in our various roles as students, families, educators, and community members. As the CASB conversations emphasized, there is a tremendous need for, and interest in, restoring the public trust in our public education system. We must partner to make that happen.
- People will genuinely support the public education system—politically and financially—if they believe it is capable of producing the results we have all agreed it should produce.
- We already know most of the strategies that could make a tremendous difference; we need to find the public will to put them into practice.

Conversation Outcomes

Through Conversation 2007 activities, we found that a broad consensus extends across the state on the purposes of and goals for public education. This phase of the conversation was framed as an open dialogue, yielding a list of ten goal statements that captured the thinking of most participants (90 percent). The goals are listed on the following page, in order of priority.

Figure 1

Colorado Citizens' Goals for Public Education		Average Ranking*
1	Help all students achieve their maximum potential	3.24
2	Develop critical and creative thinkers	3.95
3	Ensure a basic proficiency in skills and facts	4.70
4	Ensure all students are prepared for post-secondary options (vocational or college)	4.84
5	Develop responsible citizens	4.91
6	Inspire lifelong learners	5.48
7	Educate the whole child	5.79
8	Produce globally competitive workers/economically viable adults	6.23
9	Teach ethics/character	6.87
10	Teach global awareness	7.87

*The lower the ranking average, the higher its priority.

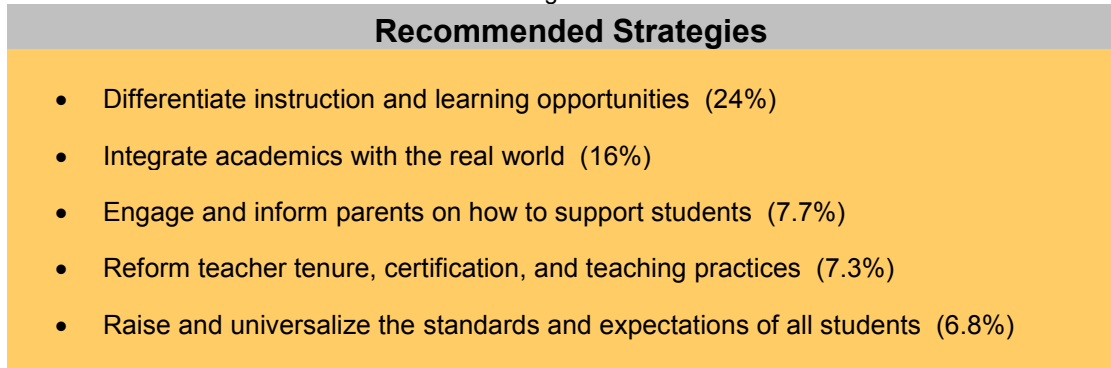
Participants were then asked to identify strategies they believe will help Colorado reach its educational goals. Hundreds of ideas were captured. They were categorized into a set of leverage points within the system for promoting change, as shown below.

Figure 2

Leverage Points for Change	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards & Curriculum • Instructional Methods • Community / Parent / Student Engagement • P-20 Transitions • Systemic Design Principles* • Funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Service Support • Assessment • Teacher Training & Support • School Culture & Climate • Facilities • Governance

The suggestions for change strategies yielded this short list of priorities for schools and communities to consider as they pursue their goals.

Figure 3



The figure after each strategy indicates the percentage of overall responses that were related to it.

The goals, leverage points and strategies developed through Conversation 2007 were presented to the Governor’s P-20 Council in November 2007.



Caveats to Consensus

While many of the Conversation results yielded broad consensus and clear priorities, there were exceptions. A number of important issues within public education — from the nature of curricular content to the relative emphasis between choice and equity — are simply dilemmas and tensions that will require ongoing dialogue to manage effectively.

As Phase 3 began, what appeared to be an opportunity to move from a shared vision to concrete action turned into an exercise in defensiveness and finger pointing. Each stakeholder group could point to how hard they were working to make progress, and how much the other stakeholders stood in their way. The downward spiral of blame and resistance soon gave way to an important insight: that until each group could see how its needs were met through a suggested change, people tended to focus on the responsibilities of others to make the changes first. When those needs were met, however, each group felt more comfortable declaring — and finding ways to live up to — their own responsibilities.

The key outcome of Phase 3 was the realization among participants that the public education system as it is traditionally defined — consisting primarily of students and educators — would not adequately support this emerging understanding of both support (needs) and accountability (responsibility).

