



# The Opportunity News

Tracking the state of opportunity  
in Colorado and around the country

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## The Bell Policy Center

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## New education commissioner aims for alignment

### Jones says closing achievement gap "a non-negotiable"

The Bell Policy Center's Frank Waterous and Heather McGregor sat down last week for a conversation with Dwight Jones, [the state's new Commissioner of Education](#). Jones has worked as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent in Kansas, Maryland and Colorado, most recently serving as the superintendent of the Fountain-Fort Carson School District.

Here are the highlights.

**Frank Waterous:** Your career has included experiences in urban and rural elementary and secondary education. You've served as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. What special challenges does leading CDE pose, and how will your past experiences help you address these challenges?

**Dwight Jones:** Working in a school district, I knew some things, but not all the things. You don't have the real deal till you get on the inside. I had no idea it was so massive.

One thing that was alarming to me was the lack of structures here in the department. The department is doing a lot of things, and some are pretty good, but there was not a lot of alignment.

What's prepared me to face the internal and external challenges is that I've taught in the classroom. I understand how things affect teachers. I've been a principal at the middle school and high school level, and I've also been an adjunct professor. I've worked in urban, suburban and rural

**Jones:** *continued to page 2*

**Jones:** *continued from page 1*  
districts, with military and inner-city populations.

I've had good exposure to the system, to the misalignments and the opportunities for alignment. The P-20 concept will be beneficial as we take on those challenges.

**FW:** In your first [Chiefline](#) newsletter as commissioner, you stressed that "student achievement will measure our success," and outlined several "non-negotiables" regarding the mission of Colorado education. First among these was closing the state's achievement gap. What are the most critical steps we need to take, both inside and outside of the schools, to accomplish this goal?



Dwight Jones,  
Colorado  
Commissioner  
of Education

**DJ:** I used to believe that if you just worked hard, had smarts and know-how, that schools and districts could close the gap. What I've come to grips with is that society and the community have pieces that fit in. To really do something about the gap, there has to be a partnership with the school and the community.

For example, in Fountain-Fort Carson, we have an alternative school with a community center. It offers WIC, drug abuse support, workforce development, a health clinic and a dental clinic. We created a partnership with the community to put those things right there. That took resources, and the city was right there with us.

District 8 had good success in addressing the achievement gap. Those socio-economic pieces matter, but we took care of those pieces. We actually dealt with those things.

It takes vision inside the school system and outside the school system. We have to broaden the spectrum on how to make that happen.

**FW:** You have often cited the importance of both "rigor and relevance"

**"To really do something about the achievement gap, there has to be a partnership with the school and the community."**

**"It takes vision inside the school system and outside the school system. We have to broaden the spectrum on how to make that happen."**

**– Dwight Jones  
Colorado Commissioner  
of Education**

in the schools' curriculum. How do these concepts fit with the idea that districts should provide multiple pathways for students to earn a diploma and achieve success?

**DJ:** Expectations and rigor matter. Kids know when you don't expect much, or that what they're working on doesn't have much relevance. When you raise the bar and give assignments that are rigorous and challenging, the majority of kids will rise up to meet that.

Dale Gasser, the former superintendent at Fountain-Fort Carson, set new requirements for rigor — four years of math, science, social studies and English to graduate. Folks said, "No way. We'll have more drop-outs." In fact, our graduation rates went up.

We also started a storefront school for drop-out recovery, where kids 18, 19 and 20 can get their diploma. They're also doing two years with Pikes Peak Community College, because it's more than getting a high school diploma. It's about how they get into the workforce.

**FW:** In the past, Colorado's superintendents and school executives have expressed concern that their voices have not been heard at the state level. You've made a commitment to visit each of our 178 school districts in the next two years. What other steps will you take to



## Gateways to Opportunity

The Bell Policy Center is focused on making Colorado a state of opportunity for all. Opportunity does not arise from a single action.

To succeed in life, people must pass through a series of gateways.

They are:

1. A healthy birth
2. A safe and stimulating childhood
3. Building a solid base for literacy
4. Establishing a healthy lifestyle
5. Graduating from high school with a diploma and the skills to succeed
6. Access to education and training for adults
7. Living a healthy adult life
8. Earning a decent living and building wealth
9. A financially secure and healthy retirement

These gateways are like steps on a long staircase. Missing one doesn't mean you

**Gateways:** *See page 3*



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cannot succeed, but it makes getting to the next step harder. Miss too many steps and the climb may become impossible.

Together, these gateways constitute the Cycle of Opportunity, the mix of experiences and events that make it possible to realize our economic, social and personal potential.

Each month in *Opportunity News*, Bell Policy Center reports on the latest research, public policies, legislation and events that promote or undermine opportunity for Colorado residents, gateway by gateway.

