

# **WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL?**

**Prepared for the  
Colorado School Finance Project**

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This document is prepared as an appendix to "Calculation of the Cost of an Adequate Education in Colorado Using the Professional Judgement and the Successful School District Approaches," prepared by the firm of Augenblick & Myers, Inc. for the Colorado School Finance Project. The advisory council for this "adequacy study" requested research into what the public perceives and expects in a successful school. This appendix uses input from three independent sources: formal survey, conversations with representatives of business and comments from educators. It combines anecdotal input with that gleaned from a more statistically based approach, and draws input from across the state, from those without children in school as well as those who are actively involved in their children's education.

State statute, federal law and legal opinion look at school success through a variety of objective measures. Such measures, quantified with relative ease, evaluate student achievement against state standards. In Colorado, the “successful school” approach is based on school-wide performance as determined by the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) tests, measuring student performance in reading, writing, mathematics and science. The state has also developed an implementation plan, which has been accepted, to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Under this plan, student performance in reading and mathematics will be measured using CSAP tests. The state has established baseline performance targets by grade level and demographic subgroup to measure progress on the way to the state and federal objective, which is that all public schools and districts will have reached the goal of 100% proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of the 2013-14 school year.

Parents of school-age children are interested in successful schools, but they are hardly the only group with such a vested interest. Other stakeholders include employers, local property owners (because schools with good reputations have a positive impact on property values) and students, as well as parents of grown children, grandparents and tax payers. Those interested in the course of public education look to subjective as well as objective measures when they consider the success of their local schools in particular, and of public education in Colorado in general. If educational excellence is the goal, then that which measures a successful school should take into account both the objective and subjective concerns.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Public Opinion Survey of Colorado Public Schools<sup>1</sup> indicates that the public, a sample which includes adults with and without school-age children, is generally satisfied with the performance of public schools, though the split between those who are satisfied and those who are not is becoming clearer. “At all three levels of schooling, the percentage of respondents giving public schools high grades has increased over time. At the same time, however, more respondents are giving Ds and Fs now than they did in prior years,” says the narrative accompanying the survey.

*While there has been a trend of increasing satisfaction with the job of education – 57% give a positive rating with regards to the job schools are doing in this arena – Coloradans’ satisfaction with districts’ maintenance of the physical plant is dropping.* Concern over the state of the physical plant is demonstrated by the number of bond issues that school districts across the state have passed in recent years as well as by the survey results, in which 61% of respondents rated school districts’ building and maintenance as excellent or good, a four percentage point drop over last year’s rating. If respondents are generally

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted by the Wells Fargo Public Opinion Research Program of the Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Colorado-Denver in cooperation with The Colorado Association of School Boards and The Colorado Association of School Executives. Sponsored by George K. Baum & Company

pleased with what is going on in the classroom, they are beginning to show concern with school districts' abilities to provide a well-kept learning environment, with solid roofs, efficient heating and cooling systems and asbestos-free floor and ceiling tiles.

Opinions are more divided on the effectiveness of the state's standards and accountability programs. One conclusion offered in the survey: "When asked to rate the effectiveness of this strategy on a scale of one to 10, only 24% give a score of eight or higher, indicating they think it is a very effective approach to reform. At the other end of the continuum, more than one-fifth (22%) think this approach is not at all effective (a score of three or lower)."

The survey results also state that "The CSAP state standards tests receive a lukewarm endorsement from the public. Only 12% are very confident that they are a good measure of student learning. Nearly half (49%) are somewhat confident. Fully 36% are not confident that the CSAP tests are a good measure of student learning. *Consistent with these findings, three-quarters (75%) think that the state needs to use other measures in addition to the CSAP in order to assess everything students should be learning.*"

This survey did not include open-ended questions that would allow for respondents to discuss attributes of a successful school or to remark upon where improvements might lie. However, the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) initiated a series of brown-bag discussions in order to gain input from a sampling of Colorado business communities. The purpose of this "Now What?" project was to gain information on how employers perceive the effectiveness of school reform measures, from the first steps toward standards-based and school choice reform in 1993 to the present.

This study took a decidedly subjective approach, and those discussing education ranged from involved parents to interested citizens. Specific knowledge of public education varied. Though the perceptions were generally positive, parents of school-aged children expressed some frustration. One participant observed, "People don't understand the opportunity to seek out what's best for your child," and said that a parent needs to be an activist to know what is going on. And though parents were taking advantage of the opportunity to open-enroll in a school of choice, it was noted that such decisions weakened neighborhood bonds. Finally, there was a perception and a concern that families who lack the time or the ability to research alternatives or to transport students to a school of choice were finding themselves at a disadvantage.

Knowledge of the impact of school reform measures was also uneven. One parent praised his child's school district, saying that he was seeing more early evaluation of students, with the impact that schools were better able to identify learning issues. The topic of CSAP brought out a variety of concerns. One participant wondered if bright students were getting what they needed or if they

were getting only what was needed to facilitate test scores. Another group was surprised to find that performance on the CSAP carries no direct consequences to the students taking the test.

For business, the rubber of school reform meets the road of job performance in the quality of the graduates. Businesses aren't clearly seeing a higher quality graduate today than they saw in 1995. Grammar and spelling continue to be concerns, and there is also a worry that music and art are being left behind as schools tightly focus their efforts on performing well on CSAP. One participant asked bluntly, "Are we getting a better education or just more tests?" Accountability measures have led to parents becoming more involved in their child's education, but some felt education hasn't improved for the students falling in the bottom third. There was a perception that the importance of soft skills, such as critical thinking skills, were being ignored and that evaluating school success through a single test ignores the impact of parental involvement on student achievement.

A different take on what makes a successful school is provided by those immersed in the day-to-day world of education. The Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE) joined CASB to gather information from administrators and school board members at a series of regional meetings held in September and October of 2002. Representatives from all of the state's 178 school districts had an opportunity to participate in these forums. Attendees were asked simply, "What is your definition of a successful school?" The most common response, coming repeatedly from each of the ten settings, is that a successful school is one that is responsive to individual student needs. Other responses looked at a number of aspects of school character that are not currently measured in the "successful school" model. Specific responses include:

- A school that can financially support, without prejudice, every program each individual student needs
- A safe, nurturing atmosphere where learners can reach their potential
- Healthy community of parents, teachers and community members working together to mentor youth in a safe, inclusive environment
- Strong curriculum. Open communication
- Place where teachers can individualize instruction
- Parents that participate, teachers who care
- Academic excellence
- Demonstrated achievement for every child
- Parents welcome and participating members of the educational community
- School that serves all its youth – vocational as well as college-bound
- 5R's – include respect and responsibility
- Diagnosing learning problems with prescriptive action. Addressing the needs of average students.
- Schools small enough to know their students, staff and families

The characteristics of school success remain open to debate, but it's clear that at this juncture success reaches beyond what is measured on a single test. Public perception of what education is and what it should do looks beyond State and Federal expectations. It is impossible to predict whether and how public expectations will shift in the next eight to ten years with continued travel down the road of school reform, but survey results make clear that the public still expects quality teachers providing instruction that will result in demonstrated learning, and that this take place in a safe and well-kept learning environment.

But the public, and the leaders of our school communities, seem to be hoping for more. Business is looking at success defined in terms of learners who can adapt to both the social forces and the technology of the work environment. Parents and educators are both looking for teaching that takes into account student abilities and needs, and for the kind of instruction that prepares students for the world beyond their high school years. This includes respect and responsibility, it includes preparation for students who are not college bound, and it includes individualized instruction that is supported by a strong curriculum.