



## **HOW IS HIGH-RISK DEFINED?**

Pursuant to Colo. Rev. Stat. 22-7-604.5, High Risk students fit into at least one of the following categories:

- Prior dropout
- Adjudication
- Expulsion
- Chronic suspensions
- Pregnant/parenting
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Gang involvement or affiliation
- Adjudicated parent
- Domestic violence in family
- Victim of abuse/neglect
- Migrant (added 2010)
- Homeless (added 2010)
- Severe psychiatric or behavioral disorders (added 2010)
- Over-aged and under-credited (added 2011)





## Alternative Schools: Models for Success

Many alternative schools in Colorado struggle to meet the academic needs of their students. Yet, there are alternative schools around the country that are having success. A few examples are highlighted below to illustrate promising models working to improve outcomes for out of school youth and youth off-track to graduation.

### Open Meadow Alternative Schools

- Public community-based schools
- Locations in Portland, OR (one middle school, one high school, four transition programs)

**Target population:** Youth ages 10-21 who have dropped out, are at-risk of dropping out, or are over-age/under-credit

**Demographics:** 84% Free or Reduced Lunch, 38% Caucasian, 24% African American, 18% Hispanic, 4% Native American, 4% Asian American

**Graduation Rate:** 81% of high school students who started the 2011-2012 school year with at least 18 credits graduated by year end; 86% of graduates transitioned to post-secondary education and/or employment

**Funding for alternative school:** 2011-2012 PPR: \$9,850

**Statewide funding:** 2010-2011 average for PPR in Oregon: \$9,362  
<http://www.openmeadow.org>

### Our Piece of the Pie: Opportunity High School

- Public charter high school in Hartford, CT
- 2<sup>nd</sup> school opened September 2012 (blended model)
- Replication in progress for two additional schools nearby

**Target population:** Youth ages 14-24 who are over-age/under-credit

**Demographics:** 80% Free or Reduced Lunch, 80% learning disabilities, 18 % English Language Learners, 33% pregnant or parenting, 67% Hispanic, 33% African American

**Graduation Rate:** 2010: 70%, 2011: 80%

**Funding for alternative school:** \$22,000 PPR (~\$11,000 from state funding, ~\$9,000 from district funding, ~\$2,000 raised by the school)

**Statewide funding:** 2009-2010 average for PPR in Connecticut: \$14,031  
<http://www.opp.org>

### Phoenix Academy Charter Network

- Public charter high schools in Chelsea and Lawrence, MA
- Replication in Springfield, MA in August 2013

**Target population:** Youth ages 13-23 who have dropped out, or are over-age/under-credit

**Demographics:** 85% Free or Reduced Lunch, 33% pregnant or parenting, 62% Hispanic, 26% African American

**Graduation Rate:** For the 2010-2011 cohort: 21 graduating students, 96% applied and were accepted for post-secondary education. 71% of 2008 graduates either graduated/still enrolled in post-secondary education in 2010

**Funding for alternative school:** 2011-2012 PPR: \$13,074

**Statewide funding:** 2009-2010 average for PPR in Massachusetts: \$13,361

**Other expenditures:** In partnership with AmeriCorps, Phoenix has an Urban Fellows program to provide 1:1 tutoring to students. Since the start of the Fellows program, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) proficiency levels for Phoenix students have increased 56% in both reading and math over the span of 3 years.

The cost of an Urban Fellow for one year : \$60,000 (AmeriCorps pays \$45,000, Phoenix pays \$15,000). In 2011-2012, Phoenix had 18 Urban Fellows for 190 students.

<http://phoenixcharteracademy.org>

### Common Elements of Success

As measured by high rates of high school graduation, acceptance into post-secondary education and/or employment opportunities

- ✓ **School Culture:** High expectations, personalized, and future focus
- ✓ **Excellent Leadership and Instruction**
- ✓ **Student Centered Design** with flexible programming, competency-based curriculum, and applied learning opportunities.
- ✓ **Effective Partnerships** with districts, non-profits, and social services to provide wrap-around services
- ✓ **Supplemental Funding**

Adapted from: Alternative High School Initiative; Financing Alternative Education Pathways: Profiles and Policy Report; and Donnell-Kay research.



## Opportunity Youth in Colorado

### Who are Opportunity Youth?

At any given time, there are thousands of youth in Colorado who have either dropped out of school or are so far off-track from graduation that their future is in jeopardy. Nationally, this population is referred to as “opportunity youth” and defined as 16 to 24-year olds who are neither in school nor secured stable employment.<sup>i</sup> According to a January 2012 report by Columbia University<sup>ii</sup>, there are currently at least 6.7 million 16 to 24-year-olds nationwide (17%) who are considered ‘opportunity youth.’ The high school graduation rate of these youth is an estimated 18 percentage points lower than the rest of their age group.

### What is the economic impact of Opportunity Youth?

Lost earnings, lower economic growth, lower tax revenues and higher government spending associated with opportunity youth are staggering. Beyond being at-risk of poorer economic, social, and personal outcomes due to their lack of labor market skills, opportunity youth create an economic burden both on taxpayers and on society as a whole<sup>iii</sup>. Given the significant economic impact of continuing to under serve this population, it is necessary to invest in preventative methods that can improve outcomes for this population.