**Jones:** *continued from page 3*

ensure that school- and district-level input is part of CDE's decision-making processes?

**DJ:** My predecessor, Bill Moloney, set up meetings with regional superintendents' associations for every other month, and I've continued that. I am also planning a similar thing with school board members and with teachers. But I don't plan to do much talking. I'm going to do more listening.

You can't set here in this office and really engage educators in this state. They've got to know where you align and where you don't align.

I'll be attending the Colorado Association of School Executives 2007 superintendent's retreat (Sept. 20-21 in Keystone), and they tell me registration is way up for that event.

We have started a [communications department](#). There has to be a consistent message. We are trying to send out news releases that make sense, like with the [recent change in calculating graduation rates](#). I got 20 to 30 calls from superintendents to just say, "Thank you." It helped them with their communities.

**FW:** Last year's school district mill levy stabilization debate highlighted the difficult trade-offs that Colorado has to make in providing state funding for K-12 education and other programs such as health care and higher education because of our current constitutional and statutory constraints. How can the state best address our budget problems in a comprehensive manner so that these tradeoffs don't have to be made?

**DJ:** There are a few things about fiscal management that are important. If we do a better job, the public doesn't mind supporting you.

I am a strong fiscal conservative, but I don't know that TABOR has served us the way we meant it to. I've been concerned that pieces of our law and policy don't align.

We know there is a facility issue in this state, and we have got to address that. Some of these rural districts can't pass a bond issue that's high enough to build new schools.

This state has either got to say, "We're in," or "We're out." The public is very supportive of education if we are doing the right thing. But at some point we need the leaders across the street [in the state Capitol building] to say, "We support education too."

**FW:** The new P-20 focus in Colorado will require a partnership between the Department of Education and the Department of Higher Education. What steps are you taking to change your department's current working relationship with higher education?

**DJ:** Congressman [David] Skaggs, [director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education], and I call each other every couple of weeks. He has a person and I have a person designated to work on this.

I will be putting two people from K-12 on his advisory committee, and we are looking at setting up the same kind of advisory board for K-12.

We are trying to solve problems. Blame serves no purpose, and spending time on the blame game is craziness. What we have to talk about is if we have to remediate kids, how do we solve it? If we have to remediate teachers, then do our training programs align? When have professors last been trained on how to teach?

David and I have good communication with each other and with the governor's office. Some people tell me that hasn't happened in years. Just to have a dialogue going — I appreciate that.

#### In the news

*The Denver Post*, Sept. 6, 2007  
[Colorado's grad rates drop into new realm](#),  
by Jeremy Meyer

## Gateway 2. A Safe and Stimulating Early Childhood

# Federal investments in kids projected to drop in the future

By Rich Jones

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Director of Policy and Research

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Federal spending in those areas generally considered as investments, such as education and research, work supports that expand the labor supply, and social programs that help people remain in the workforce or school, are projected to decline over the next decade, according to researchers at the Urban Institute.

The results of their research are published in a report issued this month, [Investing in Children](#).

Overall federal investment spending is projected to drop from 5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 4 percent, meaning these areas will receive about 20 percent less funding compared to the overall economy.

Investments targeted for children are also projected to decline, going from 1.6 percent of GDP to 1.3 percent over the coming decade. The only area of children's investments projected to increase is health benefits, which researchers attribute to rising health care costs rather than a decision to invest more in children.

Investments in education and research that go to children are projected to decline from 0.4 percent of GDP in 2006 to 0.3 percent of GDP in 2017. This contradicts the evidence that the return on investment in education is often highest when made in the early years of life.

The Urban Institute researchers note, "...the domestic spending pie is getting larger, thanks mainly to economic growth, but children are scheduled not only to get smaller shares, but almost none of the additional filling."

Researchers find that federal investment spending is being squeezed out by faster growing budget areas that have automatic increases, such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, that promote consumption and largely go to the elderly.

Long-term economic growth is bolstered through investments in human capital, basic research and infrastructure, such as roads and bridges. In a knowledge-based economy, investments in human capabilities such as education and training take on even greater importance. Because many of these investments benefit society as a whole, we make them largely through government efforts.

Because of its influence on future economic growth, the decline in federal investment spending causes concern. Investment requires redirecting spending from current consumption to those activities that will result in a future payoff. Unless we make these investments today, we may not be able to afford future spending to promote consumption.

The Urban Institute researchers conclude that spending more on investments in children would "increase their future well-being" and expand their "economic capacity to finance the programs that support their parents' and grandparents' consumption needs."