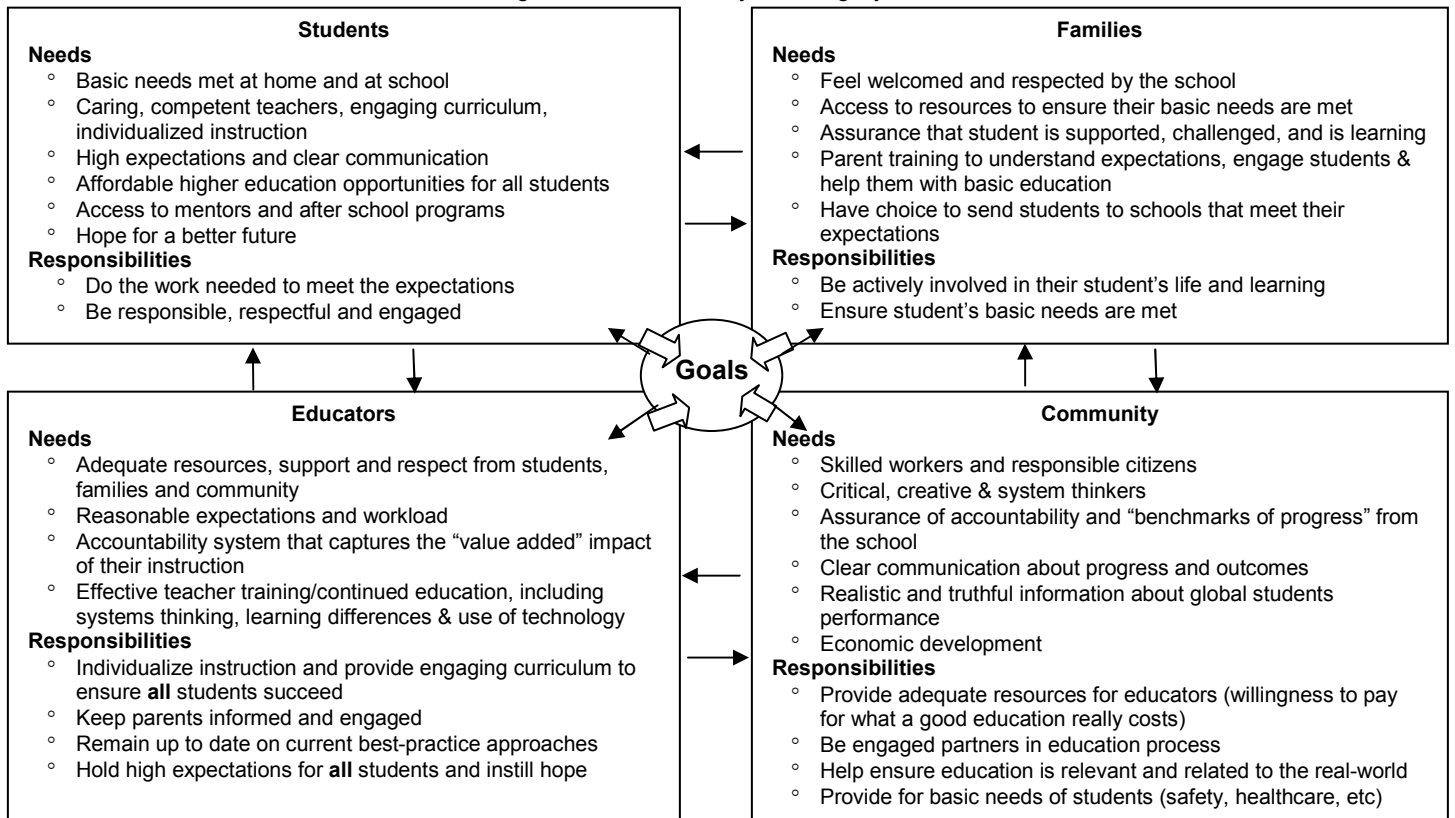
A Learning System Model for Education

A compelling new model for education emerged from Conversation 2007, based on recognition of the web of reciprocal relationships among students, educators, families, and community. Key to this model is moving away from the more traditional question, “How well are educators preparing students to succeed?” toward asking these questions: “What does each group (Students, Educators, Families, Community) need? What is each group’s responsibility?” To illustrate the interdependence of these relationships, a few examples from the conversations help to make the point:

- Educators are more willing to individualize learning when students take more responsibility for their own learning.
- Communities are more willing to provide adequate resources when schools show evidence of students meeting learning goals.
- Families are more willing to shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that their students are ready to learn everyday when they feel welcomed into the schools, and are clear on how to help their students meet the standards.

Where the original framing of the question produced finger pointing, framing the discussion around the relationships between and among groups produced hope for new ways of collaborating to get results. This realization led to an interest in creating a new educational compact, as illustrated in Figure 4 (below). This new compact would turn a 20th Century educational system, comprised of students and educators, into a 21st Century *learning system*, in which all stakeholders play a role.