### Economic Costs of Opportunity Youth:

**\$13,900:** Annual taxpayer burden of each opportunity youth  
**\$170,740:** Lifetime taxpayer burden of each opportunity youth after age 25  
**\$1.56 trillion:** Annual national taxpayer burden for the nation’s 6.7 million opportunity youth

### How are Opportunity Youth served in Colorado?

Colorado does not have a complete picture of the opportunity youth population in this state. However, indicators such as high school dropout rates, unemployment rates and overage/undercredit students who are off-track to graduation, are some useful markers. During the 2010-2011 school year, over 12,500 youth dropped out of Colorado high schools. There has been no independent study of Colorado unemployment rates for youth aged 16-24 that have not completed high school, but the national average for this age group is 18%. Overage and under-credit students constitute 7.6% of the high school population in Colorado generally, and 47% of these students are currently in enrolled in an Alternative Education Campus (AECs).

During the 2011-2012 school year there were 79 AECs in Colorado and these schools are a primary pathway in Colorado for serving opportunity youth.<sup>iv</sup> These young people are spread across all 178 school districts, with a wide variety of reasons for being out of school and so far behind (ranging from substance abuse to disability, to boredom, pregnancy, bullying and skill deficiencies). There is a correspondingly wide variety of reasons why success for this population in mainstream schools is limited. In many respects there are actual disincentives for schools and districts to keep these students. The state does not provide extra funding for students in AECs and districts often get lower accountability ratings because of the way the state calculates district performance frameworks for AECs.

According to the Colorado Department of Education:

Youth Dropped Out	12,500 ('10-'11)
Youth in high school but off-track to graduation	35,400 ('10-'11)
Youth in need of an alternative setting	47,900 ('10-'11)
Youth in current AECs	14,418 ('11-'12)
Youth in AECs with “Performance Rating”	4,152 (29%) ('11-'12)

Relative to the outstanding needs of students at risk of not graduating high school or entering a career, the current number of schools is nowhere near sufficient. And, the data shows there is an identified need to serve this population better and in vastly different ways. Without a greater state focus on this population, more and more students will continue to drop out and have bleak futures for themselves and drain the state's social services. Like other states, "the need for educational pathways leading to a meaningful credential is immense; yet the capacity to serve disconnected youth is inadequate."<sup>v</sup> Colorado can, and must do better.

### How can we improve the system for serving Opportunity Youth in Colorado?

The state's interest is in seeing a system of high quality educational options for students with the greatest need. For these students with significant challenges, local solutions are so elusive that the state has a role in exploring new solutions for serving this population. Advocates for this population support the creation of a new funding stream and accompanying accountability framework to provide a handful of great school options in the near future and provide replicable models needed to support more in years to come. This proposal is referred to as the **Opportunity Schools Initiative (OSI)**.

In order to identify new solutions, the state needs to learn more about the policy levers, operating conditions, and incentives necessary to encourage that system of high quality options for opportunity youth. Systematically testing the conditions and incentives will lay the groundwork for the creation of a strong and sustainable system of high quality schools for the state's neediest kids. The anticipated results will shape the future of those schools, and the education system at both the state and local level.

#### Before scaling a solution, we must understand:

1. What **conditions** and settings provide the right operating climate to attract and support the right providers to open and operate these schools?
2. What are the most effective **design elements** of schools meeting the academic and emotional/life circumstance needs of high-risk students?
3. What are the **cost drivers** for successfully serving this population?
4. What are **effective incentives** for serving this population?
5. How do we hold schools **accountable for performance** in a way that reflects the unique nature of their students and mission **without sacrificing rigor**?

<sup>i</sup> For Colorado public policy purposes, 'opportunity youth' will refer to 16 to 21-year-olds, as 21 is the maximum age for which Colorado schools can receive public dollars to provide educational services. There are some exceptions for students with special needs.

Opportunity Youth should also include students still in school, but significantly deficient in skills and/or credits.

<sup>ii</sup> Belfield, C.R., Levin, H. M. & R. Rosen. 2012. *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*. Columbia University: New York, NY.

<sup>iii</sup> Taxpayer burden consists of resources for which the taxpayer is responsible, including lost taxes, additional health care paid for by the taxpayer, expenditures for the criminal justice system and corrections, all welfare and social service payments, and any savings in lower education spending because opportunity youth are not in college.

<sup>iv</sup> AECs serve 95% or more "high-risk" students (defined by Colorado Rev. Stat.22-7-604.5) as falling into one or more of these categories: dropout, adjudicated youth, expulsion, chronic suspensions, pregnant/parenting, drug/alcohol abuse, gang involvement, adjudicated parent, domestic violence in family, victim of abuse/neglect, migrant, homeless, severe psychiatric or behavioral disorders, overage-undercredit.

<sup>v</sup> National Youth Employment Coalition: "Financing Alternative Education Pathways." Profiles and Policies, 2005.