

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a welder. The welder is wearing a black protective helmet with a clear viewing window and thick, light-colored leather gloves. They are working on a metal structure, and a large number of bright orange sparks are flying from the point of contact, creating a dynamic and industrial scene. The image is partially overlaid with geometric shapes: a large red triangle in the top left, a dark blue triangle in the bottom left, and a yellow triangle in the bottom right, which contains the main text.

# **Increase Quality Options in Education: Career and Technical Education**

**July 2025**



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## About the Authors



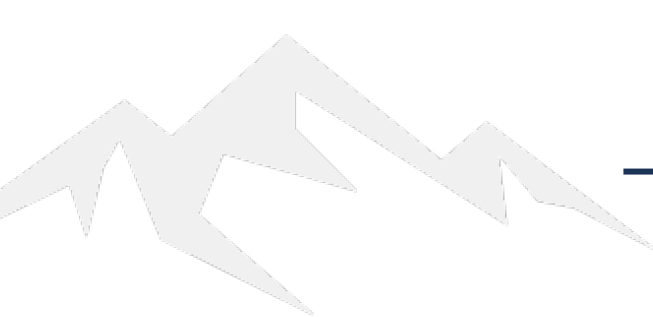
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## Introduction

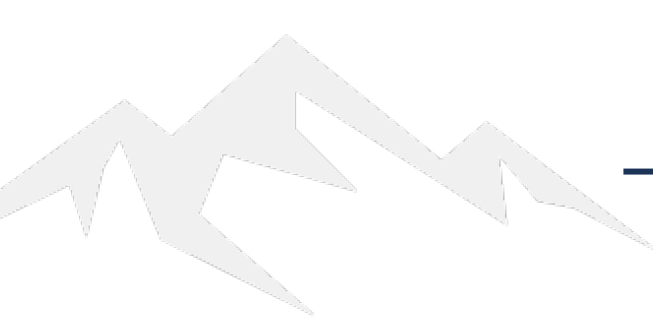
Looking ahead to the future, Colorado should continue to create innovative trade education options and provide high school credit for practical, hands-on experience in the trades. Continuing to expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) will open career paths and build a stronger workforce. It will also help avoid the crushing weight of student debt often encountered at most colleges and universities while providing the proper training for in-demand, well-paying careers.

Trade schools are programs and institutions that promote CTE and offer diplomas, certificates, or associate degrees rather than the typical theory-based college degrees offered at colleges and universities. The trades provide students with a focused education designed to prepare them for a specific trade or skill, without extraneous classes that are unrelated to their future job. Key features of CTE include work-based learning, career pathways, industry credentials, technical skills development, and articulation agreements. The trades prepare students for the workforce and enable them to move right from their training to an entry-level position, where they will find opportunities to advance.

Colorado should encourage young adults who no longer view college as the best or most attainable option for their future to see trade schools as a significant alternative and a key opportunity for success. With both the percentage of jobs in the trades and the cost of higher education steadily increasing, trade schools are essential. CTE courses in high school are also an essential pathway to give students the option to explore future opportunities before they apply to college or even to obtain a trade certificate upon graduation from high school.

According to a 2024 report by the Common Sense Institute, Colorado has a gap in the trades; our state is lacking the number of skilled technicians it needs to meet the demands of our economy, falling about 79,000 people short. (1)

According to CSI, “While Colorado public school districts and higher education institutions have placed growing emphasis on Career and Technical Education programs over the past decade-plus, data suggest that

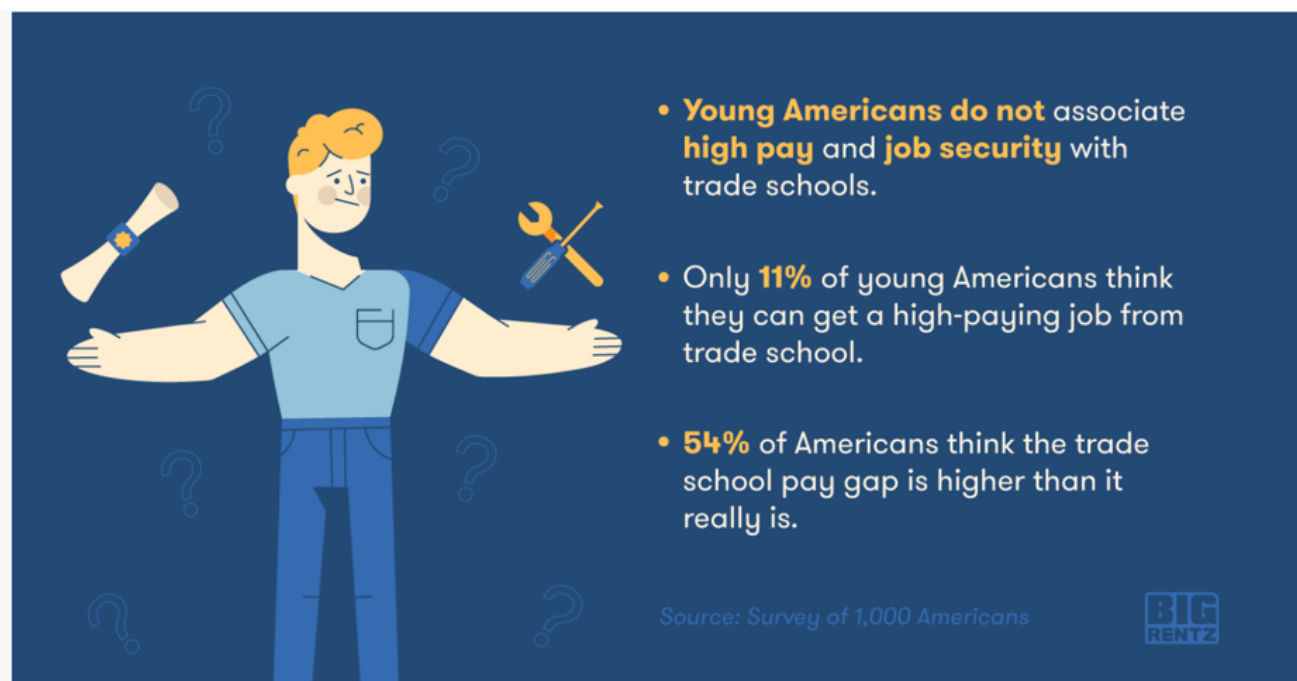


much remains to be done before our state's education system is truly aligned with the needs of the job market.” (1)

This report sheds light on the importance of continuing to promote trade schools and CTE education in high school and beyond as quality educational options for Colorado students.

