

## Standards and Assessments

Prepared by the Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA)  
On Behalf of the Race to the Top Research Consortium  
(Contact Kelly Hupfeld, Kelly.hupfeld@ucdenver.edu)

This paper provides information for those working on Colorado's Standards and Assessments Race to the Top (R2T) Committee, and is intended to accompany information provided by the Colorado Department of Education. It begins with some background on Colorado's education system and R2T, and then points out challenges and opportunities for school districts and schools presented by standards-based reform.

Putting reforms in place on paper is not enough. To move the needle, Colorado must ensure that the substance of the reforms occurs in each classroom in the state. In other words, school districts, schools, and individual educators need to understand the reforms and have the capacity and resources to fully implement them in ways that benefit students.

### Colorado Background

There are about 820,000 students and 49,000 teachers in Colorado K-12 schools. Colorado is one of the few states that constitutionally require local control of education. As a result, our state department of education traditionally has been fairly small, and many important decisions about education are made in our very diverse set of 178 school districts.

Colorado school districts range in enrollment from over 85,000 to 54 students, with half of the state's students in the ten largest districts and the large majority of districts (108) facing declining enrollment. These districts serve student populations that include isolated rural poor, urban immigrant, and affluent suburban populations. Colorado education offers students a great variety in how and where to learn. In addition to the traditional "neighborhood" school, a student can choose take classes or attend an on-line school, or to attend either a charter school, another school in the district, or even a school outside the district.

Colorado ranks 40<sup>th</sup> in per-pupil expenditures adjusted for regional cost differences, and per-pupil revenues are nearly \$1,500 below the national average. Although the state tends to perform well on national exams, it struggles with achievement gaps; that is low-income and Hispanic students (who represent over one-quarter of the student population) have much lower achievement, graduation rates and college attendance than white and middle/high income students.

## **Race to the Top (R2T)**

The federal Race to the Top grant competition will award millions of dollars to states that can show both significant progress in key reform areas and significant plans for accelerating improvement in these areas. These reform areas are:

- Standards and assessments
- Using data to improve instruction
- Teachers and leaders
- Turning around struggling schools.

It is possible that additional expectations around higher education and early childhood education will be included in the final Department of Education R2T guidance that is expected to be issued in October. Initial applications are expected to be due in December 2009.

Race to the Top assumes that states have a standards-based education system; that is, the state has identified content standards that identify what students at different levels should know and be able to do. The following sections discuss our state's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats with respect to standards-based reform, from the perspective of districts and schools.

### **Strengths: CAP4K Framework, Familiarity with Standards-Based Education Reform**

Thanks to the passage of Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K) and the recent intensive work on updating state standards, Colorado has a strong state framework to use for implementing world-class standards and assessments. CAP4K requires the state to develop an education system that will ensure that each high school graduate is ready for post-secondary education and for the workforce. The state must adopt a definition of school readiness for students entering the public schools system and a definition of post-secondary and workforce readiness for students graduating from high school. CAP4K also directs the state to revise its content standards and assessments to align with these new requirements. Individual school districts then adopt graduation standards and content standards that are in compliance with CAP4K. So far, the state looks to be adopting standards and definitions that are rigorous and reflect high expectations. This type of state-level framework is essential for directing meaningful reform of standards-based education, and is a big advantage for Colorado and its districts in this area.

Colorado was an early leader in standards-based reform, and so Colorado's schools and districts have operated under a standards-based system for nearly 20 years. This has given districts and schools ample opportunity to become familiar with the language of a standards-based system, and most education leaders fully support the goals of the system and understand the roles played by standards and assessments in reaching these goals.

### **Weaknesses: Uneven Implementation, Limited Access to Centralized Resources**

In Colorado, control of instruction is reserved to the school districts, and this "local control" culture is strong in practice as well as mandate. As a result, districts do not adopt state standards; instead, they adopt their own standards, which must be at least as rigorous as state standards. Some districts simply adopt the state's standards as their own. Others spend a great deal of time and effort customizing standards for what they see as the needs and

priorities of students in their districts. While this can result in very strong district standards, it can also lead to confusion among educators and the public.

