

# Building Needed Capacity and Alignment in Career Advising Across Colorado's Education-to-Career Ecosystem

With input from internal and external stakeholders and community partners, The Attainment Network identified key policy areas where statutory changes and additional investments would strengthen Colorado's education-to-career systems. These policy briefs provide analysis of the issues, national and local best practices, and recommendations to accelerate learner success in Colorado.

## Background

Colorado's education and workforce systems have made significant investments in career-connected learning opportunities, including career and technical education (CTE), concurrent enrollment (CE), industry-recognized credentials (IRCs), and work-based learning (WBL). Yet fragmentation across sectors and regions limits learners' ability to navigate seamless pathways from high school to postsecondary education and into the workforce.

According to a [study conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation \(OECD\) and Development](#), about 30% of 15-year-old students in the United States are uncertain about what career they want to pursue, and 34% feel school hasn't equipped them with real-world skills. Similarly, a [recent report from Strada](#) found that only 35% of postsecondary students at Colorado's four-year public institutions reported receiving personalized coaching or guidance to help select the education that will prepare them for a successful career.

As part of the Colorado Department of Education's (CDE) Career Advising Training Grant Program, The Attainment Network in 2025 produced a [Colorado Career Advising Report](#) with a landscape review of resources and recommendations for building needed capacity. The report notes that even with many strong programs in place, lack of alignment, consistent training, and shared accountability creates inequities and weakens the overall effectiveness of Colorado's career advising ecosystem. Drawing on the information and resources compiled in that report, this policy paper outlines current challenges, provides recommendations to address identified gaps, and highlights promising practices seen in Colorado and across the country.

## Problem Statement

Colorado's learners face a fragmented career advising landscape. Career advising programs can be found in K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, workforce centers, and community organizations, though not universally or consistently, and existing efforts often operate in silos without shared accountability, training standards, or cohesive messaging. Our Colorado Career Advising Report found that:

- Learners may see career advising as separate from or even in competition with college advising.

- Rural and underfunded regions lack access to the same quality of advising and tools as more resourced areas.
- Advisors frequently lack reliable, easily accessible information on emerging and evolving career, education, and training opportunities; consistent training; or the time needed to provide ongoing career coaching.
- Learners' career-connected experiences and plans are not portable or easily accessible by advisors as they transition between K-12, postsecondary education, and the workforce.
- Systems are designed around immediate job or education/training placement, rather than around holistic, personalized models that integrate timely advising and data-informed technology to support learners across their career journey and honor their past experiences, current purpose, and future goals.

This fragmentation undermines equity, weakens economic mobility, and prevents the state from building a robust talent pipeline aligned with high-demand, high-wage jobs.

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## Goal

A cohesive, statewide career advising strategy that ensures all Coloradans—regardless of geography, background, or stage of life—have equitable access to high-quality, career-connected advising should:

- Integrate career and college advising and coordinate messaging between CTE, WBL, IRCs, and concurrent enrollment.
- Center learners' identification of their purpose, aptitudes, and interests; prioritizing relationship-based support.
- Establish a cohesive framework for training, accountability, and data systems across sectors.
- Prepare learners for long-term career development, not just immediate job placement.
- Support state priorities such as workforce readiness, credential attainment, and economic competitiveness.

## Key Findings

Through the landscape analysis in the Colorado Career Advising Report, several themes emerged on the challenges and opportunities to provide comprehensive, quality career advising. Key findings in the report highlight the need for overall alignment, consistency, and reliability across the ecosystem:

### 1. Career and College Advising Must Be Unified

- Advising occurs in silos across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems.
- Learners often receive mixed messages about how education connects to careers.
- CTE, WBL, CE, and IRCs are not consistently aligned as pathways to postsecondary education and living-wage jobs.

## 2. Misalignment Across Systems Limits Continuity

- Academic, career, and experiential learning programs operate independently rather than as connected supports.
- Inconsistent communication and limited data sharing disrupt advising during key transitions.
- Lack of coordinated frameworks prevents statewide learning and program improvement.

## 3. Advisors Need Consistent Training, Tools, and Data

- Quality of advising varies widely by geography and institutional resources.
- Advisors often lack standardized training, real-time labor market information, and the technology needed to support effective advising.
- Limited professional development opportunities hinder effective, relationship-based and data-informed career coaching.