## Overcoming Stigma Related to Trade Schools

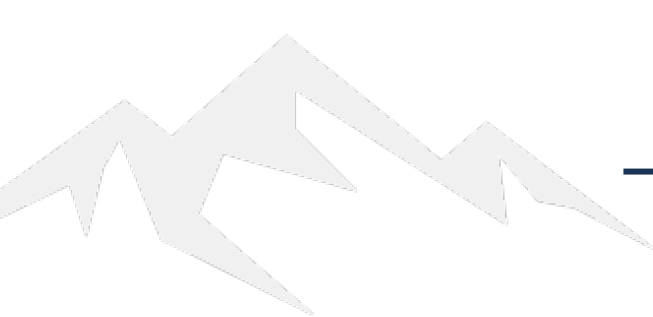
Not long ago, trade programs were perceived negatively by young adults. Young Americans, at least before the pandemic, did not associate high pay and job security with trade schools. Only 11% of respondents, from a 2019 national survey of 1,000 18 to 24-year-olds living in the United States, thought that trade schools could lead to high-paying jobs. (2)



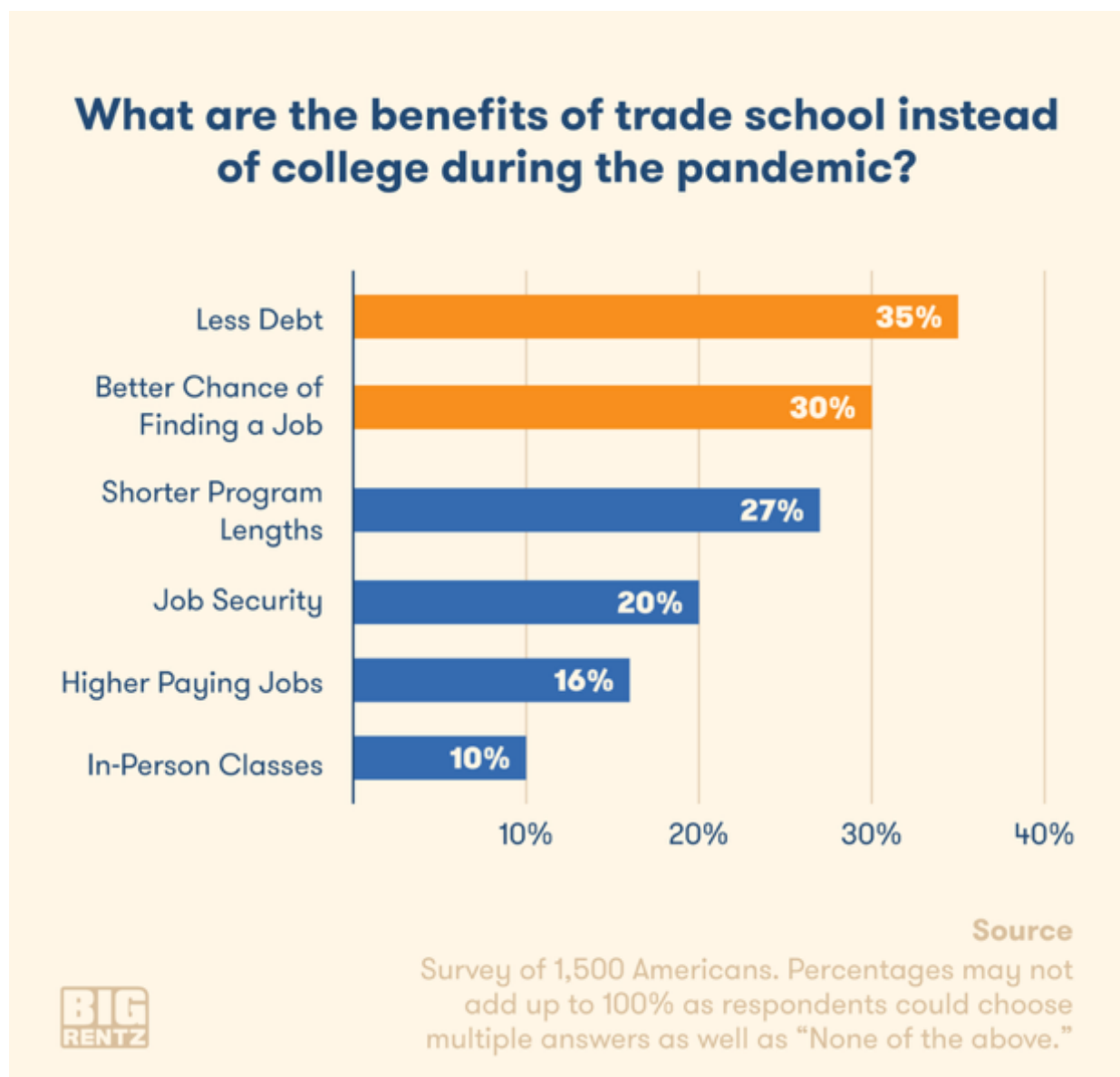
(2)

However, that trend now seems to be headed in the opposite direction.



