



DEMOCRATS *for*  
EDUCATION REFORM

# Colorado *Policy Memo*

## *A Note From Our CEO*



Democrats in Colorado face a critical moment in education policy and an opportunity to build on the achievements of Governor Jared Polis. Under Gov. Polis' leadership, Colorado has implemented full-day kindergarten, created a universal preschool program, restored school funding to state mandated levels, and focused on workforce training. These landmark reforms represent some of the most significant education policy victories for Democrats in a generation. His administration's policy framework has begun to address structural shortcomings, which have contributed to measurable progress in attainment and a near-return to pre-pandemic test score results.

Yet even as we celebrate this progress, Coloradans remain concerned about educational quality. The state continues to report high rates of chronic absenteeism, with more than one in four students (28.4%) chronically absent in the 2024-25 school year, alongside high teacher turnover, uncompetitive pay, uneven reading and math scores, low college readiness and enrollment, and persistent achievement gaps.

Gov. Polis' education legacy is built on bold, outcome-focused reforms. He overhauled school funding through HB24-1448, which updated the state's 30-year-old school finance formula to increase funding for rural schools and at-risk, special education, and English Language Learner students. The administration launched RISE (Response, Innovation, and Student Equity) Education Grants in 2020, using \$32.7 million in federal relief funds to prioritize high-needs students while giving districts flexibility to pursue innovative solutions. Gov. Polis' decision to opt Colorado into the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program in late 2025 further signals a willingness to engage a broader set of policy tools. Colorado is also a national leader in public school choice, with charter school enrollment three times that of Massachusetts. The next governor should expand high-quality charter schools and remove barriers to access, continuing Colorado's shift toward an outcomes-driven education framework.

The transition period following Gov. Polis' tenure presents an opportunity for Colorado Democrats to build on this foundation, recapture voter trust, and carry forward his reform-oriented agenda. With the right leadership committed to continuing his evidence-based approach, Colorado can lead the nation in education, preparing every student for success in college, career, and life.

## *About* **This Report**

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Colorado through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Colorado's education system and the opportunity ahead.

It includes:

### **Executive Summary (pg. 3)**

Overview of Colorado's educational landscape and opportunity for renewed progress.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Organized around three pillars that, together, create a roadmap for measurable improvement.

- Innovation (pg. 5)
- Accountability (pg. 9)
- Choice (pg. 13)

## Executive Summary

Today, over 880,000 K–12 students depend on Colorado’s schools to prepare them for college, career, and life. But recent results show that more work is needed to create the conditions for student success at scale. Colorado continues to struggle with high chronic absenteeism rates and teacher attrition, while low college readiness and enrollment rates persist.

These challenges give the next governor a chance to pursue bold education reforms that could improve life outcomes for hundreds of thousands of young Coloradans. Investments in college and career pathways, innovative school models, reducing chronic absenteeism, results-driven accountability, expanding access to high-quality schools, and the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program could shape students’ futures for years to come.

Colorado is at a crucial moment of transition. The state needs a leader who can build on the progress made by Gov. Polis by implementing urgently needed reforms that demonstrate to the nation that sustained commitment and smart policymaking can deliver high expectations, modern learning opportunities, and lasting success for every student in Colorado.

### NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading	4th	4th-Grade Math	13th
8th-Grade Reading	3rd	8th-Grade Math	12th

## Colorado At a Glance



Public School Student Enrollment  
**881,065**

Chronic Absenteeism Rate  
**28%**

Students Eligible for Free or  
Reduced-Price Lunch  
**42%**

English Learner Students  
**10%**

Students with Disabilities  
**13%**

Students with College-Ready SAT Scores  
**32%**

High School Graduation Rate  
**86%**

Two- and Four-Year College Enrollment  
**36%**

### Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading	11th	4th-Grade Math	23rd
8th-Grade Reading	7th	8th-Grade Math	23rd

# Recommendations At A Glance



## Innovation

- 1. Measure, Support, and Reward Great Educators.** Adopt strategic staffing models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers where they are most needed while laying the groundwork to permanently strengthen the educator workforce pipeline.
- 2. Expand, Reinforce, and Evaluate College and Career Pathways.** Ensure every student can earn transferable college credits and career credentials by increasing high school participation in dual enrollment, career and technical education, and other college and career pathways, and evaluating outcomes for these programs.
- 3. Invest in a Range of Innovative School Models.** Provide financial and regulatory support for a broad array of high-quality school models such as full-service Community Schools, early college programs, charter schools, magnet programs, career academies, microschoools, and others that respond to the unique needs of children and families.



