

THE OTHER COLORADO SPRINGS

An attainment and equity examination
of the complex 15 school district landscape
of Colorado Springs, CO.

ABSTRACT

Colorado Springs is a tale of two cities for students growing up here and attending school. Students attending our region's four high income school districts are doing well, bettering state averages for enrolling in college, and completing college. By contrast a similar number of students attending our region's four low-income districts are losing ground, graduating from high school at unacceptably low rates, enrolling in college at low rates, and completing college at dismal rates. Of 100 9th graders in our region's high-income districts, 43.1 will complete a college degree or certificate within 10 years. Of 100 9th graders in our region's low-income districts only 16.5 can expect to complete a college degree or certificate within 10 years based on recent historical data. We, as a community, state, and nation need to find solutions to this educational crisis for our community and for our kids.

THE CASE FOR COLLEGE EDUCATION

The case for college or some form of post-high school training has never been stronger. Although many are questioning the value of college today, a quick look at the data on how college graduates fare in our society versus those with only a high school education makes the case for post-secondary education clear.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York recently published a 2021 study finding “In recent years, the average college graduate with just a bachelor’s degree earned about \$78,000, compared to \$45,000 for the average worker with only a high school diploma.” Georgetown University’s 2021 report entitled “The College Payoff” finds that bachelor’s degree holders earn \$2.8 million dollars more over their lifetime on average than those with just a high school diploma. They also found that bachelor’s degree holders earn 31% more than those with an associate degree and 84% more than those with just a high school diploma. Further, the gap in earnings between college graduates and those with only a high school diploma is growing.

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Georgetown University's report also documents that on average those earning a college degree, are more likely to vote (73% vs 41%), more likely to exercise (69% vs 47%), and more likely to volunteer (42% vs. 19%). According to the Lumina Foundation college graduates are 2.5 times less likely to file for unemployment benefits during their lifetime than those with a high school diploma only and have lower overall rates of unemployment. They also report that college graduates are less likely to be incarcerated; a recent report showed high school dropouts have incarceration rates 63% higher than college graduates. Reliance on public assistance like the SNAP program that provides food assistance is 4 times higher among those with a high school diploma only versus college graduates. Further, college graduates pay more than 80% higher taxes than those with a high school diploma only. This story goes on and on from higher rates of desperation deaths for less educated Americans including especially opioid addiction, to higher levels of job satisfaction and greater job mobility for college graduates, to lower rates of obesity and diabetes among college graduates.

The benefits of a college education can vary depending on what a college student studies. Areas like engineering, healthcare, and technology are the most financially rewarding. Students who go on past a bachelor's degree to earn master's degrees and Ph.D.'s are even more highly compensated. There are of course exceptions and some folks with only a high school diploma have done exceptionally well. The data shared above is from studies looking at thousands of Americans and determining what the most likely and frequent outcomes are based on level of education.

On average individuals accrue many advantages in life by furthering their education beyond high school. Communities also benefit by having proportionately higher numbers of college graduates. A recent Wall Street Journal article quotes Brookings Institute Urban Specialist Mark Muro, noting "better educated places with colleges tend to be more productive and more able to shift out of declining industries and into growing ones". He goes on to point out that "cities survive by continually adapting their economies to new technologies and colleges are central to that effort". In other words, having more college students and college graduates in a region increases prosperity, innovation, and wealth accumulation.

In the Colorado Springs region, Data-Driven Economic Strategies run by Dr. Tatiana Bailey, estimates that more than 66% of current job openings require a degree. While 34% do not require a college degree, most do require specific skills such as welding experience, Computer Aided Drafting (CAD) experience, or strong communication skills. Few opportunities are open and advertised to applicants with a high school diploma only and almost none are advertised to be open to high school dropouts. Nationally, the Chronicle of Higher Education predicts in a recent report that in 2027, 70% of all jobs will require education beyond high school. Other estimates are even higher, although employers are also responding to the pandemic and labor shortages by reducing educational requirements of some jobs. A 2022 report from The Burning Glass Institute found employers dropping degree requirements for almost 50% of middle skill jobs, while

focusing more on specific skills such as writing and communication skills, and programming and technical skills in high-tech industries.