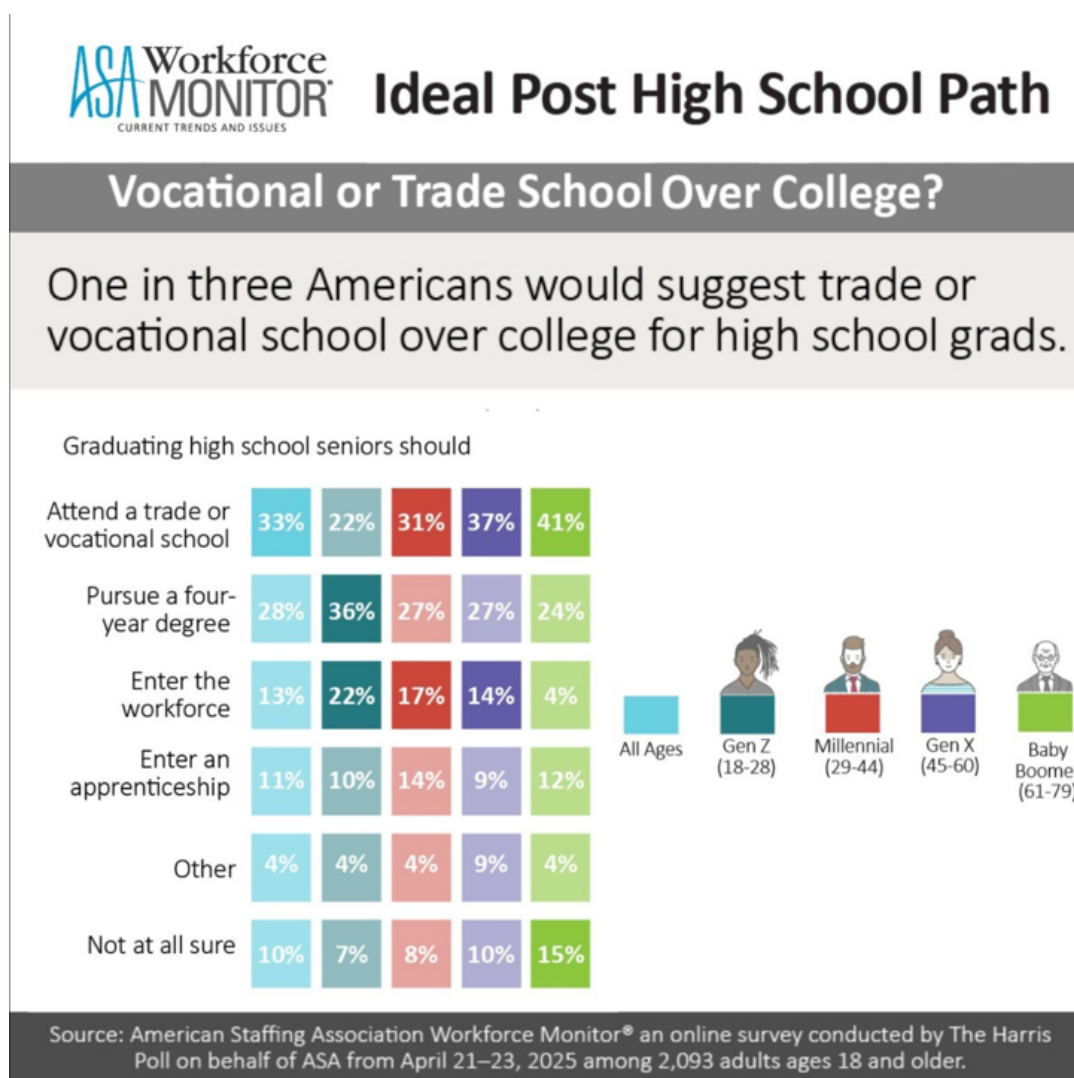


During the 2020 pandemic, a national survey found that one-third of respondents, a sample of 1,500 Americans, now preferred trade school to college. Additionally, respondents noted that less debt and better job prospects were the top benefits of choosing trade school over college. (3)



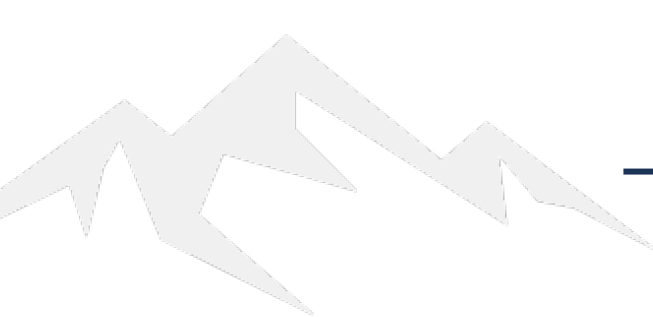
(3)

More recently, according to a 2025 survey conducted by the American Staffing Association, “a greater percentage of U.S. adults would recommend that graduating high school seniors attend a trade school than would recommend college.” (4)



(4)

Furthermore, “In the survey of more than 2,000 U.S. adults, opinions varied by generation. Vocational and trade school careers were most supported by baby boomers (41%), Generation X (37%), and millennials (31%), as compared to 22% of Generation Z. On the other hand, Gen Z was the only generation to



recommend a four-year degree (36%) over a vocational or trade school (22%). Members of Gen Z were most likely to say graduates should pursue a traditional degree, followed by entering the workforce or attending a trade school.” (5) What’s interesting about this survey is that the generations currently in the workforce see the opportunity and needs presented by the trades, while the youngest generation—which has been pushed towards traditional degree programs—still believe this is the best path forward.

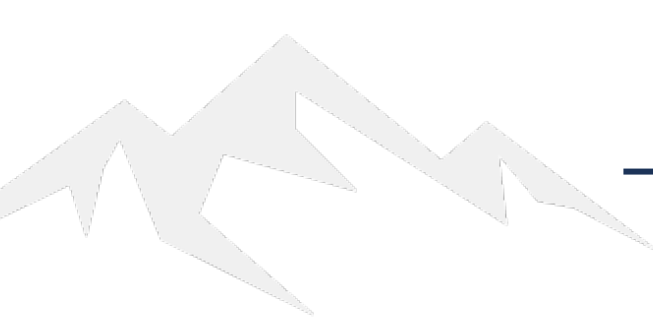
While trade schools used to suffer from the stigma of perceived low pay, were viewed as a second choice to college, and were associated with blue-collar and manual labor, trade schools and CTE education options are overcoming this point of view and are becoming an increasingly viable option for many young Americans.