## Accountability

- 1. Strengthen and Sustain Strategies to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism.** Strengthen the state's approach to addressing chronic absenteeism by developing a statewide policy agenda prioritizing the issue and ensuring financial sustainability of proven practices.
- 2. Expand Evidence-Based Math Supports Across K-12.** Expand evidence-based math supports across K-12 through larger investments in and stronger requirements about the use of high-quality instructional materials.
- 3. Ensure High Standards and Emphasize Results in Accountability.** Align school report cards with rigorous NAEP benchmarks and enforce clear, transparent accountability for all schools—especially those that are chronically underperforming—while continuing to empower local districts and communities to shape school turnaround efforts.



## Choice

- 1. Support the Continued Expansion of and Access to Charter Schools**  
**Charter Expansion:** Advance legislation to allow charter schools to open in communities lacking high-quality school options.  
**Transportation:** Advance regulation and legislation that ensure families have the means to transport their children to public schools outside their district if they choose to enroll them there.
- 2. Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit Program.** Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time learning opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.
- 3. Support the Creation of Public Microschools.** Support the creation of public microschoools, especially in rural communities and other communities lacking diverse, personalized educational options.



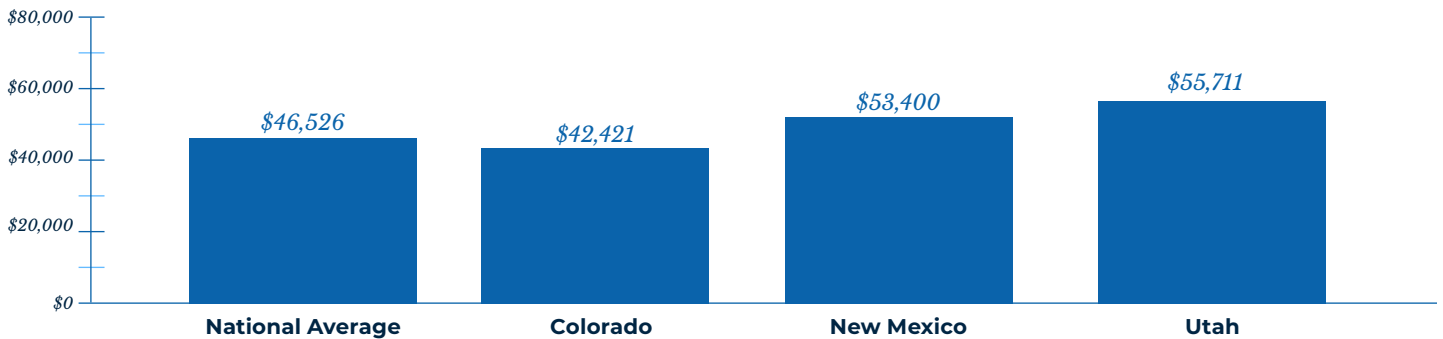
Colorado’s next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. The next governor of Colorado should usher in a new era of education innovation informed by the following recommendations.

### **Recommendation 1: Measure, support, and reward great educators.**

Colorado has an educator workforce crisis that is large and not easily quantified. Although the state’s teacher attrition rate is difficult to determine due to a [lack of data](#) collected by the state, according to [one report](#) by Keystone Policy Center, it may be as high as 21%. Even [available state data](#) on teacher shortages indicates that 1 in 7 positions needed to be filled for the 2024-25 school year. The gaps in statewide data point to an urgent need to collect and publicly publish more robust educator workforce information that includes attrition rates, positions held by fully qualified teachers, and other data relevant to understanding the state of the workforce.

One issue contributing to Colorado’s educator workforce crisis is teacher pay. The average starting salary for teachers in Colorado is significantly below neighboring states; Colorado teachers [can make thousands of dollars more](#) working in a bordering state, leaving Colorado at a disadvantage when competing for regional talent.

**Colorado’s typical starting teacher salary is far below its neighbors and the national average**



Source: [NEA Educator Pay Data \(2023-2024\)](#)

To help address the educator workforce crisis, we recommend expanding the use of [strategic staffing models](#) to accelerate learning and scaffold educator career development, providing [supplemental pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and specializations (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms), and creating a statewide task force charged with examining Colorado’s educator workforce pipeline and producing recommendations to permanently strengthen it.

