



# **BUILDING A MORE LEARNER- CENTERED SYSTEM:**

**EMERGING LEARNINGS FROM  
COLORADO'S PATH4WARD PROGRAM**



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Great Schools are Good Business

**PATH4WARD**



## COLORADO'S EFFORTS TO CREATE A SEAMLESS SYSTEM FOR LEARNERS

For nearly a decade, Colorado has been at the forefront of efforts to break down silos between education and workforce systems to provide students with relevant and engaging learning experiences, as well as accessible postsecondary and career pathways.

As a recent [case study from Jobs for the Future](#) (JFF) illustrates, the state has pursued numerous policies and initiatives that provide college and career-connected learning opportunities during high school and has made important strides in facilitating better alignment between schools, higher education institutions, and industry. As JFF points out, these efforts make Colorado a national leader in the push to create a more student-centered system that better prepares students for postsecondary success and tackles what JFF has coined the “Big Blur.”

### WHAT IS THE BIG BLUR?

The Big Blur calls for erasing “the arbitrary dividing line between high school and college and opens the opportunity for all 16-year-olds to start a path toward a postsecondary credential and career preparation.” Instead of making piecemeal changes to the current system, which leaves too many learners behind, it calls for rethinking and restructuring the last two years of high school and the first two years of college to improve postsecondary and economic outcomes for all.

Source: [Jobs for the Future](#)



## THE CHALLENGE

Despite Colorado's efforts, the state still lacks the seamless K through 12, postsecondary, and workforce systems at the scale needed to ensure all students have access to fulfilling pathways that lead to economic mobility. The result is that too many learners, particularly students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, are leaving Colorado high schools without a path and lack the comprehensive resources and navigation support they need to access economic opportunity and mobility. **In other words, students may be lost in the blur.**



Roughly 90% of the state's jobs that pay a wage sufficient to support a family of three require some type of education or training beyond high school



70% of Colorado high school graduates don't earn a certificate, associate's, or bachelor's degree within six years



The COVID-19 pandemic pushed Colorado's already low college-going rate in the wrong direction, with enrollment in the state's colleges dropping by 11% between 2020 and 2021.



Only 52% of students nationwide think their school is doing a good or excellent job teaching them about potential careers, according to a 2023 Gallup and Walton Family Foundation poll.

Survey and focus group data from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found among high school graduates ages 18–30 who declined to enroll in two- and four-year college:



71% would have found it extremely or very helpful to have a counselor help them figure out “what to study, classes to take, and meeting major requirements”



Another 75% said having a financial aid advisor to support them with scholarships and financial aid would have helped them

**With all the attention and support given to increasing postsecondary and career access and success in Colorado, we must be reflective and careful about what happens to the students who are moving through these blurred systems and how they can navigate it without clear definitions around which institution or “system” they are a part of currently.**



## **PATH4WARD: WHAT WE'RE LEARNING FROM A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH**

The creation of Path4Ward (launched as the Early Graduate Innovation Program) presented Colorado with the opportunity to test a more learner-centered approach to navigating the blur and understand what students need as they flow from one system to the next.

Established as a five-year pilot in [2021 by state legislators](#), the program provides funds to students from low-income backgrounds who complete high school in three or three-and-a-half years. Path4Ward funds are eligible for postsecondary education or workforce training in what would have been a student's fourth year or final semester of high school. Unlike traditional state scholarships that are used primarily for tuition, students can also use the funds to cover costs associated with programs, such as textbooks, technology, and transportation.

### **ABOUT PATH4WARD**

Eligible students receive 75% of per-pupil funding to pursue college courses, workforce training, or certificate program.

- ▶ Up to \$4,100 if a 3-year graduate
- ▶ Up to \$2,400 if a 3.5-year graduate

Student eligibility:

- ▶ Graduates one year or one semester early from high school
- ▶ Enrolls in a qualified program within 18 months of high school graduation
- ▶ Must be Free or Reduced Lunch eligible at any point in grades 8–12, or PELL eligible

*Funds are first sent to the student's program of choice for tuition, remaining or excess funds are sent to the student.*

