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Getting down to business

Executives are taking an active role in improving Colorado's education system

Denver Business Journal - by [Mark Harden](#) Denver Business Journal

By now, the crisis has been clear for years, at least to business leaders: Colorado's schools aren't preparing students for today's workplace.



But executives are no longer just complaining about the problem. Increasingly, they're joining the effort to solve it.

Stacks of studies, and interviews with Colorado employers and experts, reveal an emergency that could have lasting impact on the state's economy:

- Too many of the state's youths aren't getting into college.
- Many of those who do aren't ready for it.
- Even a degree often doesn't mean a graduate is ready to work.
- Too few students are studying subjects in growing demand by Colorado employers, such as engineering, math and science.

As a result, many Colorado companies with high-paying jobs are looking in other states for qualified workers -- or are considering packing up and moving away.

"We have a system that is underperforming," said oilman Alex Cranberg. "It's undermining the credibility of the public education system, and we need to do something about that."

He's one of many business leaders who have launched or thrown support behind efforts to make the state's education system work better, both for its own sake and for business.

"There's so much wasted potential and it's a terrible, terrible tragedy," he said. "You see kids who should be way, way ahead of where they are not being able to achieve their true potential. It's a horrible waste."

At the core of the issue is what's known in education-policy circles as the Colorado Paradox.

Ledy Garcia-Eckstein -- executive director of the **WIRED Initiative**, a new education-grant program under the **Metro Denver Economic Development Corp.** (EDC) -- defines the paradox as "the fact we have such a high concentration of college graduates living here, one of the highest in the country, but pretty unimpressive high-school graduation rates."

The explanation, she said, is that many out-of-state college graduates move here for jobs that native Coloradans aren't qualified to fill. "Colorado has a history of importing our skilled work force," she said.

It's not that Colorado doesn't have good jobs. A 2006 report by the Metro Denver EDC said Colorado had led all states in high-tech employment for seven straight years.

But not enough homegrown students are prepared to take those jobs as they open up, so workers are being imported.

A 2007 work force study of Colorado's fast-growing aerospace, energy, technology and bioscience industries, by **Development Research Partners** of Littleton for the WIRED Initiative, found that while most entry-level workers in these fields are hired locally, "businesses must look further outside the region to find qualified candidates" for more specialized jobs.

Some blame skimpy state spending on education.

A 2006 report commissioned by then-Gov. Bill Owens said Colorado public colleges on average receive about half as much per-student state funding as "peer" schools in other states. And the 2006 Metro Denver EDC study found the state ranked 48th in K-12 spending as a percentage of personal income.

Economic-development experts warn that some firms may wind up moving to states with more highly skilled workers close at hand, eroding Colorado's tax base. Other companies may decide against moving here.

And some employers complain that, even with a degree, Colorado students aren't always workplace-ready.

Leanna Clark, who employs 25 people at her Denver public-relations firm **Schenkein**, said she won't hire entry-level candidates straight out of college because she finds they generally aren't adequately prepared.

"They have most of the nuts and bolts down," she said. "But what we don't see are the more nuanced skills -- creativity, being able to multitask, working in a team, flexibility, how to present with confidence. They're missing some of the core things they need to be successful."

This week, the Denver Business Journal examines three business-driven initiatives out of dozens aimed at making Colorado's schools better and its students better prepared for the workplace of today and tomorrow.

Not all business leaders agree on the best approach to take.

Some argue for promoting private schools to generate healthy competition for all schools. Others back various ways to support public education directly, from improving teacher training to campaigning for more state funding.

Some promote charter schools with programs focused on in-demand skills, like the new Denver School of Science & Technology or the proposed business-themed **Denver Venture School**, slated to open next fall.

Still others, like Junior Achievement, offer programs to introduce young people to business skills, or, like the new Denver Scholarship Fund, to help students with college tuition and planning.

But whichever tools they use, business leaders increasingly see a need to play a part in school reform.

"The onus is on us as employers to make sure that educators know what we need," Clark said.

Public Education & Business Coalition (PEBC)

Address: 1410 Grant St., Suite A-101, Denver, CO 80203

Online: www.pebc.org, www.headfirstcolorado.org

Founded: 1983

Mission: "To cultivate excellence in public schools so all students succeed in learning and in life." Work is focused on professional development for teachers, principals and administrators; and policy and business engagement.

A group that unites business leaders and education professionals believes that school reform should be aimed at the front line of education -- at teachers.

So the Public Education & Business Coalition (PEBC) focuses on professional development of teachers and principals in the Denver area.

And the group gets the private sector involved in supporting public education, trying to find common ground between executives and educators so they can join forces to help schools graduate more workplace-ready students.