An example of innovative policy directly impacting teaching and learning, North Carolina's [comprehensive redesign](#) of the state's teaching profession has included the adoption of a strategic staffing model—[BEST NC Advanced Teaching Roles](#)—which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an **additional 1 month of growth in math and science compared to comparable schools** without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an **additional 1.4 months of reading growth** for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction. Colorado is well positioned to build on these lessons. Strategic state investment has [already begun](#) in a comparable model that would benefit from additional support. In addition, several states and school districts across the country have implemented supplemental pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and specializations, [with promising results](#) showing that this can be an effective strategy to address teacher shortages where they are worst. This strategy can be scaled through [grant programs](#) tailored to address chronic shortages, [pay scheme flexibilities](#) for qualifying districts, [scholarship programs](#) that cover full tuition costs for teacher preparation programs in exchange for a multi-year commitment to a hard-to-staff assignment or specialization, or even a [sliding scale tax credit](#) for teachers based on the poverty level of the school in which they teach.

Finally, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen the entirety of Colorado's educator workforce pipeline. This will require a coordinated effort by state stakeholders to examine and act on challenges compromising the pipeline's integrity. A roadmap already exists for this work: New America, in collaboration with 23 national education policy organizations, has published a comprehensive [Six-Strand Strategy for Educator Excellence](#) to create a framework for strengthening the educator workforce. Colorado could utilize this roadmap to inform a statewide task force's investigation into the state's greatest areas of improvement and ensure the sustained integrity of the educator pipeline.

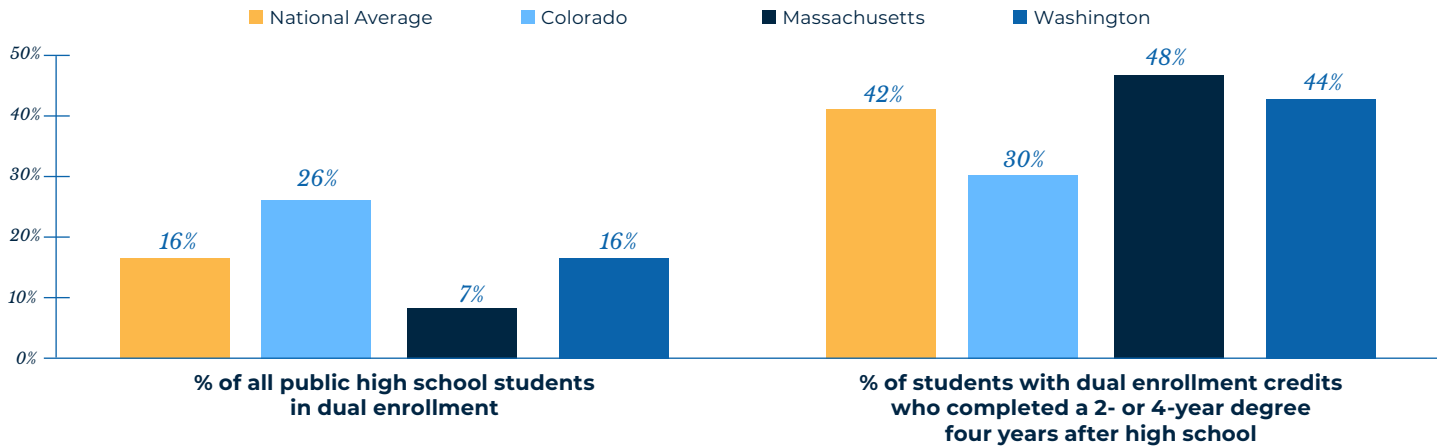
## **Recommendation 2: Expand, reinforce, and evaluate college and career pathways.**

Colorado has made significant investments in college and career pathways through its [menu of options](#) for students to demonstrate readiness for graduation. However, with fewer [than a third](#) of Colorado students earning college-ready SAT scores, credentials [misaligned with workforce demand](#), and [no longitudinal data system](#) to track long-term career outcomes, Colorado has the opportunity to do more to effectively prepare students for life after high school.

One notable area of improvement for Colorado is outcomes for students in dual enrollment programs. Colorado has relatively high participation rates in dual enrollment programs, but fewer than a third earn an associate's or bachelor's degree within four years of graduating from high school. This suggests that earned credits are not translating into faster completion of a degree or savings in college costs. Identifying and mitigating the causes of low attainment rates should be a priority for the next administration.

