



EDUCATION REFORM IN COLORADO

by Josh Abram

Over the last several years, the Colorado General Assembly has passed numerous education reform bills. In addition to other initiatives in public education, this suite of laws constitutes an ambitious reform agenda for the state. This issue brief provides a short description of these reform components.

Longitudinal growth model. Beginning with House Bill 04-1433, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) was directed to implement a statistical model capable of analyzing student academic growth based on assessment results. The model was further revised by House Bill 07-1048, which required that the CDE and a technical advisory panel better quantify student growth. This revised longitudinal growth model is the central component of Colorado's education accountability system.

Each school district is required to use the model to track student performance and growth over time, and to create student-level growth reports to share with parents. As such, every district receives a performance framework which designates an accreditation category based on the overall performance rating, growth data, growth gaps, and postsecondary and workforce readiness measures. Individual schools also receive performance frameworks. Districts and schools are then required to use the data to identify the root causes of performance problems, and to help develop improvement plans. Growth data are publically available on the state's SchoolView website.

Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K).

Senate Bill 08-212 attempts to align education systems from preschool through postsecondary education. The law requires that the State Board of Education (SBE) adopt a description of school readiness, and an appropriate assessment to measure school readiness for new elementary students. The SBE must also adopt new standards (expectations) for all major academic areas, and new assessments to measure how well students, teachers, schools, and districts meet those standards.

The bill requires that the SBE collaborate with the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) to develop and adopt a description of postsecondary and workforce readiness (PWR), and the necessary assessments to measure PWR. The SBE may also adopt criteria for adding endorsements to a high school graduate's diploma, for example to identify students who have met the PWR description, or to acknowledge a graduate's outstanding academic achievement.

Once the state agencies have adopted new readiness descriptions, standards, and assessments, school districts must adopt or align their district standards, curricula, and assessments to conform with those adopted by the state. So far, the SBE has adopted a school readiness description, the PWR description, and new model content standards. The board is in the process of developing new statewide assessments to align with the new standards, and districts have begun the task of implementing the law's provisions at the school and classroom level.

Innovation Schools Act. Senate Bill 08-130 creates a mechanism for schools, groups of schools, and school districts to try new ways of delivering instruction and/or allocating resources. The law creates a new classification of school districts: "districts of innovation." An innovation district has one or more schools implementing these new methods. Innovation districts are permitted, upon approval of the SBE, to waive certain statutory requirements, including in some circumstances provisions of a collective bargaining agreement. Unlike a charter school, which has an independent board of directors and may hire staff independent of the district, an innovation school has the same board of directors, and staff are employed by the school district. Currently, the SBE has approved 23 schools in three districts as innovation schools.

Educator identifier system. House Bill 09-1065 created a statewide educator identifier system beginning with the 2009-10 academic year. Educator identifiers assign a unique, secure, and confidential identifying number for all teachers. Information gathered by the system allows for the analysis of teacher gaps, issues related to teacher training and professional development, teacher mobility and retention, career planning, and measurement of teacher effectiveness. The CDE is in the final phase of implementing the legislation, which involves linking educator's identifiers with student identifiers into the longitudinal growth model and making data available for analysis by districts and other interested parties. The department is on track to fully implement the law by September 2012.

Education accountability. Beginning in the 1990s, Colorado implemented a system of standards and assessments that measures student achievement and workforce readiness, and also holds districts, school administrators, and teachers accountable for the results. Additional requirements emerged with passage of the federal "No Child Left Behind Act" in 2002. Senate Bill 09-163 revised Colorado's accountability system to align with the goals outlined in CAP4K, and replaced the state's principal form of communicating results, the school accountability reports (known as SARS or School Report Cards),

with a revised School Performance Report. Information formerly reported in the SARS is now posted online, with some modifications, in the performance report. Finally, the legislation created a new accreditation process, aligned with CAP4K and the Colorado growth model.

Concurrent enrollment. House Bill 09-1319 replaced existing concurrent enrollment options in state law with the Concurrent Enrollment Programs Act. The law permits a student in grades 9 through 12 to enroll in courses at institutions of higher education and apply earned credits toward the requirements for high school graduation. Subject to course availability and the approval of the school district, students may enroll in unlimited college courses. HB 09-1319 also created the Accelerating Students Through Concurrent Enrollment program (ASCENT) for students retained by a high school for instruction beyond the senior year (fifth year seniors). Participation in ASCENT is reviewed by the SBE and subject to available appropriations.

Educator evaluations. Senate Bill 10-191 creates a system to evaluate licensed personnel in Colorado's schools, and links those evaluations to the academic growth of students. The law requires statewide minimum standards for what it means to be an "effective" teacher or principal. The evaluation system must ensure that 50 percent of the evaluation be based on the academic growth of students. The law changes non probationary status from one that is earned based on years of service to one that is earned based on three consecutive years of demonstrated effectiveness. Non probationary status may be lost based on consecutive years of ineffectiveness.

The law prohibits the forced placement of teachers, and allows a non probationary teacher to keep his or her status when taking a job with a new school district. The provisions of Senate Bill 10-191 are phased in over several years. The SBE approved rules that districts must follow to implement the law; however, those rules must also be considered by the General Assembly. Beginning with the 2014-15 school year, the district evaluation systems will be finalized statewide.