

About CEI

CEI's mission is to **champion, empower,** and **ignite** Colorado leaders to deliver on the promise of public education to develop thriving young people and flourishing communities.

We have built our reputation through three primary roles: implementation expert, strategic partner, and statewide convener.

About This Series

CEI is publishing a new series of Accountability EdPapers throughout 2024 to share lessons, reflections, and recommendations about the future of high school accountability in Colorado.

EdPapers will explore:

- Honoring local relevance
- Prioritizing actionable and timely data
- Rethinking the role of high-stakes testing
- Promoting cross-system learning and transparency
- Keeping equity at the forefront



2024 Accountability EdPapers:

What Makes a Graduate? Unveiling the Opportunities and Challenges of Colorado's Unique Graduation Pathways

This paper is the fourth in our new series of 2024 Accountability EdPapers.

In this [spring series](#) of EdPapers, we are highlighting the urgency and opportunity to rethink the way Colorado's accountability systems reflect and incentivize robust high school experiences. High-quality state education systems must be coherent, and before we walk further down this road of accountability, history merits a look back at the high school policies that have evolved to present some of our current tensions and lack of coherence in the system. At the end of a school year where there is increasing momentum to realign and resource our high school systems for the first time in many years, this paper will spotlight our opportunity to ensure that the experience of a graduate from any high school or district in Colorado is transparent and accessible.

In 2007, the legislature directed the state to develop high school graduation guidelines. The process was delayed to accommodate the requirements of legislation incorporating new Colorado Academic Standards and Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) requirements, and in 2013, the state board adopted the Colorado Graduation Guidelines, which first fully applied to the graduating class of 2022. The Guidelines represent a structure whereby students may demonstrate readiness for life after high school through one or more of [11 test-based, programmatic, and performance-based options](#).

In addition to this set of policy changes, Colorado directed school districts to adopt their own graduation requirements. Beyond one course of civics education and the study of genocide and the Holocaust, Colorado is one of only three states that leave graduation requirements entirely up to individual school districts - and this isn't the only way that Colorado's graduation landscape is unique.

Most states dictate a strict set of course and credit requirements that a student must pass in order to receive a diploma. Although the stability and consistency of requirements across a state may create a shared basis for comparability and improvement conversations, the restrictive nature of this approach often leaves less room for innovative and individualized experiences for students.

Other states require students to pass an exit exam in order to achieve a diploma. While this requirement is clear, it may be too low a bar for some students, and for others, could result in a student attempting to pass the exam for much of their senior year, distracting them (and their educators) from the opportunity to identify more enriching measures of post-high school readiness. Only nine states still rely on an exit exam for graduation, and more each day are considering a move toward more holistic measures.

Colorado's local control context means that between the variety of graduation options, and the 178 different graduation policies across the state, there are many opportunities for students to experience meaningful and individualized pathways to graduation that reflect their interests and skills and will contribute to a thriving economy - in theory. At the same time, understanding state-level implications of the state Graduation Guidelines, district policies, and their implementation is nearly impossible for a number of reasons.

First, while each school district has a graduation policy, they may be difficult to access, are not often readily available to or interpretable by the general public, and are not centrally collected by CDE to store and make available publicly. The lack of comparability and transparency in the requirements makes any conversation largely inaccessible to the general public.¹

Second, the implementation of Graduation Guidelines and district policies and requirements varies widely across districts, and even inside of districts. The menu of options may be limited at the district or school level, leaving students with fewer options to demonstrate competency for graduation in some cases. There is no publicly available data about the nature of these pathway offerings in each district or school, and no shared learning about their implementation when they do exist, resulting in widely varying student experiences. Consider the capstone option, for example: some districts prioritize a rich "capstone for all" strategy, and each student has the opportunity to build toward this competency in a meaningful way over time. In other cases, the capstone is used as a last resort option for students who have not yet demonstrated other competencies.

Third, although school districts are required to report at least one graduation measure that a student has met, the reporting is inconsistent and unavailable to paint the full picture. School districts may satisfy this requirement at any point during a student's high school experience - meaning, if a student meets a measure their freshman year, the school district may or may not ever report on a student again, based on its own reporting policies, priorities, and structures. School districts are not required to report each option a student may have attempted (successfully or unsuccessfully), nor is there a requirement that either districts or CDE report publicly the demographic information of students accessing any particular option.

And finally, our accountability system has not yet evolved alongside the Graduation Guidelines and policies - while there are 11 options whereby students might demonstrate the competency necessary to graduate, only two of these options are reflected in the current state accountability framework: the SAT, which is currently captured across all three indicators², and the matriculation subindicator in the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) measurement, which includes an industry certification authorized through the Career Development Incentive Program (CDIP), when reported accurately. Unsurprisingly, without either the funding or the accountability to incentivize a more differentiated strategy to support students' paths to graduation, implementation with less fidelity can be an unintended consequence.

We believe that Colorado's local control presents a tremendous opportunity - our position is not to move to a standardized approach that infringes on the local context that makes our state so unique - but rather, we need shared language, transparent communication, and accessible reporting about graduation processes and requirements. From there, we can study and learn from innovative districts in ways that can provide in-district and cross-district comparability about the student experience, including which students are offered (and successfully demonstrate competency within) each option.

The student experience is so different from system to system - and even from school to school, in school districts with more than one high school. While accountability systems will always serve multiple purposes, our school districts are ultimately accountable to students and families.

¹ Amy Spicer, CEI's Vice President of Implementation Design, completed her doctoral dissertation on the current state of Colorado's Graduation Guidelines and the different requirements in each district. As part of her research, she gathered all 178 graduation policies from across the state. | ² In April's [EdPaper](#), we explored the right balance for measuring and incentivizing standardized testing.

We can choose to empower families to understand what they can expect from their high school experience - from the course requirements in their school, to the graduation options offered and supported, to the fidelity of implementation of an ICAP process, to the other pathway opportunities required or supported by their school as a student moves toward graduation. It should be straightforward to access this information, and whether this lives on a school or district website, or consolidated on a dashboard with CDE, we must invest in the systems to build shared language and transparency in a way that will help inform future decisions and improvements.

During the 1215 Task Force, the committee held a series of human-centered design sessions. The need to “map PWR opportunities to curriculum and graduation requirements”³ was prioritized across every stakeholder group. This mapping can only be possible if we have a way to collect and compare policies and opportunities transparently and accessibly. Critically, Recommendation 5 in the 1215 Report outlines a vision of a “one-stop shop” resource bank for schools and families to access for PWR programs; we recommend exploring this tool to incorporate individual school and district requirements to paint the fullest and most transparent picture of a high school experience.

We are optimistic about the work of the 1241 Task Force thus far, but we know that until we have a basis by which to compare the rigor of a diploma in one district against the rigor of a diploma in another district, graduation rates alone will not tell the full story in the framework. Until we incentivize and measure the menu of graduation options more intentionally, students may still receive a more limited pathway to graduation.

High school policy and practice have been asked to evolve to a more meaningful high school experience for many years now, but with no resources to support these shifts. Our hope is that, along with other shifts to high school accountability now, a transparent and accessible demonstration of graduation requirements and experiences across districts will lead to a more aligned and better resourced process for students to demonstrate their readiness for life after high school.

As always, we welcome partnership and feedback in this work. If you have thoughts, please don’t hesitate to reach out to Amber Elias, CEI’s Vice President of Policy and Partnership, at aelias@coloradoedinitiative.org.