

Making Education Everyone's Business

Colorado Succeeds: A Study of Successful Education Advocacy

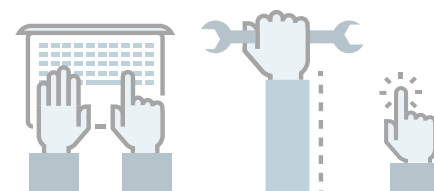
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Introduction

The potential to engage Colorado's business community in a statewide effort in education first became apparent in 2003, during a push for pre-K tuition credits. Pre-K tuition credits had been a campaign issue for Denver's then-mayor John Hickenlooper, and he wanted to rally the business community around the idea. Zack Neumeyer, the chairman of hotel investment company Sage Hospitality, organized business leaders to advance the issue in the state capital and, with a nudge from Tony Lewis at the Donnell Kay Foundation, realized that the alliance could be much more than a one-hit wonder. In 2006, that alliance formally became Colorado Succeeds.

Neumeyer and Lewis founded Colorado Succeeds to fill a gap in the advocacy landscape. There were other statewide organizations of business leaders, including the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry, and Colorado Concern, but none was primarily focused on education issues. Additionally, other business organizations like the local Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce had education committees, but their attention was divided among competing priorities like water, transportation, and taxes. Colorado Succeeds would be an organization focused on "going to the mat for public education."¹

To lead the new organization, Neumeyer and Lewis recruited Tim Taylor, who had a background in politics, government and public relations, and nonprofit management. In 2010, Taylor and Neumeyer recruited Scott Laband to join as vice president. His connections to business, education, and government rounded out the early team. Together, Taylor and Laband led the organization until 2012, when Taylor left to found America Succeeds, which is working to scale Colorado Succeeds' impact to other cities and states.



This is one of three case studies that accompany the report, Making Education Everyone's Business: Three Studies of Successful Education Advocacy. Case studies of the other two organizations, the Metro Atlanta Chamber and the Washington Roundtable, can be found on our website.

Today, Colorado Succeeds employs 10 staff members and has an annual operating budget of approximately \$3.7 million. Unlike most business advocacy organizations, which have broad policy agendas covering many topics, Colorado Succeeds is focused solely on education. It works to engage the business community in education advocacy through three key levers:²

- **Policy:** Advocating for system changes that create a more responsive, learner-centered model by giving schools and families the flexibility and freedom needed to meet the diverse needs and interests of all children.
- **Practice:** Putting policies into practice by working with early adopters who help inform the efficacy of policy changes and areas for improvement.
- **Philanthropy:** Infusing philanthropy into the work of policy and practice by leveraging dollars from corporations, private philanthropists, and the state's general fund to create a synergistic approach to funding innovation on a large scale.

Colorado Succeeds has successfully used these levers to advance policies aligned to its current agenda, Vision 2030. Vision 2030 is focused on making Colorado's education system more agile and able to adjust to rapidly changing economic and workforce needs. It outlines innovative policies supporting work-based learning opportunities that prepare Colorado's students for the state's future economy. In 2019 alone, Colorado Succeeds helped secure \$16 million from the state legislature to advance priorities aligned to this agenda.³ And 12 of the 13 bills Colorado Succeeds actively supported last year were passed and signed into law — a tangible demonstration of the team's ability to create change and ability to work effectively with legislators and coalition partners.

How has Colorado Succeeds achieved its success?

There are several key elements to Colorado Succeeds' effectiveness. While its approach is, in many respects, similar to that of other business advocacy organizations advancing education policy issues, Colorado Succeeds is particularly instructive for how it has established its success while focused on a single issue area.

Organizationally, Colorado Succeeds has worked to define a clear value proposition to its members, partners, and funders. It has developed a clear agenda to meet statewide needs and successfully aligned its staffing and financial models to support its agenda. And as the needs and dynamics of Colorado's landscape have shifted since the organization's founding, Colorado Succeeds has remained agile, enabling it to pivot successfully.