Given Colorado's relatively low rate of postsecondary degree completion for dual enrollment students, the state should implement an annual evaluation of dual enrollment programs, participation, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and school district, and make the findings easily accessible. This analysis should consider whether dual enrollment credits are transferring for both general education and major courses as well as whether dual enrollment courses are providing the rigor and quality needed to prepare students to succeed in college.

### Colorado leads its peers on dual enrollment participation, but participation doesn't translate to degree attainment



Sources: *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey (2022-23)*; *Community College Research Center (2024)*

In addition, following the implementation of Colorado's menu of options for graduation, the next governor should direct [ROI analyses](#) on various career pathways to ensure that they lead to a livable wage for students pursuing them. This will help students and families understand what pathways might best help students build a successful life after high school.

### Recommendation 3: Invest in a range of innovative school models.

Traditional school models are no longer working for enough students. We recommend providing financial and regulatory support for Community Schools, early college programs, charter schools, magnet programs, career academies, microschools, and other nontraditional school models that allow for faster, community-driven, and more iterative innovation.

For instance, [Community Schools](#)—which serve as the center of their neighborhood by providing access to critical programs and services like health care, social services, expanded learning programs, mentoring, adult education, and other resources—have been [shown to](#) improve attendance, reduce disciplinary incidents, boost academic achievement, strengthen school climate, and increase high school graduation rates. They also have a significant ROI, with [studies](#) calculating that **for every \$1 spent on Community Schools, they have a return of up to \$15.**

As another example, graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and do so faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are [14 percentage points more likely](#) (68% versus 54%) **to go on to college** compared to control-matched peers, and [14 percentage points more likely](#) (58% versus 44%) **to persist into a second year of college**—a strong predictor of eventual graduation.

One emerging school type that is expanding across the country is the [microschool model](#). Building on homeschool-style learning pods formed during the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier small-school models, microschools emphasize individualized learning and targeted supports. They can operate either as private or public entities, depending on state context and regulatory structures, but are most commonly private and tuition-based. Because of the nascent nature of the microschool model, data on their performance is currently limited. Several districts across the country are opening and operating microschools to provide more public school options and create opportunities for students to have a different learning experience.

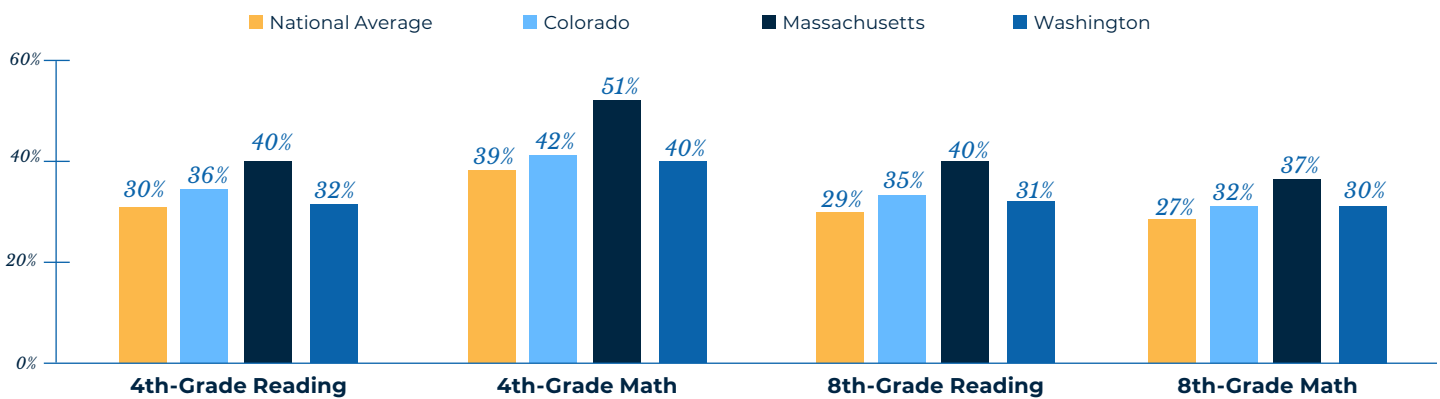
To help address the unique challenges of rural education, Indiana has [begun operating](#) microschools as public charter schools. Board members of the Indiana Microschool Collaborative describe the schools as a way to avoid unnecessary infrastructure investments and better personalize learning to [students' individual needs and interests](#).