## 4. Accountability Prioritizes Short-Term Outcomes

- Current performance measures emphasize immediate job placement over long-term career growth.
- Funding structures provide few incentives for sustained career coaching.
- Gaps in shared accountability weaken coordination as learners transition between education and employment.

# Policy Recommendations & Steps to Address

There is a clear opportunity to develop a comprehensive statewide career advising strategy to tie together and support current state priorities and related initiatives, including creating a statewide longitudinal data system, updating accountability measures, integrating WBL, industry certifications, and postsecondary education within and after high school, and building pathways aligned to Colorado's high-need, high-wage job opportunities.

The following recommendations were initially outlined by The Attainment Network in the Colorado Career Advising Report. They were subsequently informed by the work of other Career Advising Training Grant Program grantees:

## 1. Convene Statewide and Regional Career Advising Summits

Create recurring statewide and regional forums that convene K-12, postsecondary education, workforce, and industry leaders to facilitate cross-sector communication, resource sharing, and alignment of career advising strategies.

- [Report on Inaugural Statewide Career Advising Conference \(Business & Education Alliance\)](#): An overview of the event, participants, and outcomes. Held in February 2025, the conference created a collaborative space for professionals to enhance career advising strategies, develop regional partnerships, and utilize a framework to support learner transitions.

## 2. Reimagine the ICAP Process

Position the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) as the central statewide advising tool, updating and modernizing to ensure inclusion and alignment of career-connected learning opportunities. Make ICAP data portable across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems, and provide comprehensive training and updated resources for stronger implementation.

- [Developing a Statewide Career Pathways Platform \(Bellwether\)](#): Synthesis of stakeholder feedback and recommendations for content and functionality needed for developing and implementing a statewide platform.
- [Recommendations for Developing an ICAP Framework as a Career Advising Framework \(Bellwether\)](#): An overview of stakeholder recommendations for a broad ICAP framework that includes adult learners, acknowledges learners' needs beyond high school, equips career advisors at secondary and postsecondary levels to support these needs, and provides implementation recommendations for the state.

### 3. Standardize Data and Accountability

Create statewide frameworks for career advising outcomes and reporting and align with advisor training and credentialing opportunities. Support the continuous, portable advising of learners by tracking career-connected learning experiences, skill development, transitions, and employment.

### 4. Professionalize Advisor Training

Establish baseline training standards and recognized credentials for all career-connected advisors and staff, including incentives for advisors to earn a state-recognized career advising credential. Expand access to high-quality, regularly updated professional development for all professionals who interact directly with learners. Incentivize personalized advising that emphasizes learner identity, interests, aptitudes, and evolving goals—not just immediate job placement.

- [Credentials in Career Advising](#) (YAASPA, IDG, NACE): Collaborative research project outlining a comprehensive approach for developing a Career Advisor Credential aligned with national standards and including endorsement opportunities for licensed educators.

### 5. Connect K-12, Postsecondary, and Workforce Systems

Develop a unified statewide career advising framework linking CTE, WBL, IRCs, academic advising, and workforce navigation across all learner stages, ensuring continuity in career exploration, planning, and navigation.

## Model Programs: State and National

To strengthen Colorado's career advising ecosystem, it is critical to learn from programs that are already demonstrating impact. The **Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab** has a [framework](#) in place for building and determining levels of evidence for programmatic impact. This framework can be used to elevate evidence-based models as the highest standard while we pilot programming across the state to ensure efficient use of resources for demonstrably impactful practices

Both within the state and nationally, innovative models illustrate how coordinated advising, intentional integration of work-based learning, and strong partnerships with industry and postsecondary education can transform learners' experiences. These examples provide valuable lessons for scaling effective practices, ensuring equity in access, and building sustainable statewide systems. Highlighting promising Colorado programs alongside model initiatives from other states and national organizations offers guidance on moving from fragmented efforts to a cohesive, learner-centered advising strategy.

## Statewide Models

- [Career Connect Washington \(WA\)](#): State-led initiative aligning education, employers, and workforce systems through grants, convenings, and regional networks.
- [Indiana Career Explorer \(IN\)](#): Free statewide platform helping residents assess skills, explore careers, and access educational opportunities.
- [Kentucky Individual Learning Plan \(KY\)](#): Required for grades 6–12, integrating career exploration with academic planning.
- [Delaware Pathways \(DE\)](#): Connects learners to CTE, apprenticeships, and internships in high-demand industries.