One might surmise from this summary of the advantages of being college educated in America, that young people would enroll and complete college in high numbers. This would be especially true given the unique and broad range of college opportunities afforded to residents of the Colorado Springs region. Sadly, this is not the case. Pikes Peak State College (PPSC) undertook a study to examine the likelihood of an average ninth grader in El Paso County to complete high school within four years, enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school, and complete a degree or certificate within ten years of entering high school. A ninth-grader's chances are tremendously influenced by where they happen to live and attend high school.

THE COLORADO SPRINGS EDUCATION PICTURE

El Paso County, Colorado home of Colorado Springs, has 15 school districts (Table 1), most of which are located within the City of Colorado Springs. Denver, CO by contrast has 1. The State of Hawaii has only 1 school district. Comparing cities often used as benchmarks for Colorado Springs: Omaha, NE, has 5, Boise, ID has 1, Fayetteville, NC has 4, and Virginia Beach, VA has 1 school district. The effect of Colorado Springs' unusual number of districts is that students are largely segregated by income, race, and ethnicity. The result is that outcomes for Colorado Springs high school students may vary widely depending on where they live and attend high school.

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The percentage of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) provides a good estimate for poverty in each district. Table 1 shows Colorado Springs (COS) D11, Hanover D28, and Harrison D2 have the highest FRL rates at 56.4%, 64.4%, and 72% respectively. While Academy D20, Cheyenne Mountain D12, and Lewis Palmer D38, are at the opposite end of the wealth spectrum with 11.7%, 10.0%, and 9.9%. These numbers represent enormous wealth gaps between school districts that are all within Colorado Springs.

Likewise racial and ethnic diversity vary widely by school district and often correlate highly with poverty. Table 1 shows Harrison D2 is not only the city's lowest income district, but also our most diverse district with 80% of students identifying as people of color. COS D11 is our most diverse large district with 50% of students identifying as minorities, while diversity is low among many high income and rural districts.

Table 1:

2022-2023 Preschool (PK) Through 12th Pupil Count, Percent Minority, and Percent of Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) Eligibility for all 15 High School Districts

District Name	District Setting	Total PK-12 Pupil Count	% Minority	% FRL Eligibility
Academy D20	Urban-Suburban, Large	26,607	31.5%	11.7%
Falcon D49	Urban-Suburban, Large	25,616	47.1%	34.0%
Colorado Springs D11	Urban-Suburban, Large	22,729	52.5%	56.4%
Harrison D2	Urban-Suburban, Medium	12,606	74.4%	72.0%
Widefield D3	Urban-Suburban, Medium	9,612	55.8%	31.8%
Fountain D8	Urban-Suburban, Medium	8,201	54.0%	40.6%
Lewis-Palmer D38	Urban-Suburban, Medium	6,648	22.4%	9.9%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	Urban-Suburban, Medium	3,723	28.2%	10.0%
Manitou Springs D14	Urban-Suburban, Medium	1,317	20.8%	21.7%
Ellicott D22	Rural, Small	982	49.3%	58.7%
Peyton 23 Jt	Rural, Small	620	23.4%	22.6%
Calhan RJ-1	Rural, Small	424	13.2%	50.5%
Miami/Yoder 60 JT	Rural, Small	340	33.8%	45.9%
Hanover D28	Rural, Small	289	42.6%	64.4%
Edison 54 JT	Rural, Small	94	16.0%	*

For the purpose of this study, the authors found it useful to focus on eight districts. Small rural districts were left out of the study because their low student numbers cause their data to fluctuate considerably from year to year based on just a few students. Falcon D49 is also left out of the study because this district operates large, statewide, online schools that skew their data considerably and do not provide for accurate comparisons of Colorado Springs student experiences. Further, it appears Falcon D49 online school data pulls down the overall district performance considerably, however, we lacked the data for this study to separate Falcon D49's traditional schools from their online schools.

The eight districts broke out clearly as four that are High Income Low Diversity (HILD) and four that are Low Income High Diversity (LIHD). Table 2 shows the four districts in each category and weighted averages for Free and Reduced Lunch percentages (% FRL) and Minority percentages for the HILD and LIHD groups. There is high correlation between racial and ethnic diversity and higher rates of poverty in our school districts. The authors sought to determine whether poverty and race/ethnicity impact high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion.