According to a 2023 Magellan Strategies poll, Colorado voters are more skeptical of college and more supportive of career education. Coloradans mentioned the high cost of college and questioned its usefulness in helping graduates attain jobs. (6) Since voters are moving in this direction, it’s important that they pass on this support of CTE and the trades to high schoolers and the youngest generation.

According to Magellan Strategies CEO David Flaherty, “Some Republicans and conservatives brought up ideological concerns — such as colleges being hotbeds of ‘woke’ thinking — but across the political spectrum, respondents wondered about the value of higher education, sometimes citing their own experiences of high student debt and low-paying jobs. Others worried about increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence systems doing away with jobs.” (6)

The newfound skepticism placed on traditional college degrees is well-placed, with the astronomical amount of debt students are incurring—often with little payoff, even in the long run. Tuition and fees at colleges have skyrocketed, and students are entering careers that show little promise to make progress on their debt.

Now is the time to invest in supporting and creating more innovative trade educational options in Colorado’s public school system.



## Examples of Career and Technical Education in Colorado's K-12 Schools

According to the Colorado Department of Education, there are approximately 276,290 students (K-12) enrolled in CTE programs in 401 high schools and 74,776 students enrolled in 18 community college CTE programs. (7)

Here are just a few examples of district-wide trade school programs in Colorado's K-12 system.

The **Cherry Creek Innovation Campus**, which is a “stand-alone college and career preparedness facility accessible for high school students in the Cherry Creek School District,” offers courses in aerospace manufacturing, hospitality & tourism, information technology, and more, and is hoping to expand their offerings, which will include certificates for veterinary technician, welding, and even baking & pastry. (8)

**Warren Tech** is the center for trade education for Jeffco Public Schools, where students earn over 13,000 free college credits and 1,600 industry certifications per year. Warren Tech offers CTE programs in aircraft maintenance technology, aviation technology, forensic science, and cosmetology. (9)

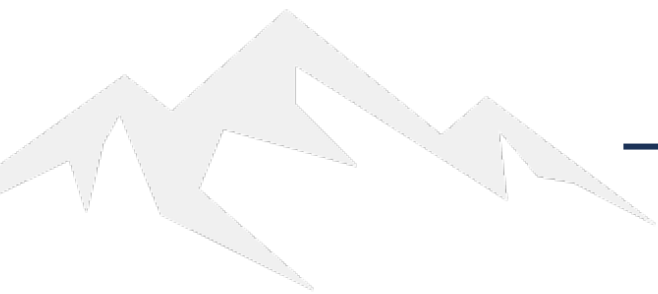
**Colorado Springs School District 11** offers over 63 programs for both high school and middle school, providing students with the opportunity to gain college credit as well as industry-specific certifications. (10)

Colorado's rural school districts and high schools also participate in offering trade education to their students.

Peyton School District (23-JT) also has its own in-house **Career Technical Education Facility**, which opened in the fall of 2015. Peyton School District has excelled in innovative trade education, offering a wood manufacturing program that has drawn praise from across the world. (11)(12)

For instance, the **Montezuma-Cortez School District** offers CTE at the district's high school in agriculture, art, entrepreneurship, and catering and theater technology. (13)





Durango School District also boasts its own CTE center: the **Impact Career Innovation Center**, which hopes to provide students with “immersive experiences that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application,” serving as a “center for learning, connection, and professional development.” The Impact Center hopes to host and help students engage in experiences such as a daily news show, 3-D prototyping, and internship portfolio presentations. (14)

A unique development that is currently securing funding is a brand-new, 87-acre trades education park in northeast Colorado Springs led by leaders of the **Pikes Peak Board of Educational Services (BOCES)**. According to Executive Director Pat Bershinsky, the park hopes to serve all rural El Paso County as well as the school districts in and around Colorado Springs and plans to host 500 students twice a day and adult education in the evening. (15)

This campus, centered on career and technical education, will help students in the region “explore what it takes to pursue well-paying careers in a range of fields that don’t require a college degree: construction trades, firefighting, veterinary training, food services and culinary arts, cybersecurity, horticulture science, meat sciences, and medical services.” (16)

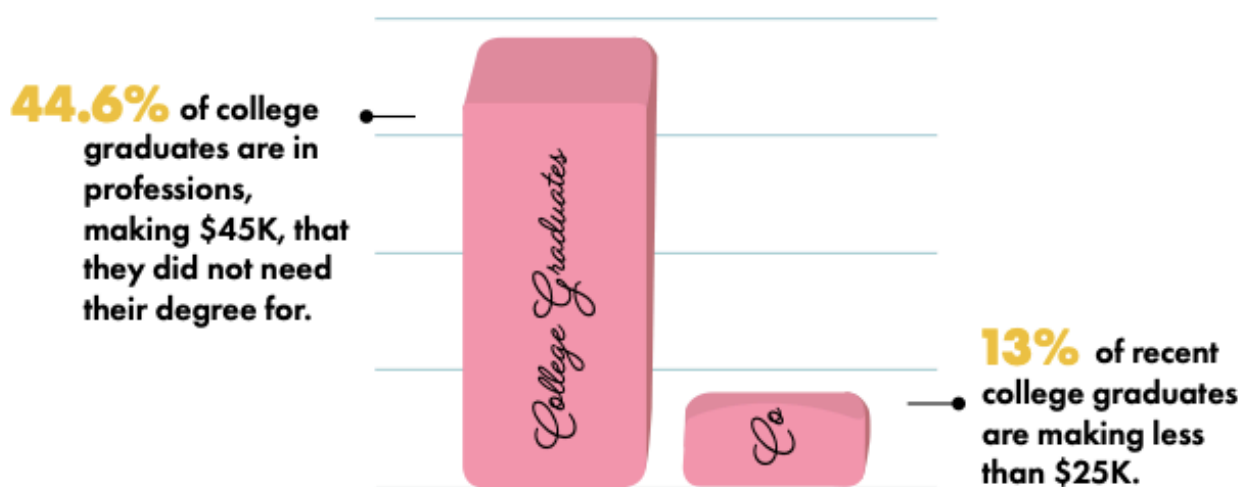
## **Post Secondary Education: Trade Schools as a Viable Option**

In today’s modern world, many are reconsidering the premise that a college degree is necessary for a job.