## National Models

- [Generation Schools Network \(CO & National\)](#): Distributed advising model integrating education with workforce readiness, particularly in rural contexts.
- [ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF](#): Developing a national digital platform to guide 16- to 24-year-olds in finding training and career pathways.
- [Appreciative Advising \(FL Atlantic University\)](#): Learner-centered advising model focused on strengths, aspirations, and purpose.
- [SUNY ASAP|ACE \(NY\)](#): SUNY's Advancing Success in Associate Pathways (ASAP) and Advancing Completion through Engagement (ACE) programs have led to doubling college completion rates by providing holistic wraparound supports with academic, personal, and financial resources; removing barriers to gaining and maintaining academic momentum; and building community among learners.
  - In Spring 2025, [Colorado announced a multi-year initiative to pilot](#) the ASAP model at Lamar Community College and Colorado Mountain College.
- [Principles for Quality Education-to-Career Guidance \(Strada\)](#): The practices, services, and resources that are key to supporting learners through a successful transition through education and into careers.
- [TRIO Career Development Programs](#): Federally funded supports providing targeted coaching, supplemental skill development, career exploration, and connection to employers and professionals.

## Promising Colorado Models & Resources

- [Jeffco Career Links](#): Aligns career advising with WBL opportunities through Career Hub Navigators, and provides a one-stop resource for learners, families, educators, industry partners, and community leaders to explore and engage in WBL.
- [Denver Public Schools Work-Based Learning](#): The largest WBL initiative in the U.S., partnering with industry and postsecondary institutions to provide learners with hands-on experience and expand professional networks. This can further align with advising efforts to help learners explore their career identity, visualize what's possible, and make a plan for their future.
- [Metropolitan State University of Denver Classroom to Career Hub](#): A centralized career development system which organizes previously disconnected functions of career advising and services, experiential learning, and mentorship. Embeds career readiness into every learner's journey by providing support and meaningful connections, as well as building confidence in career readiness through collaboration with faculty, industry, and community partners.
- [Colorado Mesa University IRIS Advisors](#): Utilizing the Appreciative Advising model, CMU provides learners with holistic, one-stop academic advising and financial counseling through Integrated Resources for Information and Solutions (IRIS). IRIS Advisors serve as academic advisors for first-time freshmen, learners with undeclared majors, and certain cohort program participants, connecting them to the campus community.
- [CrossPurpose](#): Utilizes a holistic approach integrating professional training in key industries with career coaching, mental health, and personal development supports.
- [CDE's Meaningful Career Conversations Training and Career Advising Tools](#)
  - The [Meaningful Career Conversation Course](#) was created by the [Colorado Education Initiative](#) to empower career advisors with ways to effectively support learners in exploring their strengths, navigate career pathways, and pursue their professional goals.
  - The [Colorado Career Advising Tool](#)—developed and maintained by [Indigo Education Company](#) in partnership with the Colorado Education Initiative—provides resources for learners and advisors to develop a personalized career action plan by identifying strengths and motivators aligned with education and training resources.

- [Connecting Colorado](#): Housed by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, this AI enhanced online platform supports both job seekers and employers. Job seeker tools include resume building, job exploration, and other resources. Employers are able to post jobs, connect directly with job seekers, and utilize tools to support hiring efforts.
- [Career Fit Colorado](#): A career platform launched by Colorado Thrives to connect Coloradans to living-wage jobs and help employers find skilled, motivated local talent. This platform uses AI-powered recommendation and skill-matching tools to tailor resources and best-fit roles.

## Conclusion

Colorado has a strong foundation for career advising but lacks a cohesive statewide strategy. By strengthening ICAP, developing common frameworks for advising tools, aligning accountability, linking data across systems, and investing in advisor training, including a professional credential, the state can create a seamless career navigation system that equips learners for high-demand, high-wage careers and fuels long-term economic growth.

Budget constraints may tempt leaders to de-prioritize career advising, but doing so risks undermining Colorado's workforce readiness and economic competitiveness. Quality advising is not optional—it is the backbone of career-connected learning, helping learners translate experiences into informed decisions about their futures. State and local education and workforce leaders must act now to adopt a unified strategy and invest in the tools and training that will ensure every learner can access pathways to economic mobility.