## Colorado Department of Education launches Forward Thinking report

*Forward Thinking* is the Colorado Department of Education's new plan to increase the graduation rate and close the achievement gap in all Colorado schools.

The main goal of *Forward Thinking* is "to create a purpose-driven and dynamic system of educational leadership, service and support that relentlessly focuses on the learning of ALL students."

The plan includes seven main goals, including improving guidance and support services to meet district and school needs, providing comprehensive professional development in best instructional practices, serving as a reliable source for research, data and analysis, and expanding leadership capacity through the establishment of

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### CDE plan:

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professional development and research centers.

The report also offers a role for the business community through “21st Century Strategic Partnerships,” which will join public and private efforts in supporting student learning.

“The state of Colorado places the authority for how schools are managed and what is taught with the local school district superintendents and Boards of Education,” said Commissioner Jones. “But the state has a clear role in highlighting what works and serving schools as we all work together to improve student achievement.”

[Read the press release](#), which also explains staff appointments and promotions for people involved in implementing the Forward Thinking report.

[Download the Forward Thinking report](#) (35 pgs, 180 KB)

Gateway 3. Building a Solid Base for Literacy

Gateway 5. Leaving High School with a Diploma and Skills to Succeed

Gateway 6. Access to Education and Training for Adults

## P-20 Council tackles education issues, but leaves adult ed discussion until 2008

By Frank Waterous  
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The Bell Policy Center

Colorado’s P-20 Education Coordinating Council, established by Gov. Ritter in April 2007, has begun its work on making education in the state an integrated system from preschool through college. However, while the council is tackling many important issues, adult education opportunities are absent from the mix.

Ritter charged the P-20 Council with holding statewide conversations and making recommendations for the education initiatives in his Colorado Promise platform. These included cutting the state’s dropout rate in half and doubling the number of postsecondary certificates and degrees awarded by 2017.

The council formed five subcommittees to focus on the state’s education system:

- P-3 (preschool through 3rd grade)
- Teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention
- Dropout prevention, retention, and recovery
- Preparations and transitions
- Data and accountability

The governor raised questions for the subcommittees to consider. From these questions, the subcommittees and full council will develop recommendations that may be proposed as legislation for the 2008 session, as well as longer-term policy directions for the state.

Despite the breadth of issues being explored, the focus has been on options and opportunities for children, teens and young adult students in our education system. Adult education issues — such

as adults seeking basic literacy, high school diplomas or college training later in life — have not been discussed.

Although the governor’s executive order establishing the P-20 Council mentioned “adults in need of retraining,” his questions to the subcommittees did not refer to adult education. The Colorado Promise identifies issues related to adult education as priorities, however, and his staff has indicated the topic will become a more significant part of the council’s discussions in 2008.

As the P-20 Council continues its efforts to improve the state’s education system and expand opportunity for all Coloradans, the Bell Policy Center urges it and the governor to include adult education as a central part of ongoing policy deliberations. Systemic education reform must address the needs of students of all ages, backgrounds, proficiencies and income levels if it is to produce meaningful and long-lasting benefits for individuals, families and society.

### Sources

[P-20 Education Coordinating Council web site](#): the Governor’s executive order and questions to the subcommittees, meeting schedules, background documents.

Gov. Ritter’s [Colorado Promise](#) policy book  
[June 2007 Opportunity News](#) overview of the P-20 Council

[Bell Policy Center P-20 web page](#)

Bell’s [Blueprint Implementation Memo No. 21](#) on the need for increased support for adult education opportunities in Colorado

## Gateway 7. A Healthy Adult Life

# Expanding health insurance helps, but won't solve health disparities

By Robin Baker  
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The Bell Policy Center

Expanding health insurance coverage to the uninsured may increase access to health care and life expectancy and reduce rates of chronic illness. However, policies that solely address health insurance will not end racial, economic and geographic disparities in health. To significantly decrease health disparities, financial and cultural barriers must be addressed.

A [preliminary report](#) on the causes of deaths in 2005 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found the average American life span to be a record high of 77.9 years. Life expectancy was 73.2 years for blacks, 78.3 years for whites.

While American life expectancy rates have increased, research from the CDC and other organizations consistently find substantial gaps in life expectancy and chronic disease rates among different racial, geographic and income groups. For example, a [2006 study by the Harvard School of Public Health](#) found what it called "an enormous gap" in life expectancies and health based on race, geography, income and a few other social factors.

Analyzing census and health statistics data from 1982 to 2001, the Harvard research team found that the best-off people, such as Asian women living in Bergen County, N.J., could be expected to live to an average of 91 — 33 years longer than the worst-off group, Native American men in some South Dakota counties.