Colorado's next governor should be strategic and committed to investing in an array of innovative school models that may accelerate learning outcomes for all students.

Colorado’s next governor must continue to build urgency around a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

**Colorado’s educational outcomes demand attention.** On the 2024 NAEP—the only nationally representative test which can compare student achievement across all 50 states—**fewer than 2 in 5 Colorado students demonstrated proficiency** in 4th-Grade reading, 8th-Grade reading, or 8th-Grade math. Moreover, when adjusted for comparison with demographically similar peers, Colorado plummets in national math rankings, falling to the middle of the pack. In short, **Colorado continues to struggle to equitably educate historically marginalized students.**

**Colorado lags behind Massachusetts in reading and math proficiency**

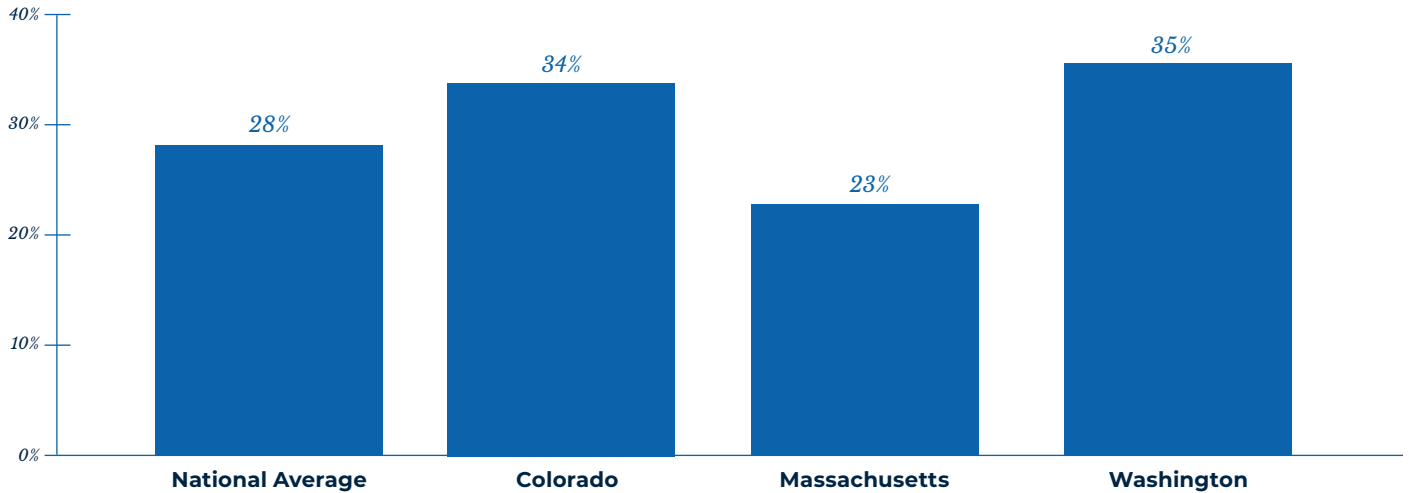


Source: *The Nation’s Report Card (2024)*

Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings (2024)				
	4th-Grade Reading	4th-Grade Math	8th-Grade Reading	8th-Grade Math
Colorado	11th	23rd	7th	23rd
Massachusetts	4th	5th	1st	2nd
Washington	26th	32nd	23rd	30th

Compounding the issue, Colorado had the 10th-highest chronic absenteeism rate in the nation as of the most recent [national comparison](#) in the 2022-23 school year. Children who are chronically absent from school [tend to have](#) disproportionately worse academic outcomes. Moreover, schoolwide chronic absenteeism [affects all children](#), even those who have perfect attendance.