Table 2:
Percent Minority and Percent of Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility for High Income/Low Diversity (HILD) Districts and Low Income / High Diversity (LIHD) Districts (2022-2023 data)

District Type	Districts	% Minority	% FRL Eligibility
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)	Academy D20, Cheyenne Mountain D12, Lewis-Palmer D38, Manitou Springs D14	29.2%	11.6%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)	Colorado Springs D11, Fountain D8, Harrison D2, Widefield D3	58.5%	53.2%

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

The data emphatically answers the research question. Yes, LIHD districts are adversely affected in every category measured relative to the HILD districts. High school graduation rates for the wealthiest districts average over 93% while the poorest and most diverse districts average 75% high school graduation rates (Table 3). When considering the thousands of students educated across the region each year, these numbers add up to hundreds of young people with the least resources dropping out of high school and setting themselves up for an extremely difficult path to find and sustain economic self-sufficiency. This is bad news for the Colorado Springs community because statistically speaking high school dropouts are more likely to rely on public assistance and/or be incarcerated. They are less likely to be economically self-sufficient, to volunteer, to vote, to sustain employment and pay taxes. It is clear from the data that a student’s beginning position of wealth and race/ethnicity are excellent predictors of high school graduation rates.

Table 3:
Class of 2022 High School Four-Year Graduation Rates

District	Total 9th Grade Enrollment (Class of 2022)	Total High School Graduates (Class of 2022)	Class of 2022 High School Graduation Rate
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)	3,272	3,067	93.7%
Academy D20	2,197	2,058	93.7%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	347	330	95.1%
Lewis-Palmer D38	613	576	94.0%
Manitou Springs D14	115	103	89.6%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)	3,525	2,649	75.1%
Colorado Springs D11	1,811	1,284	70.9%
Fountain D8	435	390	89.7%
Harrison D2	721	577	80.0%
Widefield D3	558	398	71.3%
Fountain D8	435	390	89.7%
Harrison D2	721	577	80.0%
Widefield D3	558	398	71.3%

Source: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/gradratecurrent>

POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL

Colorado, like many states, offers opportunities for high school students to complete college courses and gain college credits before graduating from high school. Concurrent enrollment programs offer students and their families low or no-cost options to begin their college education while still in high school. While many students do complete some credits while in high school, few put together adequate credits to complete a certificate or degree. Notable in the data from Table 4 is HILD example, Lewis Palmer D38, with 4.5% of their students completing a credential prior to graduation. Similarly, Harrison D2 is an outstanding performer among the LIHD schools with almost 4% of students completing a credential. High school pathways to degrees or certificates in Career and Technical Education (CTE) might be especially important for low-income students. This may also prove to be especially important for male students as well who seek “real-world” relevance in their education. Increasing credential attainment among high school students enrolled in college-level concurrent enrollment programs may be a strategy for increasing high school completion and providing for greater economic self-sufficiency after high school graduation.

Table 4:

Percent of High School Graduates Completing a Postsecondary-Recognized Certificate or Degree while Enrolled in High School

District Type	District	High School Graduation Year		
		2018	2019	2020
HILD	Academy D20	2.3%	2.4%	1.7%
	Cheyenne Mountain D12	0.8%	1.9%	0.9%
	Lewis-Palmer D38	1.9%	3.8%	4.5%
	Manitou Springs D14	0.0%	1.9%	0.0%
LIHD	Colorado Springs D11	1.1%	2.0%	2.4%
	Fountain D8	0.2%	1.7%	0.9%
	Harrison D2	1.7%	3.8%	3.9%
	Widefield D3	2.4%	1.0%	1.2%
All Districts		1.9%	2.5%	2.5%

ENROLLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Table 5 shows the calculated college enrollment rate beginning with classes of ninth graders and the percentages of those students who graduated from high school and enrolled in college. Our best performing district in the region is Cheyenne Mountain D12 at 70.2%. Notable too are Harrison D2 and COS D11. Harrison D2 averages 40.3% of ninth graders completing high school and enrolling in college while COS D11 is the lowest performing district at 29.0%. Although Harrison D2 is easily the lowest income school district with 72% of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch, they are punching above their weight in terms of preparing and sending students to college. This gives us reason for optimism. The challenge of getting students to engage in college or technical training beyond high school is not insurmountable. People and programs make a difference. Harrison D2 shows that regardless of financial need or other factors such as racial minority status, students can be successfully encouraged to engage in post-high school education.