1 Colorado Succeeds has defined a clear value proposition and created multiple entry points for members and partners to engage in the work.

Colorado Succeeds is somewhat unique among business organizations in that it is solely focused on education. While there are other business advocacy organizations in the state, most are primarily focused on other issues such as health care, manufacturing, technology, and business profitability. When these organizations dabble in education or workforce issues it is often in the form of informational briefings and networking opportunities; they tend to defer to Colorado Succeeds' expertise on education policy issues. This leaves Colorado Succeeds as the only state-level business advocacy organization authoring policy proposals and encouraging business leaders to be actively engaged in the full spectrum of education policy, practice, and philanthropy. Colorado Succeeds' positioning in Colorado's business advocacy landscape provides a unique value proposition for those business leaders who are interested in and concerned about education and workforce issues.

In addition to this specific value proposition, the Colorado Succeeds team has developed multiple points of entry for business organizations to participate in its work. Similar to many other business advocacy organizations, Colorado Succeeds has a tiered membership dues structure wherein different dues levels are associated with different types of benefits.

Specifically, businesses paying dues in the \$5,000-per-year range have access to meetings and briefings that Colorado Succeeds hosts, access to networking opportunities within the Colorado Succeeds network, and support in getting placed on local boards and commissions. In turn, their dues support Colorado Succeeds' broad policy agenda. Businesses paying in the \$25,000-per-year range get all of those benefits plus sponsorship of the Succeeds Prize, an annual, televised event that honors innovative school districts and educators. Businesses paying \$40,000 per year help shape Colorado Succeeds' programmatic work and the outcomes associated with that work. However, while there are ranges of dues and benefits, Colorado Succeeds is flexible and customizes a company's dues based on how that business wants to participate. This customization allows business leaders to sow and reap the value that makes the most sense for their unique business contexts and goals.

Another point of entry that Colorado Succeeds offers its members is its three levels of board membership.⁴ The three different boards play different roles in the overarching work of Colorado Succeeds, again enabling businesses to provide and obtain different value from membership based on what makes sense for their company. Like other organizations, Colorado Succeeds has a governing board, called the board of directors. This board includes 16 individuals who work to ensure the organization's financial and organizational success. Colorado Succeeds also has a board of advisors, which includes representatives from approximately 70 of Colorado Succeeds' members. Colorado Succeeds engages these board members in quarterly meetings to share information and gather feedback. They provide an important perspective on the needs of the workforce that helps Colorado Succeeds shape its policy agenda, and they use their influence to advocate on behalf of those policy priorities.

The third board, the board of trustees, is made up of 37 senior-level executives from member companies (many are former members of the board of directors). These individuals bring personal and political capital, influence, and expertise that Colorado Succeeds can leverage to advance its priorities.

Beyond its member companies and board members, Colorado Succeeds provides opportunities for both funders and other business organizations to engage in their work. Colorado Succeeds provides philanthropy with the opportunity to realize an impact that is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, Colorado Succeeds launched the Investors Roundtable, a group of philanthropic leaders, to provide funders with an opportunity to learn about the emerging field of career-connected learning and identify opportunities to co-invest in opportunities aligned to Vision 2030. In addition, Colorado Succeeds engages and builds relationships with other business organizations in the state through the BizCARES (the Business Coalition to Advance Reform of the Education System) network. BizCARES includes organizations such as local chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, business roundtables, and industry associations throughout the state.⁵ While these network partners are not members, Colorado Succeeds helps coordinate efforts, deepening the impact of the organizations' collective advocacy.

As Colorado Succeeds provides opportunities for learning, coordination, and collaboration, funders have invested \$5 million toward two initiatives aimed at creating agile learners, educators, and systems; BizCARES has strengthened Colorado Succeeds' statewide credibility and provided the team with a mechanism for hearing from local business leaders from a variety of regions.