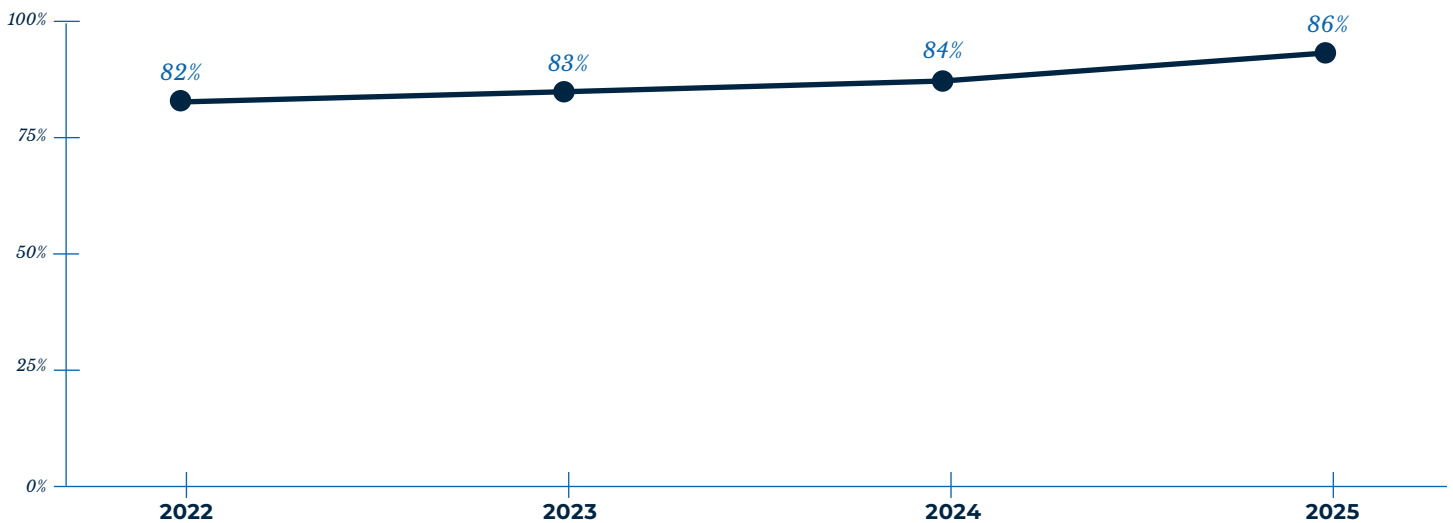
### Colorado had the tenth-highest chronic absenteeism rate in the nation in SY22



Source: [U.S. Department of Education \(2022-23\)](#)

One notable area of improvement for Colorado has been its high school graduation rate. While the state’s graduation rate was 82% in 2022—the seventh-lowest in the nation—it has increased substantially to 86% in 2025. However, this only brings Colorado up to the national average. More progress needs to be made for Colorado to lead the nation on high school graduation rates and ensure all of the state’s students reach this crucial milestone that predicts future employment and earnings outcomes.

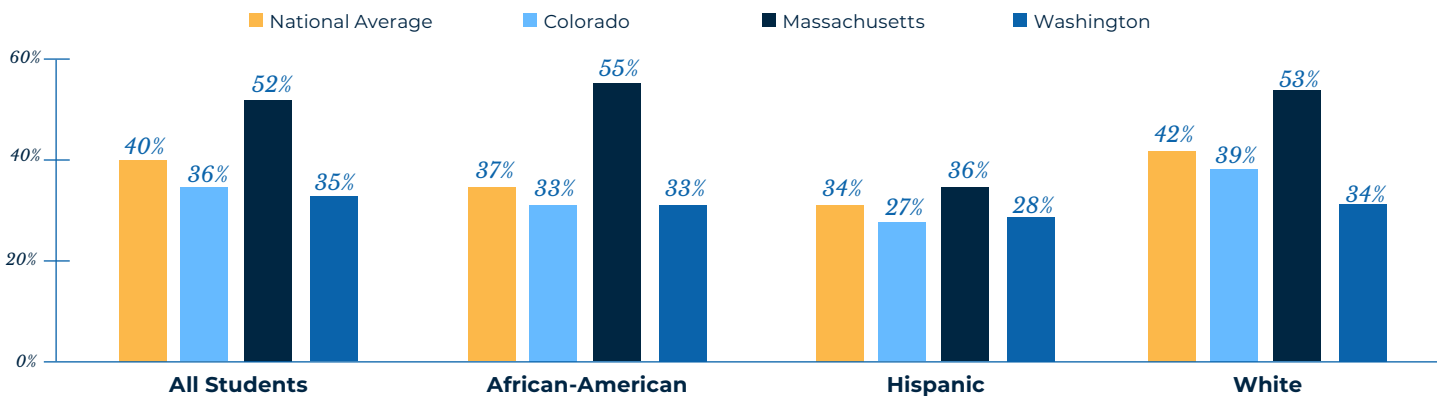
### Colorado has made steady progress on improving its graduation rate



Source: [Colorado Department of Education \(2026\)](#)

The state should also be cautious about celebrating this increased high school graduation rate without considering how it translates to postsecondary outcomes. For example, Colorado sits below the national average on college enrollment, especially for students of color.