Table 5: Percent of Ninth Graders Enrolling in College in the Fall after High School Graduation or Completing a Postsecondary-Recognized Credential before High School Graduation

District	High School Graduation Year			Ninth Graders Enrolling in College in the Fall after High School Graduation or Completing a Credential before High School Graduation (Three-Year Average)
	2018	2019	2020	
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)				65.0%
Academy D20	65.3%	65.5%	62.0%	64.2%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	72.4%	72.6%	65.3%	70.2%
Lewis-Palmer D38	68.0%	68.2%	63.7%	66.7%
Manitou Springs D14	58.8%	62.0%	42.6%	54.4%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)				33.1%
Colorado Springs D11	29.8%	31.9%	25.2%	29.0%
Fountain D8	40.8%	41.1%	37.7%	39.8%
Harrison D2	40.7%	40.1%	40.2%	40.3%
Widefield D3	36.0%	35.4%	32.2%	34.5%

A notable difference between our HILD districts and our LIHD districts is out of state enrollment for college (Appendix I, Table A and Table B). Among our LIHD districts 84% of students who enroll in college after high school attend an in-state college. That number is only 68% for our HILD districts. The in-state/out-of-state disparity highlights the difference in choices of high school graduates, differentiated by high school experiences and family financial resources. Conversely, only 25% of HILD high school graduates enrolled in a 2-year institution immediately after high school, whereas that number is 45% among our LIHD high school graduates. More often our LIHD are choosing affordability and accessibility as well as options for more immediate employment in careers such as Healthcare, Advanced Manufacturing, and Cyber Security.

SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Once a student enrolls in college, the effect of being from a HILD or LIHD school district continues to impact their success. Table 6 shows the percentages of students completing a degree or certificate within 6 years disaggregated by school district. Students from HILD districts completed a college degree or certificate after entering college at a rate of 63.5%. Meanwhile, lesser resourced students from LIHD districts completed a degree or certificate in college at a rate of 47.8%. The reported state average is 58.9%. HILD students enjoy a 33% increase in their rate of college completion relative to LIHD district students.

Table 6:

Percent of First-Time College Students Earning a Postsecondary Credential within Six Years of Entering College

District	Fall Cohort		
	2013	2014	2015
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)	65.4%	70.5%	63.5%
Academy D20	64.9%	69.7%	62.4%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	68.4%	76.1%	72.8%
Lewis-Palmer D38	68.7%	72.5%	63.5%
Manitou Springs D14	48.9%	57.1%	52.2%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)	50.5%	52.3%	47.8%
Colorado Springs D11	52.8%	57.2%	53.5%
Fountain D8	41.5%	42.2%	37.7%
Harrison D2	44.0%	40.2%	45.8%
Widefield D3	54.6%	50.0%	39.7%
State Average	57.9%	59.8%	58.9%

Note: Six-year completion rates are based on students who graduated from high school in Colorado in a given year and started attending an in-state institution in the fall following graduation. In-state institutions include all public Colorado colleges and universities along with three private institutions (i.e., Colorado Christian University, Regis University, and the University of Denver). Completion rates reflect the percentage of those “first-time” students who received a certificate, Associate, or Bachelor’s degree from any of the above-listed institution within six years of graduating from high school. As a result, out-of-state completions are not included in the six-year completion rate calculation.

TEN-YEAR POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT RATES

Combining data from the eight Colorado Springs districts we are studying yields an average ten-year postsecondary credential attainment rate of 28.1% (based on a 3-year weighted average calculation). Table 7 shows that for an average ninth grader in a HILD school, their chances of graduating from high school within four years, enrolling in college immediately after graduating from high school, and completing a postsecondary credential within 10 years of entering high school are 43.1%. In other words, among one hundred ninth graders in our region's HILD districts only 43 are expected to earn a postsecondary credential within 10 years of entering high school. That is discouraging and the outlook for our LIHD schools is much worse. Only 17 of 100 ninth graders in our LIHD districts are expected to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete a college degree within 10 years of entering high school. Students in our HILD districts are more than two and a half times as likely to become college graduates than those in our LIHD districts. Ten years after entering high school, 83 of 100 LIHD district students will be without a college degree or certificate that offers them the economic power to hold higher wage jobs providing for economic self-sufficiency.