According to a report by the Republican Study Committee (RSC) American Worker Task Force, many “college graduates end up in positions they would have been qualified for without their degree.” In fact, “approximately two-thirds of graduates with a bachelor’s degree regret some aspect of their education, and the most common regret is their student loan debt.” (17)

Student loan debt, this study finds, has served as an impediment to reaching other milestones, as many young people believe they cannot start a family or buy a home until their debt is resolved. (17)

## UNDEREMPLOYED GRADUATES



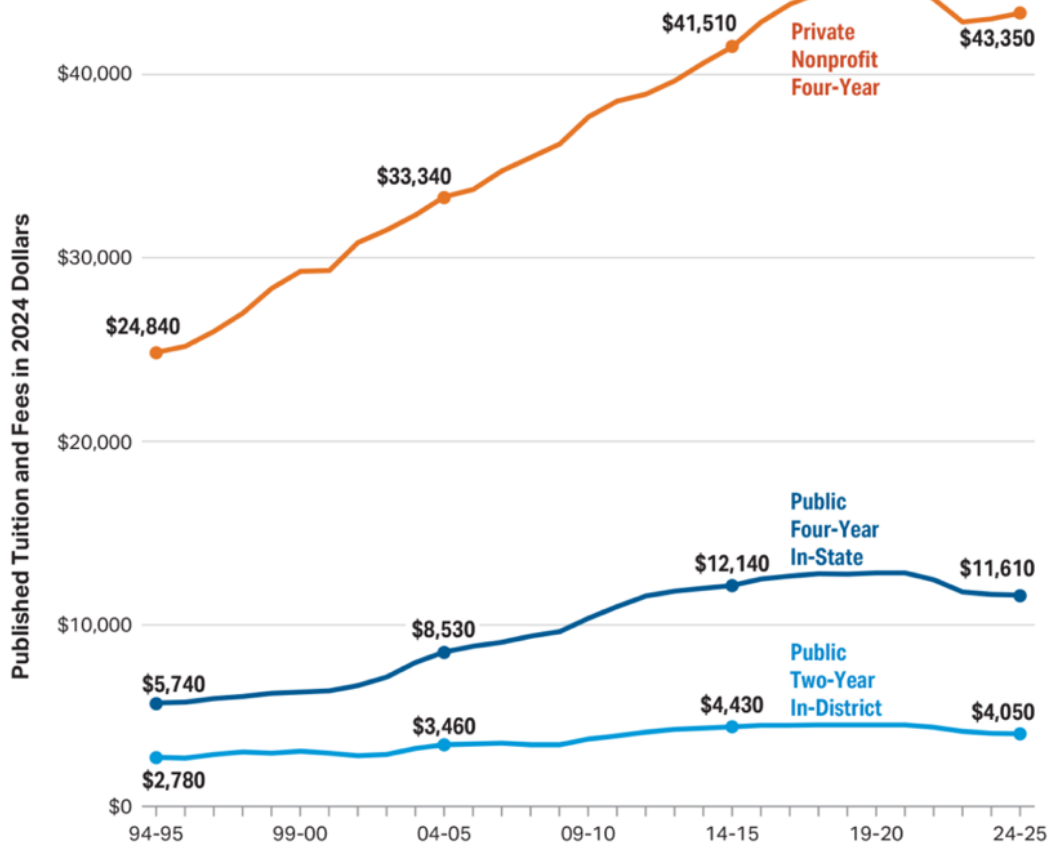
SOURCE: "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates," Federal Reserve Bank of New York, July 17, 2020, <https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market/index.html>.

(17)

Whether or not those conclusions are accurate, the debt is causing young people to believe that their future goals are unreachable.

A 2019 report from The Heritage Foundation found even further evidence of the consequences of student loan debt resulting from higher education: "Interestingly, graduate programs—which are generally perceived to be good investments—are some of the worst offenders. Students who graduate from the University of Miami Law School, for example, hold a median total debt of \$150,896, but earn a starting salary of just \$52,100." (18)

"Even more problematic, students who obtain a master's degree from New York University in film/video and photographic arts graduate with a median total debt of a whopping \$168,568, but earn a median starting salary of \$29,600." (18)



(19)

The graph above, from College Board, reveals how expensive private, nonprofit four-year colleges have become for their customers. (19)

