

Seven steps to better state schools

*By Jared Polis
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In light of alarming reports and statistics about Colorado's achievement gap, it's encouraging that a widespread consensus has emerged among state policymakers that closing that gap and fixing the educational pipeline are urgent priorities and that we need innovative programs.

One such program was presented to the State Board of Education recently. The Sheridan School District and Lincoln High School in Denver offered a creative model for allowing kids to receive college credit while still in high school. Unfortunately, an evenly split board missed a great opportunity to demonstrate its support for programs such as these that have successfully narrowed the achievement gap by providing hope to disadvantaged students.

By failing to repeal our own restrictive rule, we failed to reward innovation and success. Our inaction on this crucial issue creates confusion, and sends mixed and discouraging signals to entrepreneurial educators who seek to transform students' lives.

It's imperative to reform Colorado's fragmented educational policy and systems, and to move toward a more integrated approach that offers every child an opportunity to succeed from preschool through college. While "P-16" has become a frequently used term within Colorado's education community, our current structures and policies impede rather than ease preparation and smooth transitions at each stage of education.

Decades of research indicate that student achievement and progress require a seamless process with several essential components, such as: high and clearly stated expectations; strong support and culturally sensitive services and relationships; quality teachers; adequate resources and facilities; research-based and results-driven assessment; and flexibility that allows and rewards effective innovations.

Policy development and alignment between our public schools and colleges is imperative. The separate initiatives of the K-12 system and higher education, although well-intended, often create confusion and problems. Information and data are not shared or are not readily available. Issues of preparation and barriers of transition from high school to college have not been explored thoroughly. The fragmentation and lack of coordination reflects current structures and prevents the strategic design of a seamless, more efficient and effective education system.

It is time for Colorado to take seven bold steps:

Foster greater statewide cooperation between the preschool, elementary, secondary and higher education systems. Cooperation among all interested agencies and parties, with business and industry input and participation, must also involve flexibility for regional and local working groups that will bring together school districts, post-secondary institutions, parents, employers and others.

Provide universal access to high-quality preschool and early childhood education. Research clearly shows that early education for children up to age 5 enriches learning opportunities, achievement and life outcomes significantly.

Develop a student tracking data system to assess achievement and progress from preschool through college. Without such information, we are unable to measure results and make informed decisions. Today, the different student data systems used by the K-12 and post-secondary education agencies prohibit effective monitoring and evaluation, leaving too many questions unanswered and clouding accountability.

Promote and encourage dual and concurrent enrollment programs that motivate students to stay in high school and get a head start for college. Such programs would allow a student to earn both a high school

diploma and an associate's degree or up to two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree. Only about 1,750 full-time equivalent students are enrolled in the current academic year in the state's dual and existing concurrent enrollment programs.

Clearly communicate to students, parents and educators a clear set of expectations required for advancing through the different education levels. It is especially important to engage young people in their own cultural context and community of peers, and to provide mentoring and coaching. Outreach fuels student and parent motivation for high educational aspirations.

Enhance teacher preparation, education and professional development by creating effective relationships between teacher education programs and school districts. Extensive research demonstrates that teacher quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement.

Provide comprehensive, student-centered support services, including academic counseling and tutoring, to low-income college students to increase their retention and graduation rates.

The good news is that an effort has started in Colorado to focus on achieving a successful P-16 educational system. If sustained and broadly supported, such an effort will push beyond bureaucratic turf and entrenched practices and toward truly closing the achievement gap.

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