Table 7:

Percent of Ninth Graders Earning a Postsecondary-Recognized Credential within Ten Years of Entering High School

District	High School Graduation Year			Ten-Year Postsecondary Credential Attainment Rate (Three-Year Average)
	2013	2014	2015	
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)				43.1%
Academy D20	41.9%	43.1%	39.8%	41.6%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	48.9%	52.9%	48.9%	50.2%
Lewis-Palmer D38	46.5%	52.5%	42.8%	47.3%
Manitou Springs D14	29.8%	29.9%	25.9%	28.7%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)				16.5%
Colorado Springs D11	15.4%	17.3%	15.8%	16.1%
Fountain D8	17.5%	16.9%	15.5%	16.6%
Harrison D2	16.0%	14.6%	16.8%	15.8%
Widefield D3	20.4%	17.5%	16.1%	17.9%

UNEVEN SUCCESS: GENDER AND RACIAL/ETHNIC GAPS

This study also highlights differences in academic success based on gender and race. The results that follow may surprise many readers.

Gender gap: Much has been written about the plight of boys in our nation's educational system including the well researched *Of Boys and Men – Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters and What To Do About It* published in 2022 by Richard V. Reeves. He assembles dozens of studies looking at how male students are falling behind their female peers in educational attainment, workforce participation, and professional success. Indeed, this widening gender gap may be one of the great challenges facing our nation in the coming years as America can ill afford to fail to capitalize as a nation on the talents and abilities of young men, as well as women.

In the graduating class data for 2021 among the eight districts this study focuses on, only Cheyenne Mountain D12 had a higher graduation rate for male students than female students and their numbers were very close 95.3% for female students and 97.8% for male students. The other seven districts have higher graduation rates for female students, with some exhibiting large differences. In Widefield D3 for example, the graduation rate is 87% for female students and 71% for male students (a 16-point difference). COS D11 has a graduation rate of 75% for female students and 63% for male students (12-point difference). This disparity exists in male / female performance among our HILD districts as well though its less extreme. Academy D20 posted a graduation rate of 96% for female students and 91% for male students.

The challenge of building meaningful structures to improve student outcomes becomes even more difficult when we layer race and ethnicity over gender.

The challenge of building meaningful structures to improve student outcomes becomes even more difficult when we layer race and ethnicity over gender. Many folks might assume that white males are most likely to successfully graduate from high school. Table 8 shows that, in three of the districts, white males carry the lowest high school graduation rates of all demographic groups; in three more of the districts white males are second lowest in graduation rates. Meanwhile, Hispanic and Black women are thriving relative to other demographic groups with graduation rates as high or higher than other demographic groups in nearly every district. Black male and Hispanic male graduation rates in COS D11 are the low point in this measure with barely over 50% high school graduation rates. This is a devastating outcome for those students. This data makes clear that it is especially important where Black and Hispanic male students attend high school. This data also makes clear that all male students are facing tremendous challenges. Real school choice is critically important to them. Academic programs that engage and support their interests are also critical.

Table 8:

2021 High School Graduation Rates Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

District Type	High School	Hispanic		Black		White	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)	Academy D20	94.7%	88.4%	94.3%	92.9%	96.4%	91.8%
	Manitou Springs D14	88.9%	100%	N/A	N/A	100%	95.5%
	Lewis-Palmer D38	93.9%	96.3%	66.7%	100%	98.1%	92.9%
	Cheyenne Mountain D12	96.7%	96.0%	100%	100%	94.8%	97.8%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)	Harrison D2	88.4%	76.3%	84.4%	71.4%	83.6%	62.5%
	Widefield D3	83.3%	70.8%	93.9%	79.5%	86.7%	67.1%
	Fountain D8	83.6%	87.8%	100%	84.8%	92.3%	81.3%
	COS D11	69.6%	55.3%	68.7%	56.4%	78.9%	67.7%

ANALYSIS AND POTENTIAL PATHS FORWARD

School Consolidation: An obvious solution one might draw from this data is to combine our school districts into a single district. This strategy offers the advantages of smoothing our available assets across all our region's schools, lowering overhead and administrative costs, and offering the opportunity for unified goals for student success. Alas, this strategy is also unlikely to happen as entrenched mechanisms to maintain the status quo are powerful. Our region's school boards, and administrative bureaucracies are unlikely to agree to such a plan. Further, simply combining our districts would not necessarily change cultures of low student performance in some areas.

True School Choice: A more meaningful change might be achieved by creating real school choice. In 1990 Colorado passed the Public-School Choice Act guaranteeing Colorado students the opportunity to attend outside of the district where they live. Students can request to attend an out-of-district school, but schools can limit the number of out-of-district students they accept. More confounding is the transportation challenge. Colorado law does not allow school buses to cross school district lines without the consent of both districts. In effect, this keeps many students

from having real school choice. Few working parents have the flexibility to take their children to school and pick them up each day. This difficulty is compounded for single parents. So, while we have a law called, “Public-School Choice Act” the reality is that few students really have a choice to attend outside of the district where they live.