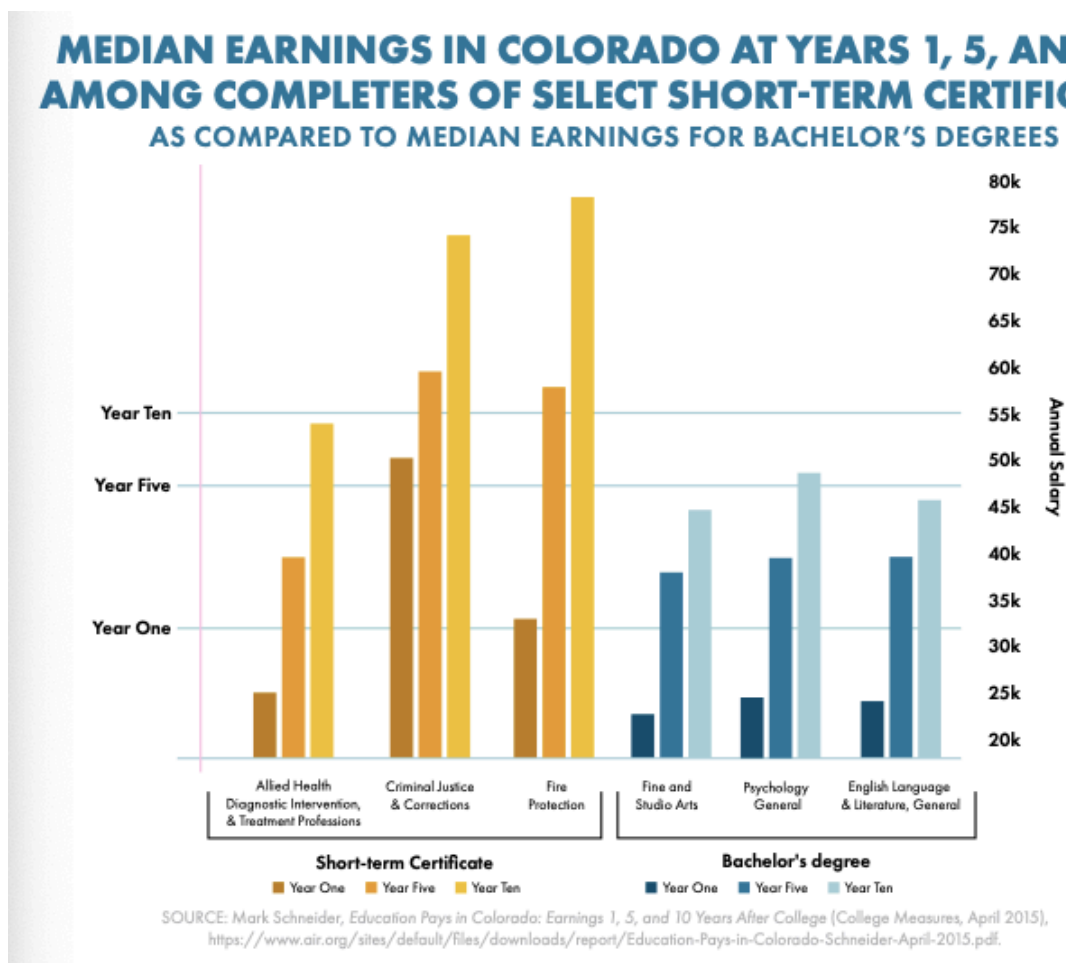
These average costs only showcase tuition and fees. When housing, food, books, supplies, transportation, and other expenses are included, the average total cost comes out to \$62,990 per year. (19)

The RSC report, with these factors considered, finds that “From the moment that students begin their high school studies, they should not be deprived of meaningful exposure to education paths that are not contingent upon a traditional college degree.” (17)

“Our students must understand that career and technical education (CTE) and apprenticeship options are a viable way for students to achieve quality, high-paying jobs without incurring massive amounts of debt.” (17)

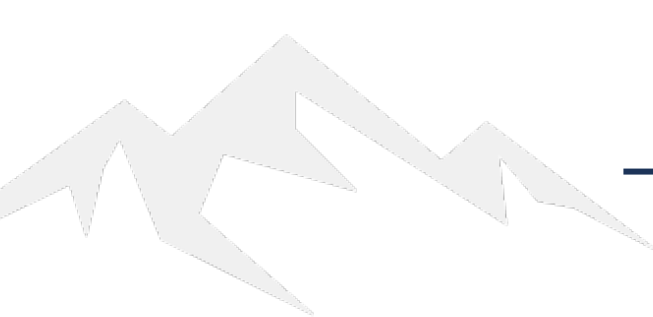
Colorado needs to encourage, from the outset of a child's education, that career and technical education is just as viable and respectable as a college degree.

A 2015 study by the American Institutes for Research found that students in Colorado who received a short-term certificate in specific trades earned more than certain graduates with a bachelor's degree in one year, five years, and ten years after graduation. (17)



(19)





The study also found that bachelor's degree holders in certain programs—Fine and Studio Arts, Psychology, and English Language and Literature—were earning less than all the median earners for all short-term certifications by the tenth year. (17)

So, what is Colorado doing right with trade schools?

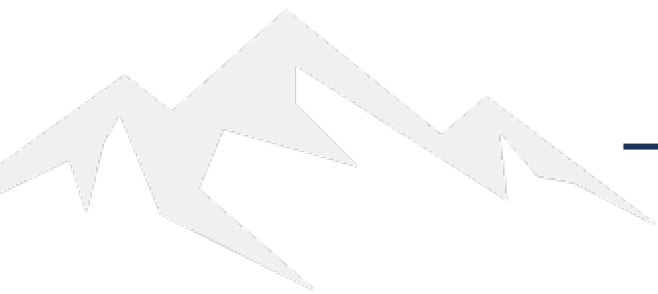
Colorado has excelled at providing opportunities for extensive trade school programs at the postsecondary education level through the state's community college system. According to its website, The Colorado Community College System (CCCS) is "Colorado's largest higher education and workforce training provider. With 13 colleges and more than 35 locations, we serve over 115,000 students each year. We offer Concurrent Enrollment, Career & Technical Education (CTE), certificate programs, transfer programs, associate and bachelor's degrees, one master's degree program, and customized employer training." (20)

Included in the 13 colleges that offer extensive skilled trades programs are the Pikes Peak State College (Colorado Springs), Morgan Community College (Northeast Colorado), Red Rocks Community College (Denver Metro), and Pueblo Community College (Southern Colorado).

In recent years, Colorado also saw the creation of the Western States College of Construction (WSCC), which officially launched in 2020 and was "accredited as the first professional institution of its kind in the nation by the American Council for Construction Education (ACCE) in late 2021." (21) WSCC boasts eight campuses across Colorado and Wyoming, and offers students opportunities to learn on the job, with the average graduate making \$104,874 per year (salary and benefits). (22)

While WSCC offers specific trade education in the construction industry, technical colleges are not new to Colorado.