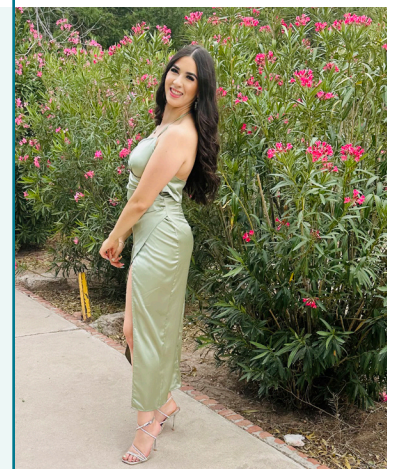
In addition to supporting the legislation, Colorado Succeeds worked with philanthropic partners to bring implementation resources to the program. This allowed for increased awareness of Path4Ward to interested schools, support for eligible early graduates to receive one-on-one navigation support to help them discover what they want to do after high school and how to begin working toward that goal, and additional dollars for more immediate transition needs while waiting for the state's funds to be processed. Colorado Succeeds is also guiding a national learning conversation with an [advisory council](#) to ensure learnings have broader implications.

**Path4Ward—the policy and program—is a recognition that some students seek to finish high school early, whether they are ready for college-level coursework or desire more experience in a career pathway, and aims to prevent them from getting disengaged and slipping through the cracks during a critical time in their lives.** While the funding is a helpful step in supporting this transition, program partners also recognize that students need significant navigation support in helping find and ultimately finance their pathway.

It's important to note that different learners need different levels of support as they chart their course after high school. Some students have an intentional plan and need help achieving it, while others require support to simply navigate life as a young adult and learn about the variety of options and resources available. Ultimately, the implementation of Path4Ward demonstrates that the needs of individual learners are unique, and it is through building more student-centered systems that learners can be better served regardless of the barriers they face.

### **PATH4WARD STUDENT STORIES: JAQUELIN**

Jaquelin always felt behind academically as she entered elementary school understanding more Spanish than English. Her family took her out of her large elementary school to enroll in a smaller charter school. Upon entry, she was made to repeat third grade due to test scores. Jaquelin started high school at a traditional public school where she felt compelled to graduate early as she was older than her peers and ready to move on. She graduated a semester early and is enrolled in Metropolitan State University's International Business program.



## A DEEPER LOOK: PATH4WARD'S IMPLEMENTATION

Path4Ward launched in the Spring of 2022 with five school districts and collectives of schools. After the first full school year (2022-23), Path4Ward has reached 222 eligible early graduates. Implementation partners have conducted training for learning providers, information sessions and bilingual materials for students and families, one-on-one navigation supports to utilize the funds for postsecondary or workforce training programs, evaluation for continuous improvement, and the facilitation of a peer-to-peer support network.

To carry out the pilot, a small group of partners convened to support implementation:



### Colorado Department of Higher Education:

Legislatively required to oversee the implementation of the pilot program, including selecting participating schools, disbursing scholarships to students, and managing participants.



Colorado Succeeds: Engaged philanthropic partners to support implementation; facilitates strategic collaboration among partners to ensure pilot success and inform future policy efforts.



RESCHOOL Colorado: Develops evaluation and measurement structures to help understand the student experience and facilitate implementation improvements; and supports dissemination of additional flexible funding—or, “learning dollars.”



Zero Dropouts: Provides one-on-one navigation support to participating students and implementation support for participating learning providers.

## PATH4WARD BY THE NUMBERS (AS OF THE END OF THE 2022-23 SCHOOL YEAR)

**222**

eligible students referred by partner school districts for navigation services

**1700+**

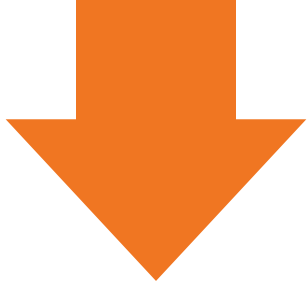
contacts with students and families

**46**

scholars pursuing approved postsecondary or workforce training programs using Path4Ward funds

**20**

postsecondary institutions and workforce programs represented across the state



## REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION: BARRIERS TO ADDRESS

While just entering the second school year, there are early lessons learned from the implementation of Path4Ward that are relevant to other postsecondary and career-connected learning programs that may inform learner-centered initiatives. And, despite Colorado's significant efforts to ensure more students enter meaningful pathways and have the navigation support to find success, the implementation of Path4Ward is exposing significant learnings and barriers.