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A hub and spoke school bus system could alleviate this issue and allow true school choice for students across the Pikes Peak region. Rather than combining our school districts, we should simply combine their transportation capabilities. Solving the school choice challenge will create competition among our schools to better serve students. Higher education has long lived in a world where there is real competition among our institutions. Higher education competition within the United States is a reason why we have the best system of higher education in the world. In the Colorado Springs region alone, there are for-profit institutions, private non-profit institutions, a regional university, a state college, and a military academy as well as hundreds if not thousands of online education providers. This competition forces colleges and universities to be their best. Institutions must be good at their work, excellent stewards of their resources, and meet the demands and expectations of students and employers alike to remain viable and competitive. Competition driven by meaningful transportation options for students will improve K-12 schools. There is little incentive for this kind of change, though, without state level leadership from Colorado’s legislature and Governor.

Charter Schools: Charter Schools do provide choice and competition. However, charter schools have been many times denied opportunities by the school districts in the region. Further, many charters launch with great ambitions and wonderful intentions only to find themselves in great difficulty over the challenges with physical facilities, hiring and retention of quality faculty, effective institutional leadership, and financial difficulties. Charter schools can and are part of the solution, but they cannot be the only solution. Mainline public schools have the lion’s share of facilities, resources, experienced teachers, and administrators; they need to be a best choice for students.

Career and Technical Education (CTE): CTE programs exist at most high schools and at Pikes Peak State College (PPSC). Around 450 high school students attend PPSC each semester for access to CTE programs. Across our nation though, CTE programs have diminished year after year because they are far more expensive to provide than traditional classroom education. CTE programs such as Auto Tech, Diesel Power Mechanics, 3-D Printing, Robotics, HVAC, and Welding require highly specialized teaching environments and large investments in equipment. School districts facing difficult budget situations in our region and across the country have often made the hard choice to discontinue CTE programs because of their relatively high cost. This choice likely resulted in a disproportionate and negative impact on male students. Hands-on, career-oriented training that kept many boys engaged in school is mostly gone from high schools today. PPSC CTE programs for high school students are consistently filled to capacity leaving

some students without an opportunity to participate. Colorado needs to infuse CTE training with more resources; these programs take significant investment but pay big dividends with student graduates who can contribute to our regional economy and be self-sufficient.

Nationally and regionally, educators and policy makers must undertake an effort to break down gender barriers for students. Students should be encouraged to develop where they have interest and ability without the limits of society's out-of-date norms related to gender and careers. We need to recruit more young men into health-care programs which offer many career pathways and well-paying jobs. Similarly, we need a sustained effort to attract more young women into high-tech opportunities like computer science, cyber security, and computer programming. In PPSC's prestigious nursing program only 12% of students are male (average wages for graduates of this program are over \$70,000 annually for first year graduates), in Dental Assisting only 7% of PPSC students are male. By contrast, 20% of Computer Science students are female and 26% of Cyber Security students are female at PPSC. High-tech programs are doing a better job with gender equality, but there is work to do in both health care and high-tech occupations.

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Promise Scholarship programs: The disparity between college-going rates of low-income students and their higher income neighbors in our region highlights the critical issue of college affordability. Many low-income high school students never believe college can be an option because of the cost. Promise Scholarship programs work. Across the country similar programs have resulted in remarkable increases in college-going and college completion rates. Through a partnership between PPSC, Harrison D2, and private philanthropy (Dakota Foundation and Legacy Institute), remarkable success is being achieved with a Promise Scholarship program called, Dakota Promise. Like almost all successful student programs, the rules of this program are remarkably simple. Any student graduating from a Harrison D2 school (Harrison High School, Sierra High School, Atlas Prep, or James Irwin Academy) is guaranteed they can attend PPSC at no cost if they graduate high school with a 2.5 or better GPA. A 2.5 GPA is half B's and half C's. Once they graduate, all they must do is enroll in PPSC and they are covered. Dakota Promise pays secondary to Pell Grants but ahead of any other scholarship a student receives. The PPSC mantra is "we got you." PPSC and Harrison aspire to see the program grow to provide "first dollar in" scholarships, paying ahead of Pell, which deliver the best outcomes for students.