"Our teachers aren't business people, and in many cases haven't worked in a business environment," said PEBC board chairwoman Clark. "So there's as an opportunity in this type of collaboration for business people to help educate our educators as to what we need.

"Public education today is structured around a model that hasn't evolved the way the workplace has evolved," Clark said. "It was built for a different era, based on seat time in the class as opposed to outcomes and what you need to use in a day-to-day business environment."

PEBC (www.pebc.org) offers intensive training in classroom skills, from instructional-methods coaching to curriculum planning, beyond what teachers are taught in college. It also helps schools set up "peer learning" labs so teachers can pick up best practices from each other. And it coaches principals to become better leaders.

The PEBC's Boettcher Teachers Program pays for would-be teachers -- many of whom already have degrees and workplace experience in other fields -- to get a credential as well as specialized training in exchange for a five-year commitment to teach in an urban school district.

While focused on the Denver area since its founding in 1983, the PEBC's professional staff has branched out to provide training programs and consulting in other parts of the country.

On the policy side, PEBC is "bringing the business voice more into the conversation about education reform .. and what the workplace needs, given that education is a real driver in the economy," said PEBC President Rosann Ward.

She said PEBC tries to sound a "clarion cry" to business leaders that Colorado risks losing jobs to other states if its schools don't do a better job of preparing workers.

"It's actually frightening," Ward said. "If we don't change until it hurts our pockets, that's where we're going. So we try to talk about ways [business leaders] can help the [school] system become a better pipeline for the economy, not forgetting that education is also about democracy."

Alan Gottlieb, the coalition's vice president for policy and business engagement, heads the effort to familiarize business leaders with education matters. He edits the HeadFirst online magazine (www.headfirstcolorado.org), which this month is changing its name to Education News Colorado. Todd Engdahl, a longtime **Denver Post** editor, has joined the website to lead its coverage of education issues in the state Legislature.

The PEBC board includes executives from banks, utilities, telecoms, insurers and other companies; the superintendents of several Denver-area school districts; and Beverly Ingle, head of the **Colorado Education Association**, the teacher labor union.

"When you put business leaders side by side [with superintendents] on the board, they begin to realize that they deal with the same workplace issues -- recruitment, retention, training, compensation," Ward said.

And, Clark said, PEBC's partnership of business and education leads to an awareness of shared responsibility for the success of schools.

"We had a round-table retreat where one of the superintendents on the board said, 'We have [students] for just six hours a day.' So the burden is also on us as employers and parents -- and I am both -- to make sure that we're not just sitting back and whining, but are getting involved and doing something about it.

"Because if we don't," Clark said with a chuckle, "we're all going down!"

Alliance for Choice in Education (ACE)

Address: 1201 E. Colfax Ave., Suite 302, Denver, CO 80218

Online: www.acescholarships.org

Founded: 2000

Mission: ACE "provides low-income families with the power and freedom of genuine educational choice through financial scholarships, college prep and career guidance, and school choice advocacy." Seeks to promote "an accountable and competitive education marketplace that fosters effective private and public schools."

Competition usually is healthy for business and good for customers -- so why not stimulate more competition among schools?

That's the premise behind the Alliance for Choice in Education (ACE), which helps pay private-school tuition for students from low-income Denver-area families.

Founded seven years ago by Denver oilman and venture capitalist Alex Cranberg and retired **J.D. Edwards** President Ed McVaney, ACE believes its scholarship program helps deliver a higher-quality education to inner-city youths by making private schools more affordable.

ACE also tries to stimulate development of local private schools by expanding their student base -- thereby spurring what it sees as healthy competition among both private and public schools that can lead to improved education for all students.

It's an approach supported by many business and community leaders, dozens of whom serve as ACE board members, trustees and advisors.

They include former Gov. Bill Owens, **Urban League of Metro Denver** CEO Sharon Alexander Holt and Polly Baca, director of the **Latin American Research and Service Agency**.

"Business people intuitively understand the powerful dynamic of improvement that's associated with competition," said Cranberg, chairman of **Aspect Energy LLC**. "As much as we as businessmen would all like to have no competition in our own business, we all understand, deep down, that it's good for us and it's good for our customers."

He likes to say that the "C" in ACE could stand for either choice or competition. "Through support of a competitive environment for education, all schools -- including traditionally operated public schools -- will get better. We hope we're providing a stimulus."

This school year, ACE has granted 715 scholarships averaging \$2,146, for a total of \$1.5 million. Recipients currently attend 167 private and parochial schools. The average ACE scholarship covers 36 percent of a student's private-school tuition.

A typical ACE scholarship recipient's household income is less than \$23,000. Nearly half of ACE recipients each year are Latino, and 15 percent to 20 percent are black.