Here are a few things to consider:

### NAVIGATION

► **Earlier and extended navigation support is critical**

Most students receive counseling usually focused on higher education options in 12th grade, meaning early graduates, particularly three-year graduates, are likely receiving only limited postsecondary or career counseling at school. Further, once students graduate, there are no entities or systems paying attention to their needs unless they enroll in a postsecondary program or institution. We must ensure to continue to support these learners whether they continue in such a program or system.

► **Workforce-focused opportunities are particularly elusive**

Given the decentralized nature of workforce programs and lack of access and exposure in high school, pursuing workforce training opportunities is not a natural jump for many students unless they are exposed to such opportunities through someone in their family or community.

► **Structural and societal issues prevent the exploration of workforce pathways**

These include a societal view that traditional college programs are “the path” to success, a lack of meaningful exposure to career opportunities in secondary schools, a requirement to be 18 years old to participate in some workforce programs, and a lack of cultural and formal guidance for choosing workforce options, among others.

### FUNDING

► **Learning dollars are critical for up-front costs**

Students face many up-front costs before starting a postsecondary program, such as tools, uniforms, and technology. Yet students do not receive their Path4Ward funds until after their selected program begins. To fill this gap, RESCHOOL provided participants with discretionary learning dollars to cover necessary up-front costs. More flexible, upfront funding will help students transition.

## ALIGNMENT

### ► **Schools and districts are hungry for programmatic opportunities**

Districts have limited capacity to support implementation and sustainability. During the first year of implementation, three districts were added to the Path4Ward pilot, showing strong interest among learning providers. Additionally, more than 90% of all eligible students opted into the program in its inaugural year, and the number of participants is growing. And while schools and districts have interest in expansion opportunities, lack of capacity to access, implement, and sustain programming remains an issue. Current initiatives to align programs, such as the 1215 Task Force, could help future implementation.

### ► **Colorado needs a method for capturing and measuring the impact**

Without good research and evaluation, policymakers, educators, and education advocates cannot know if programs have their intended impact. A lack of data connected to workforce programs and outcomes leaves students and those who support them without a clear picture of the return on their investment. Initiatives like the Colorado Commission on Higher Education's Return on Investment indicators could establish metrics and program-level information that would be helpful for learners.

### ► **Alignment across state agencies to better facilitate aligned funding, capacity, and partnerships**

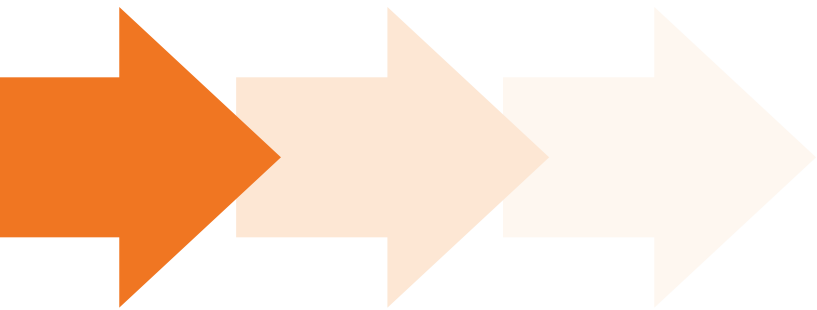
To get postsecondary and career-connected learning programs off the ground *and* to test the thinking of those who design, implement, and improve such programs, legislative efforts must continue to integrate across agencies and siloes. Organizing agencies based on learner journey vs programming could also help align within agencies, and the supports program providers can help play.

## **PATH4WARD STUDENT STORIES: KENYA**

A three-year graduate of Vantage Point High School in Adams 12 Five Star Schools, Kenya completed her Certified Nursing Assistance (CNA) licensure through PIMA Medical Institute in March 2023. Not long after graduation, Kenya was hired in her field at the Center at Northridge, working with patients needing complex nursing care. Kenya struggled in school but was motivated to graduate, wanting an early start to her career. She pursued a CNA licensure to ensure that all patients are treated well, and utilized her Path4Ward scholarship to pay for tuition and her state board of nursing exam.







## LOOKING FORWARD: HOW TO BUILD A MORE SEAMLESS SYSTEM IN COLORADO AND BEYOND

As a small pilot, Path4Ward raises important questions and curiosities about how Colorado and states nationwide break down the dividing lines between the education and workforce systems. And beyond that, how can the state ensure students have the autonomy, financial resources, and navigation support necessary to make informed choices regarding their aspirations and goals after high school?