### Colorado has lower college enrollment than the national average, especially for students of color



Source: *National Center for Education Statistics (2021)*

## Recommendation 1: Strengthen and sustain strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

While Colorado has [made progress](#) on reducing chronic absenteeism in recent years, rates [remain higher than pre-pandemic levels](#) and actually [went up](#) in the 2024-25 school year. The state’s progress must be sustained in order to ensure that all students receive the learning they need. The next Colorado governor should strengthen the state’s approach to addressing chronic absenteeism by [developing a statewide policy agenda](#) prioritizing the issue and [ensuring financial sustainability](#) of [proven practices](#). As noted earlier, Community Schools are a [promising approach](#) to addressing chronic absenteeism and should be considered in tandem with other efforts.

## Recommendation 2: Expand evidence-based math supports across K–12.

While the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) [rates](#) Colorado as strong on implementing evidence-based reading instruction, the state has room for [improvement](#) on evidence-based math instruction. Colorado should [enact policies](#) strengthening high-quality instructional materials for math, including implementing a universal math screener, requiring districts to adopt approved curricular materials, collecting and publishing data on adoption and usage, and providing funding for math coaches.

Alabama made [significant investments](#) in evidence-based math instruction and has seen notable improvements, making the [largest jump in the nation](#) on the 2024 NAEP results. Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Indiana [have also implemented](#) strong reforms.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Ensure high standards and emphasize results in accountability.**

The next governor of Colorado should ensure that every school in the state is held to high standards and held accountable to improving student outcomes. They should establish stronger reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools, but especially chronically underperforming schools, by monitoring the faithful implementation of [HB25-1278](#), passed in 2025. Successful turnaround efforts must prioritize family engagement and community voice, recognizing that sustainable improvement depends on meaningful participation from those most affected.

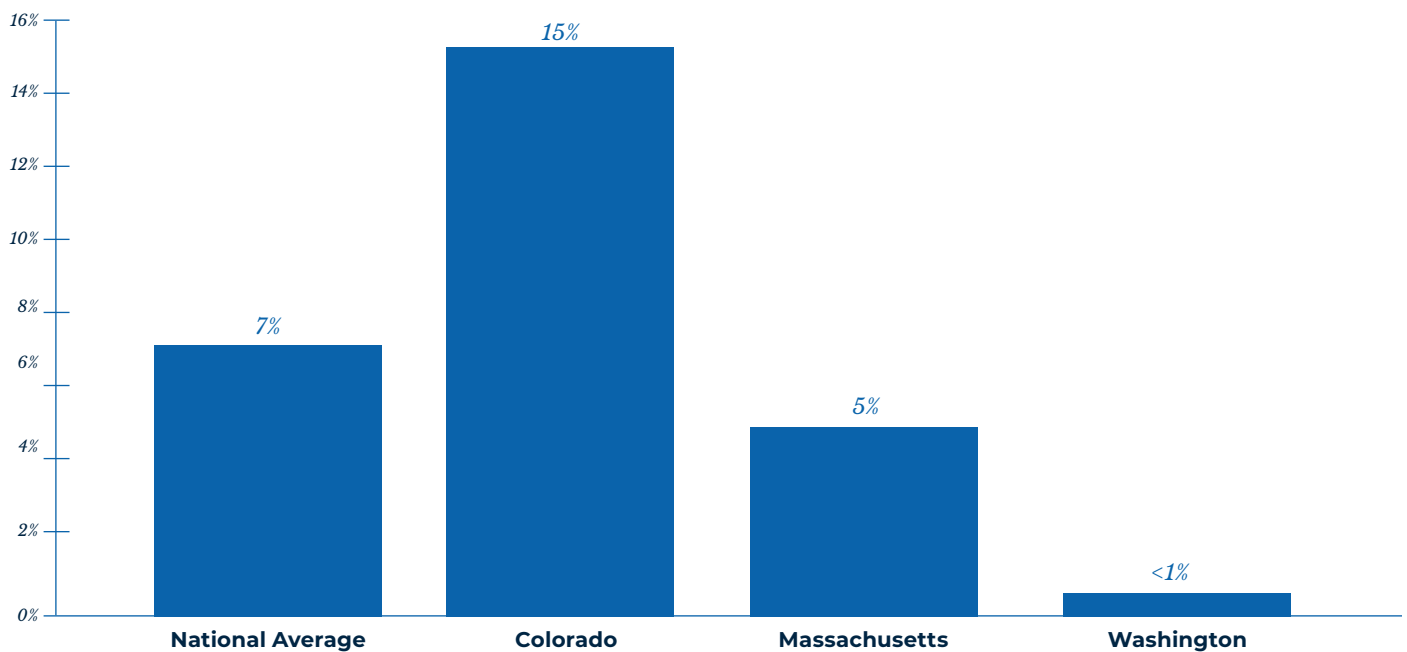
The next governor should ensure that Colorado is taking a holistic approach to building a high-quality school system. Turnaround laws in states like [Massachusetts](#) and takeover efforts in cities like [New Orleans](#) tend to be more successful when paired with a broader reform agenda including funding reform, state longitudinal data systems that track outcomes beyond high school, and innovative approaches like New Orleans's creation of the nation's most intensive market-based school system.