Across the nation and across the Colorado Springs region, college-going rates declined sharply because of the pandemic. Larger negative impacts for college enrollment were observed among low-income communities. However, in Colorado Springs, our lowest income school district was the only district to post a gain in college-going rates in 2020. Indeed, Table 9 shows that in 2020, the college-going rate for Harrison D2 increased by 0.6%, a seemingly small increase, but it was very significant given the large pandemic-related declines that were happening at most schools

across the Colorado Springs region and across the nation. The Dakota Promise program helped students realize they can attend college. Since 2020, college-going rates held steady or increased as students continued to enroll in college through the Dakota Promise program. In the fall of 2023, 147 students from Harrison D2 enrolled in PPSC compared with 93 students in Fall 2019. The authors look forward to reporting on graduation rates for Dakota Promise scholars as the data becomes available.

Table 9:
Pandemic-related impact on college-going rates.

District	2019 College-Going Rate	2020 College-Going Rate	Change
Cheyenne Mountain D12	75.1%	67.6%	-7.5%
Academy D20	69.6%	66.3%	-3.3%
Lewis-Palmer D38	68.6%	66.4%	-2.2%
Manitou D14	68.5%	47.2%	-21.3%
COS D11	43.9%	34.8%	-9.1%
Harrison D2	47.6%	48.2%	+0.6%
Widefield D3	43.8%	39.9%	-3.9%
Fountain D8	47.4%	43.7%	-3.7%

Statewide Initiatives: The Colorado Department of Higher Education recommended some solutions to increasing postsecondary access and success in their “Pathways to Prosperity” 2022 Report. The report highlights several statewide initiatives to increase college-going rates including the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative that catalyzes private scholarship donations with public matching funds. A new program in Colorado that is having significant impact is Care Forward Colorado, which is providing “all costs covered” access to college for students in high demand, healthcare, short-term training programs. Colorado is funding the program with public dollars. Care Forward Colorado is in its first year, but already impacting enrollments in areas such as Certified Nursing Assistant, Phlebotomy, Medical Assisting, and Dental Assisting.

This paper serves as a call to government, education, civic, and business leaders to join together in identifying, funding, and implementing solutions to increase educational attainment for students in the Pikes Peak Region, across Colorado, and the nation. There are innovative solutions that

make a difference. Solutions often require an initial investment, but they will pay dividends in generations of Pikes Peak area residents who achieve financial independence, become active citizens, and contribute to the success of our region. Further, their children will also be far more likely to do the same. Our efforts today can make a meaningful difference for generations to come.

APPENDIX I: ADDITIONAL TABLES

Table A:

Percent of In-State Enrollment for Ninth Graders Continuing their Education at the Postsecondary Level in the Fall after High School Graduation

District	High School Graduation Year			In-State Enrollment (Three-Year Average)
	2018	2019	2020	
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)				67.0%
Academy D20	67.6%	67.1%	67.7%	67.4%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	72.1%	59.3%	66.9%	66.0%
Lewis-Palmer D38	70.9%	63.9%	60.4%	65.1%
Manitou Springs D14	71.6%	74.3%	74.5%	73.4%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)				83.5%
Colorado Springs D11	81.7%	85.4%	83.6%	83.6%
Fountain D8	81.0%	77.0%	80.9%	79.6%
Harrison D2	88.5%	87.7%	87.3%	87.8%
Widefield D3	77.6%	83.5%	83.9%	81.6%

Table B:

Percent of Enrollment in Two-Year Institutions for Ninth Graders Continuing their Education at the Postsecondary Level in the Fall after High School Graduation

District	High School Graduation Year			Enrollment in Two-Year Institutions (Three-Year Average)
	2018	2019	2020	
High Income Low Diversity (HILD)				23.7%
Academy D20	24.3%	24.3%	25.1%	24.6%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	15.9%	15.0%	19.5%	16.7%
Lewis-Palmer D38	22.5%	25.4%	25.0%	24.3%
Manitou Springs D14	32.8%	28.4%	37.3%	32.4%
Low Income High Diversity (LIHD)				42.1%
Colorado Springs D11	40.6%	37.7%	41.6%	39.9%
Fountain D8	39.0%	40.3%	38.3%	39.2%
Harrison D2	41.5%	46.6%	62.2%	50.2%
Widefield D3	39.6%	44.9%	38.4%	41.1%