These learnings are relevant to other postsecondary and career readiness initiatives. For example, the state recently passed two large initiatives in the 2023 session that could build upon this work. [Career Advance Colorado](#) helps pay for workforce training for in-demand careers such as construction, education, firefighting, law enforcement, and nursing. The [Universal High School Scholarship](#) program will establish scholarship and navigation supports for the class of 2024 through the Office of Economic Development and International Trade.

Colorado Succeeds proposes the following principles to ensure future aligned programs benefit from Path4Ward and blur learnings.

### 1. FUND STUDENTS' LEARNING JOURNEYS, NOT INDIVIDUAL PROGRAMS

- ▶ Flexible funding is key to learner-centered systems that let students have choices and drive their path. Path4Ward shows that while scholarships help students enroll in programs and coursework, philanthropic learning dollars have provided an essential stopgap for necessary costs. We must ensure every student, especially students from low-income backgrounds, has timely access to the funds they need to kick start their journey.
- ▶ Additionally, improvements must be made to disburse funds to students as quickly as possible (versus being processed through the program they enrolled in). It's clear that there are many up-front costs for learners as they pursue career training or higher education. Empowering them to make financial decisions and have flexibility in financing their path is essential for learner-driven programs.

## **2. INTEGRATE COUNSELING SUPPORTS AND EXPAND THEM BEYOND COLLEGE-GOING STUDENTS**

- ▶ Navigation and wraparound services are critical for helping learners pursue high-quality postsecondary and career options. Path4Ward and other postsecondary success programs, like Colorado's Accelerating Students through Concurrent Enrollment (ASCENT) Program and the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative (COSI), have shown the importance of wraparound services to fully support students. This requires a commitment to sustainable funding and capacity.
- ▶ The current high school counseling model needs more capacity, is not built into the learning experience, and needs to be equipped to help students find pathways outside of traditional higher education. Further, counseling support abruptly ends once students graduate, regardless of whether they have identified their next step. Revitalizing high school counseling to meet the diverse need of learners will help them explore the variety of options available to them at the pace they need.

## **3. ENSURE OUTCOME DATA FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER PROGRAMS ARE MORE ACCESSIBLE AND AVAILABLE**

- ▶ This allows learners and families to decide about postsecondary paths with information such as cost, time, fees, and requirements. This data is available in several places and not always accessible based on region, pathway, or program delivery model. Facilitating better alignment and information sharing between institutions, including departments of education and higher education, learning providers, colleges, workforce agencies, and students and their families, would support reaching this goal.

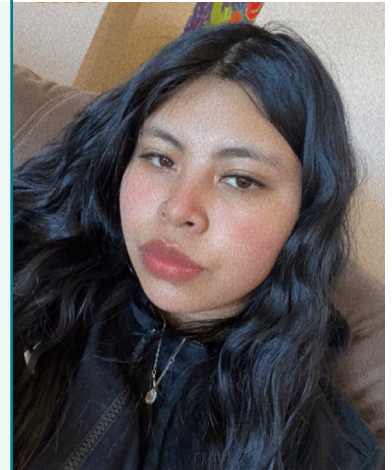
## **4. EMPOWER STUDENTS TO MOVE THROUGH SYSTEMS BASED ON COMPETENCY AND INTERESTS**

- ▶ Students have different passions, aspirations, and ways of learning. Path4Ward is a reminder that learner-centered systems enable students to learn at their own pace, explore their interests, and build a vision for their future. Moving away from seat time requirements and closer to relevant, rigorous, and engaging learning experiences will support with exposing students with high-quality pathways.

**To get more learners on a path to postsecondary success, Colorado must reduce the barriers students face along the way and better support them with pursuing the best options for themselves—and empower them with the information they need to make better decisions earlier.**

### **PATH4WARD STUDENT STORIES: SUCELY**

A three-and-a-half-year graduate of the Greeley Alternative Program, Sucely chose to utilize her Path4Ward funds to improve her English skills through the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at Aims Community College. Sucely immigrated from Guatemala in 2019. Her first language is K'iche', her second language is Spanish, and she is working to enhance her third language, English. She chose to graduate early in order to pursue work. The ESL program will help to ensure she finds success in the workplace.



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