Home to Colorado is the Emily Griffith Technical College (Denver), the Technical College of the Rockies (Western Colorado), the Lincoln College of Technology (Denver), the Colorado School of Trades (Lakewood), Pickens Technical College (Aurora), and more.



While Colorado provides the opportunity to learn a specific trade at the community college level as well as through accredited trade-focused institutions like the WSCC, the state can take even further steps to promote trade education.

## **Promoting Trade Education: Nonprofits, Organizations, and Local Government**

While promoting the trades in K-12 schools and higher education will prove to be fruitful, organizations, especially nonprofits, are also taking up the task to educate the next generation in the trades.

### **Faith-Based Nonprofits**

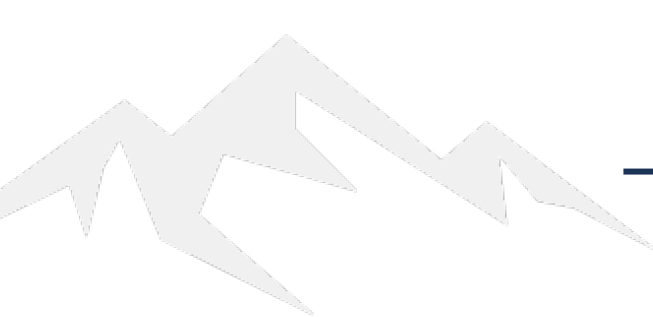
Faith-based nonprofit organizations, coupling extensive trade education with faith, are active in low-income Colorado communities where many students would not have the opportunity or means to attend a traditional college.

For instance, The Master's Apprentice offers a "pre-apprenticeship program designed to help motivated individuals from low-income backgrounds start rewarding careers in trades such as Carpentry, HVAC, Electrical, Plumbing, Pipefitting, Renewable Energy and more." (23)

The Master's Apprentice is a six-week program where students "explore all the major construction trades and receive hands-on training, industry certifications, professional mentoring, and career coaching to get real opportunities with quality companies to start the careers they want." (23)

CrossPurpose is a similar faith-based organization that wants to abolish poverty through career and community development. The nonprofit offers training and certification in the trades, allied healthcare, culinary, transportation, clerical & administrative, and sales. (24)

According to their website, CrossPurpose hopes that "[b]y the end of 2025, our dream is to see a total of 5,000 Denver neighbors break out of poverty and achieve their dreams." (24)



## Nonprofits for the Underserved

Colorado is also home to nonprofits that bring trade education to specific, underserved communities. Take “TACT,” for example.

Teaching the Autism Community (TACT) is a “Colorado Program Approved Service Agency (PASA) and partners with Colorado Community Centered Boards to serve participants” on the Autism spectrum. (TACT) TACT accepts private pay and works with families that don’t receive state or federal funding.

TACT’s program “empowers individuals with Autism through education and employment in the skilled trades.” They offer multiple tracks, including Career Track, Workshops, Job Coaching, and Specialized Day Schools, all with specific trade education in the culinary arts, auto mechanics, carpentry, technology, electrical, and welding. (25)

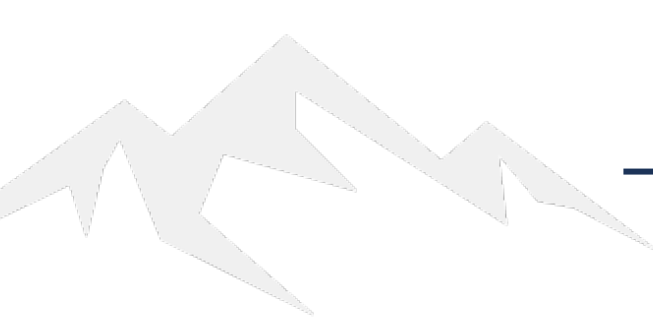
Neurodiversity Works is another example of a nonprofit for the underserved. According to their website, the mission of Neurodiversity Works is to “empower individuals with diverse neuro-variations, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, to achieve meaningful careers and sustainable wages in the rapidly expanding drone and analytics industry.” (26)

According to their website, 40% of neurodivergent adults are unemployed, and even with a college education, “85% of autistic college graduates find themselves without employment.” () Neurodiversity Works believes there is an opportunity in the drone industry to “harness the capabilities of neurodivergent individuals,” and in doing so, integrate these individuals into the workforce. (26)

By increasing quality options in education, especially in certain trades and workforce readiness, Colorado’s educational system can also support Coloradans with ADHD, dyslexia, and autism, just as the nonprofits TACT and Neurodiversity Works have done.

## Skill-Specific Organizations

Another area where nonprofits have taken on the training mantle is in the construction trade. “[A]ccording to a survey conducted by the Association of



General Contractors, 80 percent of contractors are having difficulty finding qualified craft workers.” (17)

Organizations like Construction Education Foundation, Careers in Construction Colorado, and BuildStrong Academy of Colorado exist to solve this problem.

Construction Education Foundation (CEF) was “founded in 1999 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to construction industry workforce development in Colorado. Funded by industry partners, government grants, private and public support, CEF creates workforce development opportunities through education, training programs, and scholarships. CEF’s efforts lead to sustainable pathways toward great careers in construction for both high school students and adults.” (27)

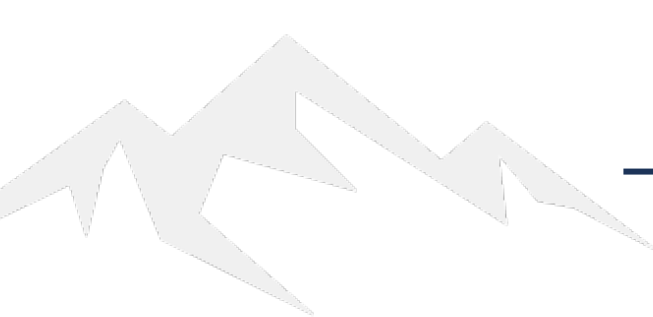
Careers in Construction Colorado (CICC) is a “501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded by leaders in the construction industry who recognized the need to cultivate the next generation of skilled professionals” and “is dedicated to making construction-based vocational education accessible to high school students across Colorado.” (28)