2 Colorado Succeeds has defined a clear policy agenda aligned to statewide needs.

Colorado Succeeds has developed a clear policy agenda tightly aligned to the specific needs of the state. Colorado's population is growing,⁶ unemployment is low,⁷ and it is ranked among the most-educated states in the country.⁸ Forty percent of adults in Colorado hold at least a bachelor's degree – eight percentage points higher than the national average.⁹ However, Colorado's high school graduation rate of 79% is below the national average and is the seventh-lowest in the country.¹⁰ And the students born and raised in Colorado don't enjoy the same educational outcomes as their peers educated elsewhere. For example, of the 768,000 Coloradans who hold a bachelor's degree, just 27% of them were born there.¹¹

This so-called “Colorado Paradox” – Colorado's placement among the most-educated states alongside its place among the lowest-ranking in terms of K-12 outcomes – is of particular concern to Colorado's business community. A recent analysis of the state's talent pipeline suggests that 64% of Colorado's top jobs will require a credential beyond high school, yet just 57% of Coloradans hold a post-high school credential.¹² (And just 29% of native Coloradans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 45% of adults who reside in Colorado but were born elsewhere.)¹³ The lower attainment of Colorado's native population adds to business leaders' concerns about the future of Colorado's workforce, since it will likely require them to recruit talent from out of state.

Colorado Succeeds' Vision 2030 directly addresses this need. Focused on making Colorado's education system more agile and able to adjust to rapidly changing economic and workforce needs, Vision 2030 outlines innovative policies supporting work-based learning opportunities that prepare Colorado's students for the state's future economy. Within the Vision 2030 Framework, Colorado Succeeds advocates for five policy agenda items:¹⁴

- Career Connected Learning and STEM
- Choice and Competition
- Early Childhood Education
- School Finance
- Accountability and Measures of Student Success

These core policy ideas fit neatly at the intersection of education and the workforce, offering Colorado's business leaders a prime opportunity to invest in changes that directly affect them.

3 Colorado Succeeds undertakes a thoughtful approach to its use of human and financial resources.

Colorado Succeeds is a small team of 10 employees, with a staffing structure designed to hit all major elements of their work. Currently, staff are divided into four operating units:

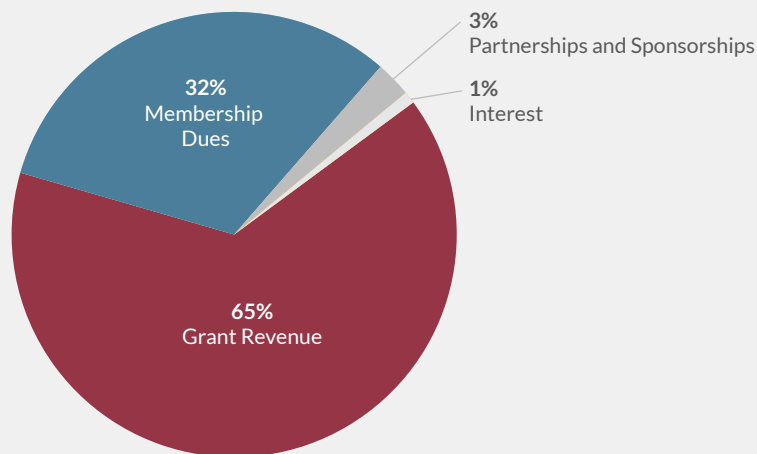
- **Government affairs:** Working with elected and appointed officials to research, develop, articulate, and support policies aligned with its priorities.
- **Membership:** Educating and engaging business leaders in the organization's three strategic priorities: policy, practice, and philanthropy.
- **Advocacy:** Creating and executing strategic communications plans and engaging with broad, diverse coalitions of education stakeholders.
- **Implementation:** Supporting leaders from education, business, and government in building partnerships that create relevant and valuable learning experiences for students.