## Choice

Colorado is a national leader in public school choice. The state has triple the charter school enrollment of Massachusetts and far exceeds the national average. In addition, Colorado allows families to enroll their children in another public school within the same district (intra-district enrollment) or in another district (inter-district enrollment), policies that help ensure a child's zip code doesn't determine the quality of their education. The next governor of Colorado needs to strengthen this sector, by supporting the expansion of high-quality charter schools and networks and addressing systemic barriers to attendance.

### Colorado leads its peers on charter school enrollment



Source: *National Center for Education Statistics (2022–2023)*

### **Recommendation 1:** **Support the Continued Expansion of and Access to Charter Schools**

Advance legislation to allow charter schools to open in communities lacking high-quality school options. The next governor of Colorado has a chance to give more students real choices in education by opening high-quality charter schools in areas where local schools have struggled for years. The state could let the Colorado Charter School Institute approve these schools even if the local board does not, as long as there is clear evidence of need and support from families (e.g., high percentage of students attending underperforming schools in the district). To make sure these schools succeed, the state should also provide additional grant funding and technical support during startup. This approach could bring proven, innovative school models to communities that have too often been left behind.

*Provide transportation support for students attending public schools outside their district.* While many Colorado families have ample choices regarding what school their children might attend, they are often [limited by the cost or feasibility of transportation](#). This runs the [risk of excluding](#) families who cannot afford or do not have time to arrange transportation to their children's charter or magnet school, making economically advantaged students more likely to attend non-local schools and economically disadvantaged students less likely to do so. To address this, the next governor should advocate for legislation and advance regulations that would provide financial support to charter schools or their enrolled families for student transportation to and from school. For instance, Florida provides a [transportation stipend](#) to families whose children are enrolled in public schools outside their district of residence.

## **Recommendation 2:**

### **Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC) program to expand access to tutoring and out-of-school time programs.**

The new [Federal Scholarship Tax Credit \(FSTC\)](#) program represents an opportunity to expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs and to accelerate learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most. Governor Polis has already [announced that he will opt into the program](#), and the next governor should continue participation. We recommend embracing the FSTC program and designing it to serve under-resourced students and families by providing free services through scholarship-granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and non-academic support to K-12 students. [Out-of-school time](#) programming provides [academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities](#) for young people to build durable academic and life skills. It also provides working class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on the weekends.

## **Recommendation 3:**

### **Support the Creation of Public Microschools.**

A recent [Brookings report](#) underscores an engagement challenge contributing to high chronic absenteeism: Large numbers of students say their schools feel neither engaging nor welcoming, with rural and urban students reporting the weakest sense of belonging. Microschools are small, community-driven hubs of innovation that engage youth by connecting learning directly to real-world experiences, whether through local projects, internships, or partnerships with community organizations and businesses. Many microschoools are designed specifically to support the learning and development of marginalized youth.

Colorado can support the creation of public microschoools in high-need areas by, for example, utilizing competitive grant programs similar to [RISE](#) and [Elevate AI](#) (via the state's Opportunity

Now Fund) to establish a network of public microschools. The state may also consider [legislation](#) similar to that proposed in Washington to establish a framework and funding for public microschools. This legislation could make specific provisions to ensure students with the greatest need are being served by these new schools.

## *Moving* **Forward**

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The next governor has a chance to continue driving education reform in Colorado, from the first day a child enters school to the day they graduate with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to succeed in the world beyond. By embracing innovation that maximizes the potential of every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality public options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future for all. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Colorado will thrive for generations to come.