BuildStrong Academy is narrowly focused on the shortage of skilled labor, saying that, “At a time of record industry expansion, construction employers struggle to find enough qualified workers to meet market needs. BuildStrong Academy of Colorado (formerly Colorado Homebuilding Academy) was founded specifically to address this labor issue. Through a series of innovative, industry-driven training programs for youth and adults, the Academy is building a highly-skilled labor force that can meet the demands of Colorado’s expanding construction industry.” (29)

## **Local Governments**

County governments have also stepped into promoting the trades by either highlighting available CTE programs in their county—which include many programs from nonprofit organizations—or by providing their own youth programs that explicitly highlight the trades.





For example, Adams County created “The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WOIA) Youth Program,” which offers “assistance to support youth to obtain their high school diploma or equivalency, attend postsecondary training (2 years or less), access work-based learning opportunities, and encourage youth through their education by offering case management and supportive services.” (30) This program is geared to low-income youth, ages 16-24, who face challenges to employment. While the WOIA Youth Program has a broader focus than CTE education alone, apprenticeship opportunities are a key component of the program and will lead to more students finding successful careers without a college education.

Denver County showcases a list of approved pre-apprenticeship programs on its website, including the BuildStrong Academy of Colorado, the Construction Education Foundation of Colorado, the Second Chance Center, The Master’s Apprentice, and many more. Making a list of programs easily accessible for residents is a service every county should provide. (31)

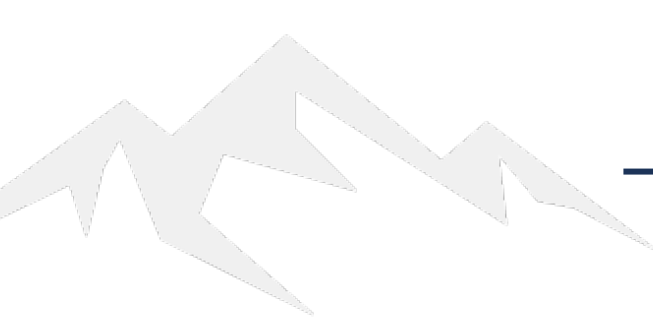
## Conclusion

The 2024 Colorado Talent Pipeline Report finds that “Colorado employers are concerned about finding qualified employees now and in the future,” and that “Over the next ten years, the state expects 400,000 people to retire.” (32)(33)

The solution to this concern is a continued, growing emphasis on integrating the trades into higher education as well as the K-12 educational system. Colorado should also welcome the inclusion of nonprofit organizations and local governments in promoting the trades.

According to the Colorado Department of Education’s Strategic Plan, one of CDE’s Wildly Important Goals (WIGs) is that beginning with the “anticipated year of graduation of 2029, 100% of graduates will have achieved at least one of the following: Earned a quality, in-demand non-degree credential; Earned 12 college credits that count toward a postsecondary credential; Participated in one high-quality work-based learning (WBL) opportunity.” (34)

This is the right approach.



On June 26, 2020, President Trump signed an executive order that required federal job postings to “only require a degree when it is a legal necessity and only consider a degree advantageous when the education received directly relates to the job task.” (1)

As the country continues to move away from college degrees as the primary qualifier for a career, Colorado should move forward with making trade schools an increasingly viable option for all Coloradans. Innovative policies promoting trade education as real education are necessary to lower the cost of higher education, to provide real options for those students not continuing to college, and to meet the needs of the U.S. workforce.

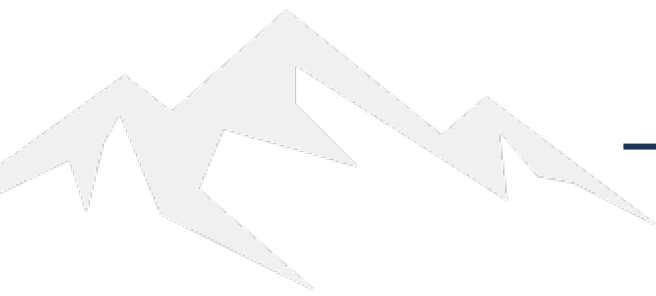
Innovations in trade education can come from the state, local governments (like school boards), nonprofits, and the private sector. Together, we can set our students up for success by providing them with innovative career and trade options that help meet the demands of Colorado’s economy.



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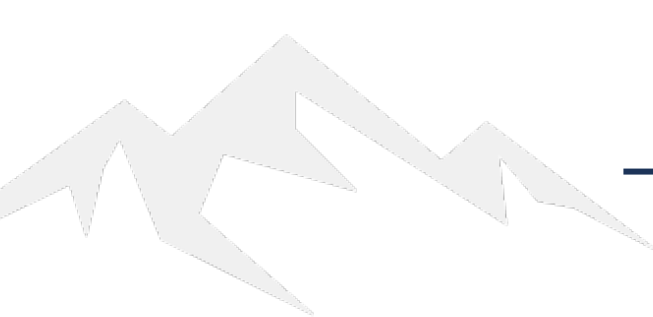
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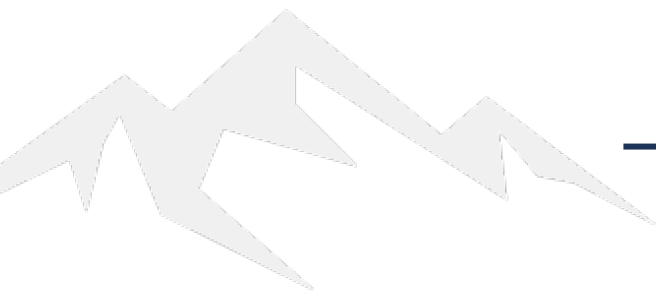


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