"The students that ACE financially supports are very often the students that the current system cannot serve. They are low-income, at-risk kids who have done poorly in their assigned public schools," ACE Executive Director Norton Rainey said in the group's latest newsletter.

"But given a chance to learn in an environment of their choosing which meets their needs, these kids can succeed."

ACE claims impressive results. It said more than 90 percent of its scholarship recipients graduate from high school each year, and 78 percent of its class-of-2006 recipients went on to college.

It also said its recipients scored an average composite score on their ACT college-admission test of 20.7 in 2006, versus 15.6 for all Denver Public Schools students and 14.4 for lower-income DPS students.

Unlike some advocates of "school choice," ACE doesn't reject public education out of hand. In fact, some of its board members and backers also support efforts by DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet -- who attended this year's ACE annual dinner -- to improve the city's public-schools system.

"If you ask me, the most damaging thing we could do to public education is shield it from competition," Cranberg said. "I don't abhor public education. I support it."

Behind Cranberg's involvement in the effort is the fact that he and his wife, geologist Susan Morrice, have two daughters, ages 13 and 9.

"When you start going through school choices for your own children, you start realizing they're not the same people as you were growing up, and so there's a tremendous need for diversity," he said. "And ironically, as much as diversity is celebrated in America these days, it's not stimulated when it comes to where kids go to school. That's changing, but we have a long ways to go."

Metro Denver WIRED Initiative

Address: 1445 Market St., Denver, CO 80202

Online: www.metrodenver.org/wired

Founded: 2006

Mission: To create "transformational and sustainable changes in our education and workforce systems to enhance the region's global competitiveness."

Think of the Metro Denver WIRED Initiative as providing venture capital for building a skilled work force.

WIRED -- Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development -- was launched last year with a three-year, \$15 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Operating under the wing of the Metro **Denver Chamber of Commerce's Economic Development Corp.**, WIRED backs programs with the goal of increasing the supply of Colorado-educated workers for jobs in the high-wage, fast-growing sectors of aerospace, bioscience, energy and information technology.

To that end, WIRED aims to boost Colorado students' skills in the so-called "STEM" subjects: science, technology, engineering and math.

Already, WIRED -- which serves the seven metro-Denver counties plus Larimer and Weld counties -- has issued its first round of grants. Ten of 25 applicants received a total of \$3.7 million in January.

"We fund programs, but that's not really what it's about. It's about funding transformation," said WIRED Executive Director Ledy Garcia-Eckstein, an official of the **Denver Office of Economic Development** who is on loan to administer the grant.

"It's about how we change the system, so that when the funds run out in two years, we're not in the same spot, and we're generating the workers our economy needs."

Among programs backed so far by WIRED:

- A [University of Denver](#) engineering "summer camp," with WIRED helping to extend the curriculum to regional high schools.
- An online education program by the [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning](#) for high-school students in Denver and Jefferson counties interested in energy careers.
- An internship program at the Denver School of Science & Technology, a new charter high school, which gives 11th-graders work experience in science and technology.
- A hybrid degree program at [Regis University](#) in business and IT management, especially targeting bilingual students.
- Expansion to a broader spectrum of students of a [NASA](#)-backed degree program at The Metropolitan State College of Denver in aerospace-systems engineering technology.

"We call the grant program 'Growing Our Own,'" Garcia-Eckstein said. It's a reference to WIRED's effort to ensure that Colorado has enough homegrown workers to fill its highly skilled jobs, so local businesses have to import fewer workers from other states.

WIRED's grant emphasis in its first year is supporting or expanding existing programs. In its next two grant cycles, beginning in 2008, the initiative will try to find novel new programs to support.

To help with the process, WIRED has undertaken business surveys and "asset mapping" to identify areas where Colorado's students are lacking needed skills and where businesses are short of suitable local job candidates.

A study for WIRED by Littleton-based analysis firm Development Research Partners, released in May, examined work force needs in WIRED's four "focus" industries: aerospace, bioscience, energy and IT.

It found that half of those employers must bring in at least some of their workers from out of state. The higher the skill required, the more likely it is that a local employer will have to look elsewhere to fill that job, the study found.

Some WIRED-backed programs help to make high school students better prepared for studying in-demand skills in college that will later lead to high-paying careers.

One example is a two-year "process technology" program at **Red Rocks Community College** in Lakewood to train skilled workers for careers in oil refining and other energy fields.

The program at times has had difficulty finding entering students with the right math skills. That's where WIRED stepped in.

"With some of the funds we're giving them, the community college is going to high schools to begin the program there," Garcia-Eckstein said. "Those students can take applied math and science [courses], and they will have six credits toward the [Red Rocks] program."

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