Each unit has one senior staff member and one junior staff member. There's also a CEO and an office manager. The leadership team includes four senior staff members (one from each operating unit) and the CEO. This structure helps enable Colorado Succeeds to tackle education advocacy work from all angles and ensures that each operating unit has representation at the leadership level. The staffing model is dynamic, however. Prior to 2019, the team was smaller and consisted of only the government affairs, membership, and advocacy units. In 2019, as a response to mixed impact from the policies Colorado Succeeds had worked to pass, the leadership team decided to expand its work and added a fourth operating unit, implementation. The implementation work now enables Colorado Succeeds to partner with districts, educators, and families to help new policies and programs gain early traction.

Because Colorado Succeeds is a small team, they work with consultants and professional services firms to support some of their core functions. For example, Colorado Succeeds hires consultants to support the development of policy concepts and to help conduct the research that supports those policies. In addition, Colorado Succeeds hires lobbyists and a number of external firms that support the marketing and communication aspects of their work.

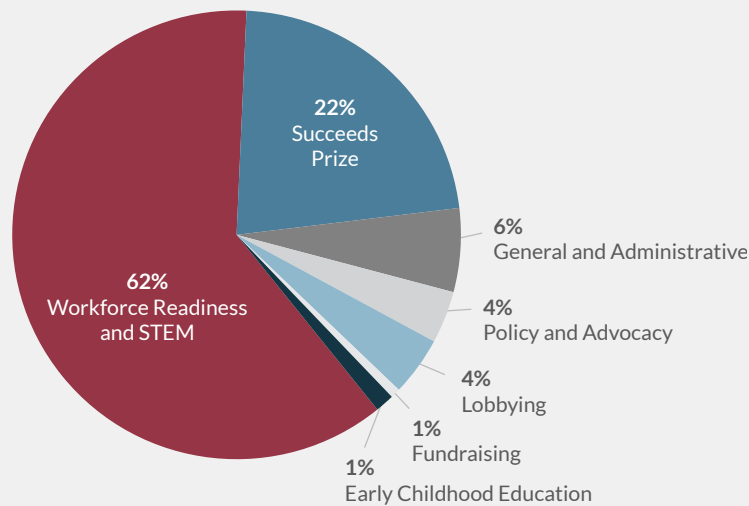
In terms of how Colorado Succeeds structures its finances, the organization is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. For the past several years, its budget has hovered right around \$2 million. Unlike many business organizations, which tend to rely heavily on member dues, year-end 2018 numbers (the most recent available) indicate that about 65% of the organization's funding comes from grants. Just 32% comes from membership dues (see Figure 1). More than half of Colorado Succeeds' budget is spent on its workforce readiness and STEM priorities (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 > Colorado Succeeds Revenue, by Category, Year-end 2018



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 2 Colorado Succeeds Expenses, by Category, Year-end 2018



Colorado Succeeds' FY 2020 budget is a marked increase over previous years, coming in around \$3.7 million. This increase is driven largely by the addition of the implementation work and grant funds to support it. The influx of grant dollars to support the new implementation work also shifts the balance of Colorado Succeeds' revenue; the leadership team is anticipating about 75% of its FY 2020 revenue to come from grants, up from 65% in previous years.

The FY 2020 budget growth resulting from additional grants, rather than membership dues, reflects a consistent trend for the organization: Colorado Succeeds' leadership team has found it more efficient to grow its top-line revenue numbers through increasing foundation grants rather than by increasing membership or membership dues. There are a number of reasons for this. First, foundations tend to be particularly interested in supporting programmatic efforts that result in quantifiable progress; Colorado Succeeds' new implementation work is a direct way to engage philanthropists in measuring progress and outcomes. In addition, Colorado Succeeds has found that foundations are generally able to make larger investments than businesses, so working with foundations on programmatic work is often more efficient. Finally, Colorado Succeeds has as a primary focus increasing the involvement of philanthropy in education. This focus sets it apart from other business advocacy organizations, which tend to focus more exclusively on advocacy and policy.

