

Narrative Change Goals



Colorado Education Initiative's (CEI) long-term vision is that all young people in Colorado exit K-12 education boldly taking their next steps toward hopeful, equitable, and prosperous futures. It does this by working with education leaders to implement relevant and meaningful learning for young people.

Through the Pathways Narrative Project, CEI set out to understand how narrative research could support the organization's efforts to increase and accelerate adoption of career-connected learning (CCL) resources and funds in Colorado.

Mapping the Narrative Landscape



First, CEI conducted messaging and media audits and in-depth interviews to test their hypothesis that CCL was positioned as an option mostly for high school students who were not succeeding on a more traditional, academically-focused pathway. They also wanted to test the desired new narrative: Career-connected learning for every student is a meaningful

part of the high school experience. They learned, among other things, that parents and other family perspectives are absent from media and messaging about CCL, and that while students' experiences are highlighted, their voices are not. In addition, while CCL was portrayed as exciting and innovative, it was mostly covered in relation to higher education, not high school.

Understanding Audience Mindset



Next, CEI conducted in-depth interviews with Colorado superintendents, principals, and counselors, and also conducted one focus group with work-based learning coordinators. Among the key take-aways: audiences see CCL as having the potential to transform young people's lives, citing impacts that go beyond traditional academic measures, such as students feeling empowered to choose different paths. For many, this mindset evolved over time through early experiences with CCL, from a more narrow intent to better serve some students to a recognition of the value added

for all students. For some, knowing students who personally benefited from CCL widened their view of which students would most benefit from CCL. Some audiences view CCL as making the current education system more relevant and others see it as a logical next step in the evolution of high school. However, most audiences feel that the high school system is broken — young people have changed, but high school has not. Across all of these audiences, CCL is connected to ideas of exploration, change, and preparation for one's future.



Testing Persuasive Messages



CEI conducted an online survey of school district leaders participating in their Rural Coaction cohort – a grant-based program of Colorado Department of Education that aims to collaboratively build and expand student pathway opportunities, career-connected learning and career partnership programs in rural areas. Later they conducted interviews with a selection of superintendents from the cohort drawn from a diversity of locations and geographic contexts. CEI developed and tested messaging they hypothesized would persuade superintendents to frame CCL as benefiting all students, and therefore motivate them to adopt or accelerate adoption of CCL. Messaging was positively received by most Superintendents; they could see the value of incorporating CCL options for many reasons, such as the relevance it brings to the high school experience and how it helps students explore so they can

articulate and pursue goals after graduation. The message “CCL for all students” resonated especially well for educators who have first-hand experience with CCL programs in their districts. However, messages needed to also acknowledge that there may not yet be CCL options available that offer comprehensive pathways to college and career for every student.

I think it's an extremely antiquated system, especially with the way kids learn today. Everything is at their fingertips. So I definitely think that we need to completely revamp how we teach and what we teach.

—District Staff, Small Urban District

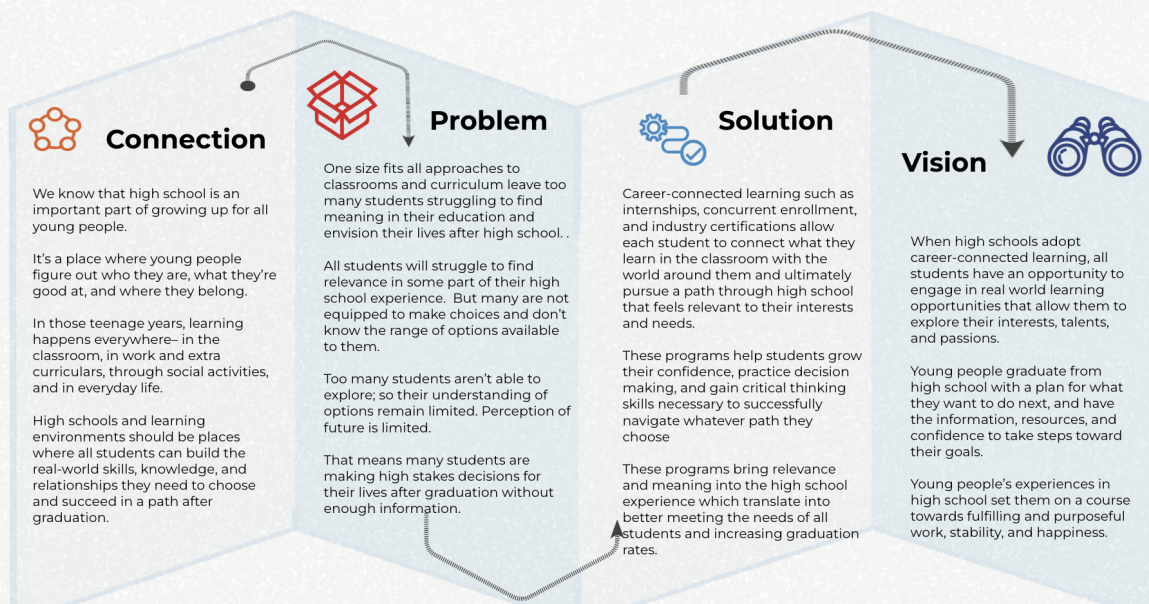
I feel like it's a numbers game. Like, how are these kids doing on test scores versus looking at the bigger picture of these kids...as well-rounded humans. Are they happy? Are they healthier? Are they finding their passion? I think we're working on that, but I don't think that's where we're at.

—Work-based learning coordinator, Rural District

Putting Messages into Action

CEI set out to motivate Superintendents to accelerate adoption of CCL, by showing the benefit of CCL at the individual (student) and systems (district) levels. Their research revealed that their target audience was largely aligned with their messaging, and because of this could be ideal ambassadors to their peers outside of the cohort. CEI conducted a messenger training in which they socialized the narrative framework, sharing messages that had been effective entry

points for district and school leaders and provided training on best practices for communication. The training was attended by 20 individuals ranging from superintendents to teachers. Almost all of the individuals who participated in the training reported having an increased understanding of who benefits from and an increased willingness to speak about CCL with their professional peers.





What's Next for Colorado Education Initiative



The research affirmed the desired narrative, “CCL for all students is a meaningful part of the high school experience” as having traction with CEI’s target audiences, and provided insight into what motivates superintendents and other education leaders to frame CCL in this way. In addition, the research provided the organization with greater nuance on CCL’s value and benefits to students. In the future, CEI will work to socialize their findings by integrating specific insights that emerged from the Pathways Narrative research within school and district implementation efforts, collaborating with other organizations who support CCL to advance coherence in Colorado’s education ecosystem (e.g., state agencies, intermediaries, and funders), and more broadly on changing the narrative to elevate the promise of CCL for Colorado’s young people and communities.



I think that advancing narrative change will be really critical for broader ecosystem change and for aligning partners in this space on language use. If we think about some of the influencers we’re trying to move, we can’t have everybody using different terminology to mean the same thing and then think that they’re all going to just get it. I also think understanding the ways in which there are current narratives or mindsets or mental models that prohibit the kind of change we seek help us get to a shared understanding of how to operate in a collective way.

—Samantha Olson
VP of Strategy, Colorado Education Initiative

About the Pathways Narrative Project

The Pathways Narrative Project is a two-year collaborative initiative, led by Wonder: Strategies for Good and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and others, that convened nine organizations working in five places (Colorado, Indiana, New York,

Texas, and Washington, DC) to improve education and career pathways for young people. Together the cohort explored how to leverage the power of narrative to advance programs and systems change in the pathways space.