From a global perspective, the Harvard team notes, 10 million Americans with the best health have achieved the highest levels of life expectancy in the world. At the same

time, the health of tens of millions of Americans is more comparable to people living in developing countries.

Meanwhile, an [August 2007 report by the U.S. Census Bureau](#) (78 pgs, 3 MB) found significant gaps in income and health insurance coverage based on race.

Between 2005 and 2006, the median income rose in white households, but remained the same for other racial groups, while the percentage of people without health insurance increased for Hispanics, decreased for Asians, and remained the same for whites and blacks.

The Harvard team speculates that providing health insurance to the uninsured could narrow the gap in life span, but note that barriers such as income, language and geography must also be addressed to reduce large inequities in health care and rates of chronic disease.

A [Harvard Gazette](#) story on the research concludes, "...policies aimed at reducing fundamental socioeconomic inequalities are...practically absent in the United States...Health disparities will have to be at least partly addressed through public health strategies."

Public health departments and other organizations share the responsibility of protecting and improving public health through preventive medicine, health education, control of communicable diseases, application of sanitary measures and monitoring environmental hazards.

### Related article

Kaiser Daily Health Policy Report, Sept. 13, 2007  
[Coverage & Access/Life Expectancy Reaches Record High of 77.9 Years](#)



## Colorado Springs non-profit offers alternative to payday loans

By Isabel Nicholson  
Public Policy Fellow  
The Bell Policy Center

[America's Family](#), a non-profit based in Colorado Springs, helps people stay out of predatory lending debt traps and get into mainstream banking.

Predatory lending is a growing cause of serious and long-term debt for thousands of Colorado's working poor. Other than banks and credit unions, it is difficult for low-income workers to find organizations that offer helpful financial alternatives or gateways into mainstream banking.

America's Family offers a comprehensive approach to helping low-income workers become self-sufficient. Programs offered include financial literacy and education classes, access to loans, membership with a local credit union and continuing education.

The America's Family

**America's Family:**

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### America's Family:

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web site provides success stories of their members. From a single mother who accessed resources and financial networks when her son became ill, to an employee receiving a promotion after 14 years of work, America's Family relates stories of helping workers be more financially secure and happier.

A [New York Times story](#) highlights Steve Bigari, America's Family president and founder.

Bigari's idea to start the non-profit came when he was trying to deal with a drop in profits at the McDonald's restaurant he managed. He had planned to cut his employees' paid vacation time, until one of the restaurant owners told him, "You can afford to give up your rizzing-razzing vacation, but they can't, so I hope you have a better plan than that."

After that, Bigari started to understand that to run a good business, he needed to take care of his employees.

## Gateway 8: Earning a Decent Living and Building Wealth

# Strategies multiply to help low-income families develop assets

By Lauren Bogard  
*Public Policy Fellow*  
The Bell Policy Center

Asset-building strategies designed to help low-income people have multiplied. Reports from three organizations — National Housing Initiative, The New America Foundation and The Brookings Institution — show that asset-building programs targeted to help low-income people are on the rise, but that experts differ on their recommendations for the most effective programs and strategies.

According to a article in the spring 2007 edition of Shelterforce magazine, [Asset-Building Comes of Age](#), published by the National Housing Initiative, many of the most popular asset-building strategies and resources are focused on helping low-income people. But more integration among the many wealth-building strategies that are available is needed to increase their effectiveness.

An issue brief published by the New America Foundation in April, [The Assets Agenda 2007](#), makes recommendations for achieving greater integration and comprehensive solutions within the asset-building field. The issue brief also summarizes the federal policy agenda to broaden savings and asset ownership opportunities for low-income Americans.

Four of the New America Foundation's recommendations are consistent with The Bell Policy Center's agenda:

- Expanding access to college as the first step to achieving security, acquiring assets and building wealth.
- Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to enable low-income people to save and receive tax relief.
- Supporting and investing in micro-enterprise development programs.
- Increasing scrutiny of the payday loan industry, which disproportionately targets low-income people.

Brookings Institution researcher Matt Fellowes advocated for a more multi-faceted approach to asset-building strategies in his 2006 paper, [From Poverty, Opportunity: Putting the Market to Work for Lower Income Families](#). He suggests that the effectiveness of traditional income-boosting federal programs, such as the EITC and minimum wage laws, is eroded in the face of high market prices.

Fellowes proposes asset-building strategies to lower high prices using three market-based solutions:

- Create incentives for businesses to operate in low-income neighborhoods, to reduce the higher costs and risks of doing business with the poor.
- Create and enforce regulations to curb unscrupulous business practices, such as charging unreasonably high prices for services in areas where access to similar services is not available (i.e. payday lending).
- Invest in tools that boost the transparency of the market for lower-income consumers so that they can make better-informed decisions.