Colorado Succeeds' leaders indicate that their budget is stable, with six months of general cash reserve (funded through unrestricted contributions from members and foundations) and a healthy mix of funding. Even so, the leadership team is focused on ensuring members have meaningful ways to engage in their work — a key indicator of renewed membership and ongoing support.

4 Colorado Succeeds has developed a strategic approach to its advocacy and implementation work.

As noted above, Colorado Succeeds is enormously successful in getting legislation passed and dollars appropriated for its priorities. The success of the Career Development Incentive Program, which Colorado Succeeds was instrumental in getting passed, illustrates how the organization approaches its advocacy and implementation work. Initially passed in 2016 and expanded in 2018, this program incentivizes school districts and charter schools to support students in accessing industry credential opportunities (see sidebar below for more details).

Sidebar

Colorado's Career Development Incentive Program

As in 2016, the Colorado legislature passed House Bill 16-1289, which created the Career Development Incentive Program.¹⁵ This program provides an incentive to school districts and charter schools of up to \$1,000 per high school student who completes a qualified industry credential program, work-based learning experience, or a relevant course.¹⁶ Importantly, the bill established that the business community will be able to vet and update the list of in-demand credentials on a yearly basis.

Colorado Succeeds' research, policy development, and advocacy were instrumental in passing this legislation. In the mid-2010s, the Colorado legislature had turned its attention to career and workforce issues. Seizing this policy window, and relying on its experience and expertise in high school and workforce issues, the Colorado Succeeds team worked with legislators to put forth a series of ideas to create better connections between the K-12 education system and the workforce.

So far, the program is showing signs of success. Interest has been strong, with 42 districts (of 178 statewide) and three charter schools participating. In year two, 35% of participating districts were rural — an important measure given that 80% of districts in Colorado are rural and educate more than 15% of the total student population in the state.¹⁷

Over the course of the first three years of the program, districts reported 16,000 qualifying credentials, work-based learning experiences, and courses. Due in part to this success, in 2017, the legislature doubled the program's funding, from \$1 to \$2 million. In 2018, the legislature decided to expand the two-year pilot program for an additional five years, through 2024, and to increase annual spending for the program to \$5 million.

Perhaps most importantly, the Career Development Incentive Program has proven to be an important mechanism demonstrating the value of providing students with multiple pathways to career success. This is helping Colorado Succeeds continue its work to change and refocus the conversation about high school and postsecondary connections, credentialing, and ensuring Colorado's education system sets its students up for long-term success.

Colorado Succeeds' approach to developing and getting this legislation enacted included a number of strategic moves.

To begin with, Colorado Succeeds has a demonstrated track record of engaging the business community to advocate for policies that address key statewide needs at the intersection of education and business. Legislators trust that Colorado Succeeds understands the state education and political landscape; Colorado Succeeds also has strong relationships with legislators. At the same time, by virtue of representing the business community, Colorado Succeeds was well-positioned to advocate on an issue directly tied to the state's economic growth.

In addition, Colorado Succeeds took advantage of an open policy window. In 2015, the year before the Career Development Incentive Fund legislation passed, a similar bill passed in the education committee but did not pass in the appropriations committee. Despite this, conversations about career and work and workforce development continued into the 2016 legislative session. Colorado Succeeds prepared several ideas for how to invest in better connections between the K-12 system and the workforce. The career development incentive program gained the most traction.

Work on behalf of the Career Development Incentive Program also benefited from the track record of a similar policy in Florida. In 2014, the Florida legislature created a fund to incentivize districts to develop credentials aligned to needs in the state's economy.¹⁸ By 2016, there were some early indicators of success.¹⁹ The Colorado Succeeds team modeled Colorado's career development fund after Florida's legislation and highlighted the program to Colorado policymakers. The example of an existing, promising model helped ensure that members of the legislature were receptive to the idea.

Once Colorado Succeeds had a policy proposal in hand, it used its networks and relationships to cultivate strong legislative champions. Both Crisanta Duran, the speaker of the House, and Daneya Esgar, who represents Pueblo, Colorado, championed the legislation and were critical to moving the bill forward to adoption. Esgar has continued to be an important champion for growing the funding for the Career Development Incentive Program over time.