Local control has also led to a relatively small state department of education. As a result, the state typically has not provided training on standards, model curriculum frameworks, sample assessments, and the like – information that helps teachers and principals translate the standards into classroom curriculum and instruction. Some districts do a good job of providing this information to their teachers and principals and otherwise implementing a standards-based education system; others, with more limited resources and/or motivation, do not provide this information but leave implementation up to individuals working in the schools.

A recent study of the state's math standards and student performance found that Colorado students struggled with virtually every subcontent area in math.<sup>i</sup> Teachers agreed that their students were weak in math, but revealed “an honest confounded quality as to how to tackle math deficiencies and where to begin” (p. 9). Many teachers were unfamiliar with their district's math standards: “Less than one half of the 58 districts visited were firmly clear about math standards and referred instead to the text and quizzes of their own textbook as their goals for math.” Not surprisingly, “[e]very city or district visited discussed the need for stronger teacher development in math...”

Similar conclusions were reached in a study of science standards and student performance.<sup>ii</sup> Again, each subcontent area in science was problematic for students. Interviews with teachers revealed a sense that elementary teachers were not comfortable teaching science content, and that secondary teachers were not using effective instructional techniques. At every visit, teachers requested a model curriculum so they could understand how the science standards should work in practice.

In summary, Colorado district and school leaders are desperately in need of resources and information that will help them develop and implement the newer, more rigorous standards and assessments. They need to train teachers to translate the standards into meaningful classroom instruction, and to use new forms of assessments to improve instruction. As district budgets continue to be cut, it is unlikely that schools and districts will be able to come up with these kinds of resources on their own.

### **Opportunities: Using R2T Resources to Assist Districts and Schools in Implementing CAP4K**

According to the U.S. Department of Education's draft guidelines for Race to the Top, 50 percent of the funds awarded to each state will go directly to the state, and the other 50 percent will be distributed to districts in the state. So consideration of how best to use R2T funds must include not only how these funds can best be used for state-level reforms, but also for investments in districts and schools. For example, R2T funds could be used to bring districts and the state together to develop curricular frameworks, model formative assessments, and other tools and resources housed at the state level that can help ensure that the goals of CAP4K are realized through changes in classroom instruction. The state could set up clearinghouses, state-level trainings, and other ways of distributing the information to districts. Districts could

use R2T funds to provide training to their teachers on the new standards and on how to use the new tools to improve instruction.

A great deal of conversation has occurred across the state about moving from a “seat-time” based system that promotes students based on chronological age and credit completion to a system that promotes students based on demonstrations of proficiency in meeting the standards. In a proficiency-based system, students are grouped based on their needs, and the system can quickly and fluidly adapt to individual circumstances. One school district, Adams 50 in Westminster, is moving to this type of proficiency-based system. The state may want to consider providing planning grants and other assistance for districts to experiment with and adapt this type of system.

### **Threats: Fear of Loss of Local Control**

R2T encourages states to adopt standards at least similar to those being developed by a multi-state consortium on common standards. The work of the consortium is intended to bring uniform high-level quality to state standards. As CDE’s background paper describes, Colorado has been active in this work, participating in the consortium while moving forward with its own parallel initiative to revise its standards. To the extent that the consortium’s work is perceived as potentially mandating national standards, critics in Colorado and other states may oppose it as infringing on local control. CDE’s background paper explains how Colorado intends to customize its standards while still participating in the national consortium. Work may need to be done to gather as much agreement as possible in Colorado around the benefits of raising standards across the country through the consortium.

---

<sup>i</sup> Colorado Department of Education (2005). The State’s Prime Numbers: A Report on the Performance of Our State’s Math Standards and Recommendations for Stronger Math Achievement. Denver, CO: Author. Available online at [http://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradomath/documents/The\\_States\\_Prime\\_Number\\_report\\_2.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradomath/documents/The_States_Prime_Number_report_2.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Colorado Department of Education (2006). The State’s Formula for Success 2006: A Report on the Performance of Our State’s Science Standards and Recommendations for Stronger Science Achievement. Denver, CO: Author. Available online at [http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/OSA/Final\\_Science\\_White\\_Paper\\_2006.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/OSA/Final_Science_White_Paper_2006.pdf).