Figure 4: A 21st Century Learning System



In November 2007, we invited all participants from the 29 previous Conversation 2007 meetings to a **Capstone Meeting**. This capstone meeting reinforced the importance of the new learning system model educational compact. Participants understood and gave new meaning and examples to the model, which reflected the work of all of the meetings. Participants clearly appreciated the importance of the educational compact, of considering the needs and responsibilities of all groups in order to achieve significant change. As a case in point, one small group used the example of expecting all students to be proficient in reading and writing by the 3rd grade — when research suggests almost all students are developmentally capable of proficiency with proper support. Currently, the trend toward “social promotion” prevails because each stakeholder group can blame another for the students who have not met the mark. But if stakeholders work together to ensure all students are proficient, and design flexible, individualized systems to support them, we could radically increase the numbers of students who go on to graduate from high school and enter post-secondary options.

Conversation 2007: Implications for Policy and Action

By far the most important lesson from Conversation 2007 is the need to see public education as a whole system, and to approach potential improvements in a systemic way.

- 1. Develop whole-system, lasting solutions, not piecemeal quick fixes.** In practical terms, that means we ought to resist any policy solutions that address a single element of the system—e.g. funding, assessment, teacher preparation, graduation requirements, parental engagement—in isolation. Instead, any proposed solution, including recommendations from the P-20 Council, the state legislature, and even some district level proposals, should be first viewed through the lens of how well it meets the needs of the various stakeholder groups and supports them as to take on their respective responsibilities. We recommend a “time out” on any policy that does not address the educational system as a whole in this manner.
- 2. Focus on top priority policies.** Assuming that any proposed changes have in fact met the “whole system” standard we propose above, we recommend that efforts should strongly consider the list of prioritized strategies outlined by participants (see Figure 3). Far from the uninformed opinion of laypeople, we found these strategies to be highly supportive of ensuring better results for all students. In particular, policies that support the individualization of instruction, the connection to real-world learning, and those that support and engage parents ought to take top priority.
- 3. Manage dilemmas and polarities.** To address the range of issues that emerged during the discussions, which are more tensions and dilemmas to manage than problems to solve, we recommend an ongoing series of public dialogues, carried out both formally and informally, to surface these tensions outside of heated crises. Debates over the relative balance of choice and equity, and the need to preserve cultural knowledge and tradition while still fostering innovation and social change in our schools, are best seen as a timeless balance of competing virtues, rather than an either/or fought out in policy initiatives or ballot proposals.
- 4. Raise the standards, but point them in the right direction.** When revising the state standards, draw on the strong support for “21st Century learning skills” we found in our discussions, include the core content and strong thinking and problem-solving skills students will need to compete globally in the 21st Century.
- 5. Assess what truly matters.** Ensure that the assessment system is a fair reflection of mastering these skills and knowledge, rather than being, as many fear CSAP currently is, a test that rewards a lower set of skills than students actually need to succeed.

6. **Coordinate the points of transition.** As for P-20 transitions, the results of Conversation 2007 strongly support the work of the Preparations and Transitions subcommittee of the P-20 Council, and its efforts to align and integrate the various elements of the P-20 system—and especially the need to have an ongoing point of coordination and communication among the various parts.
7. **Link resources with accountability — across the board.** Our findings suggest that funding discussions must be framed in terms of resources, not just taxes. This expands the possibilities of finding new sources of support from the community. Any discussion of funding (the responsibility of the community) must be linked to accountability, which is everyone’s responsibility, not just teachers. The resource-related needs of each stakeholder group ought to be considered as part of the overall costs of the system, not just the costs of running schools themselves. Resource needs for parents and students include the social service net needed to ensure that students are prepared to learn. Resource needs for the community include the skilled workers and citizens that schools help produce. While conceiving of educational resources in this way does increase the overall price tag, it also encourages a more coordinated effort between existing funding streams. Well-coordinated social service and juvenile justice programs can free up resources throughout the system and better support learning outcomes for students.


Policy Recommendations Recap

- ✚ **Develop whole-system, lasting solutions, not piecemeal quick fixes.**
- ✚ **Focus on top priority policies.**
- ✚ **Manage dilemmas and polarities.**
- ✚ **Raise the standards, but point them in the right direction.**
- ✚ **Assess what truly matters.**
- ✚ **Coordinate the points of transition.**
- ✚ **Link resources with accountability — across the board.**

Moving Forward

Through Conversation 2007, and the other statewide efforts in Colorado, we have learned a great deal about what the public hopes to see in its public education system. We have also seen the public’s willingness to strongly support its schools when they see the system as a whole designed to assure the desired results. We hope that these findings help bring the public’s shared goals and aspirations one step closer to reality.

In conjunction with the efforts of the P-20 Council, Commissioner Dwight Jones and the State Board of Education, the Civic Canopy commits to playing its part to ensure that Coloradoans remain engaged in the education dialogue. We look forward to the construction of a truly world class learning system for the 21st Century that supports all of Colorado’s students. ⚖️

 <p>Civic Canopy</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Colorado Civic Canopy</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Civic Canopy is an inclusive network of partners that engages in thoughtful dialogue and collaborative action to increase the civic health of our communities.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">www.civicanopy.org 720-331-4210 civilconversations@msn.com</p>
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