At the same time that the team was working to cultivate legislative champions, Colorado Succeeds launched and led a broad coalition, which included business leaders from major companies, school district leaders, and individuals from organizations like Code.org, local chambers of commerce, and CareerWise Colorado. Colorado Succeeds' BizCARES network enabled them to spread the message and garner support from businesses and communities across the state. Having all of these players at the table — school districts, key members of the business community, and other education and workforce advocacy organizations and partners — was critical to building broad legislative support for the fund.

The governor signed the legislation in 2016.²⁰ Since then, and pursuant to its new implementation work, the Colorado Succeeds team has worked to publicize the program, ensuring that school district leaders understand the program and that early adopters have tools and resources at their disposal to support local implementation.

Colorado Succeeds was able to quickly take advantage of an open policy window because it had previously built such strong partnerships with both its dues-paying members and its partners. The teams' ongoing credibility and relationships with legislators helped ensure an internal champion for the legislation. Once the law was passed, Colorado Succeeds was once again able to tap its broad network to support the dissemination of information and the implementation of the program.

5 Colorado Succeeds has remained flexible and agile, allowing it to adjust to a changing landscape and evolving needs.

Much in the way that Colorado Succeeds aims to make Colorado's education system agile, the organization itself has demonstrated agility over time, shifting its work to address a changing landscape and new opportunities. This has enabled the organization to stay relevant to the business community, the education community, and the state legislature, and to ensure that its policy goals reflect the changing needs of the state.

Colorado Succeeds has demonstrated this agility over the course of its 14 years of existence; however, two fundamental shifts highlight most clearly the organization's agility. When Colorado Succeeds launched in 2006, its focus was exclusively on the K-12 education system. Over time, the organization has extended its view — and its policy and advocacy work — beyond K-12 to include early childhood education as well as postsecondary. Colorado Succeeds CEO Scott Laband explains this evolution: "The rationale is that it is all one talent pipeline and there are essential milestones at different points of the continuum. Additionally, we are driven to increase the number of postsecondary credentials in our state. That's what our economy requires and what our members are demanding of the workforce. It was in response to them that we have chosen to move in this direction."²¹

The broadening of Colorado Succeeds' work addresses the needs of Colorado's economy and speaks directly to the needs of the state's business sector. This not only keeps Colorado Succeeds' businesses engaged in their work, but it also serves to engage new and different businesses, philanthropists, and partners in their ongoing work to strengthen the state's education systems.

In addition to widening the *focus* of its work, Colorado Succeeds has successfully expanded the *type* of work it does. After seeing mixed impact from the laws and policies it helped to pass, the leadership team expanded its strategic plan in order to support the implementation of those laws and policies. To do this, Colorado Succeeds works with school districts, educators, and families to implement new policies, ensuring that early adopters understand how those policies work. In the context of the Career Development Incentive Program example given above, this implementation support took the form of facilitating meetings with district leaders to help them understand the policy and how to implement it in their districts.

While the implementation work is still in its early phases, members and funders are excited about it — as demonstrated by the \$1.7 million increase in Colorado Succeeds' budget between FY 2019 and FY 2020, driven largely by foundations wanting to support Colorado Succeeds' move into implementation work.

Conclusion

Colorado Succeeds occupies a unique and important space in the Colorado business landscape, as the statewide business voice focused exclusively on education issues. Looking to the future, Colorado Succeeds will continue to remain flexible as it both creates opportunities and takes advantage of policy windows in its efforts to realize Vision 2030 and a more agile education system – enabling all of Colorado’s students to access the education and work opportunities that will set them up for success.

Endnotes

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- 15 General Assembly of the State of Colorado, House Bill 16-1289, <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb16-1289>.
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- 20 General Assembly of the State of Colorado, House Bill 18-1266, https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2018a_1266_signed.pdf.
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