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Rethinking Graduation Readiness: Lessons from Three Colorado Districts

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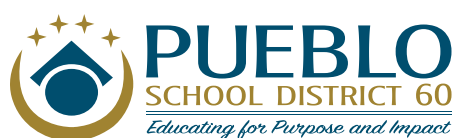
About CADRE

The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) is housed in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. The mission of CADRE is to produce generalizable knowledge that improves the ability to assess student learning and to evaluate programs and methods that may have an effect on this learning. Projects undertaken by CADRE staff represent a collaboration with the ongoing activities in the School of Education, the University, and the broader national and international community of scholars and stakeholders involved in educational assessment and evaluation.

Introduction

Across Colorado, many school districts are redefining what it means to prepare students for postsecondary success. As the state shifts toward emphasizing real-world application, student agency, and authentic demonstrations of learning, several districts are exploring how to translate these priorities into purposeful assessments inclusive of capstone projects and performance-based assessments.

While these terms (i.e., capstone and performance assessments) may vary in definition across sites, they converge around a common goal for evaluating graduation readiness: ensuring that students graduate not only with credits, but with confidence and the skills to navigate their future.



CANON CITY SCHOOLS
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This document showcases the efforts of three Colorado districts: Pueblo School District 60 (Pueblo 60), Salida School District (Salida), and the Cañon City School District (Cañon City). Each offers insights into the design, implementation, and sustainability of these student-centered approaches. Information from each district profile was gleaned from individual interviews held with district leaders steering the work. We interviewed the Superintendents of Salida and Cañon City, and interviewed the Director of Magnet Schools charged with leading the Project-based Learning work in Pueblo 60. The districts reflect diverse starting points and strategies, but share a commitment to equity, authenticity, and instructional coherence.

These district snapshots illustrate that there is no single path to effective implementation. Instead, they highlight a range of approaches grounded in local vision, relationship-centered leadership, and the deliberate alignment of systems, schedules, and educator

development. As policymakers consider how best to support and scale these efforts, the experiences of these three districts point to practical considerations and strategic investments that matter; especially those related to capacity building, community engagement, instructional time, and leadership.

What follows is a set of district narratives focused on the current state of graduation readiness work that is still evolving. Each offers valuable insights and a firm commitment to preparing students not merely for graduation, but for a future they can articulate and claim as their own. We begin this overview of innovative district approaches to evaluating graduation readiness with Pueblo 60 since this PBL approach was initiated recently in 2024-25. We then share Salida's journey of building this approach with the community and teachers, and end with Cañon City's story of moving into a more mature phase of establishing system- and community-wide support for their capstone and graduation profile work. We conclude with cross-district takeaways shared across sites for other school districts seeking inspiration and direction in using performance assessments and/or a capstone as part of a broader body of evidence for determining graduation readiness.



PBL and Performance Assessment in Pueblo 60: Building Structures, Shifting Practice, and Sustaining Vision

Centennial High School in Pueblo 60 was selected as a central site for the district's performance assessment and project-based learning (PBL) initiative not necessarily because of existing instructional excellence, but due to its location, demographic reach, and strategic potential. In the interview, the district leader explained, the decision was tied to a federal desegregation grant (MSAP) that required demonstrating evidence of student tracking and mobility. Centennial sits on Highway 50, serving as a midpoint between two school districts. The geographic location of this school made it ideal for potentially attracting back students who had choiced out of Pueblo 60 to attend schools in neighboring districts. "There was this sense of flight," the district leader explained, "we were losing a lot of students and this was an opportunity to bring our students back." Centennial was not only seen as a school in need of renewed investment, but it was also a symbolic and logistical opportunity to bring families back into District 60.

» Linking Project-Based Learning and Performance Assessment

The district's approach to performance assessment is inseparable from its investment in PBL. Rather than being viewed as separate or sequential efforts, performance assessments are baked into the design and implementation of high-quality projects. As noted by the district leader overseeing this initiative, "Project-based learning really cannot take place without a performance assessment attached to it."

The district's strategy is influenced by career and technical education (CTE), where performance assessments come naturally. In fields like construction, healthcare, or culinary arts, students demonstrate their knowledge by doing - building, measuring, presenting, solving. "It's the combination of skills, understanding, and content knowledge," he noted. "If I'm a construction

worker, I can show that I know how to build. Through that, I demonstrate I understand how to measure, how to cut, how to follow safety protocols.”

The vision now is to extend this kind of authentic assessment into all academic areas. Doing so requires not just new tasks, but a fundamental shift in how units are designed, and instruction is delivered. The district is leaning heavily on the backward design model, using tools from PBLWorks. Teachers are being guided to identify critical standards, such as those in reading, writing, and communicating, to build across grade levels and hold lasting relevance.



Current State

At the time of the interview, the district leader acknowledged that Centennial is still in the early stages of this work. Only a handful of teachers or “maybe less,” he estimated, “are currently implementing performance assessments in a way that aligns with the district’s goals.” Much of the instruction observed at the school reflects what PBLWorks would describe as “dessert-style projects,” where a standard unit concludes with a project tacked on at the end (often a poster, presentation, or culminating task) that does not shape the learning arc from the outset. “I’d say eighty-five percent of what I’ve seen is still in that realm,” he admitted.

However, formal training just launched at the start of the 2025-26 school year with educators since this initiative is taking an unusual approach to carefully cultivating and “growing” a complex reform. The work with educators started with the summer workshops that marked the beginning of a multi-year vision for professional development to sustain the work. The district leader shared that the summer professional development will facilitate deeper understanding of backward design; not just in terms of unit planning, but in the ways that rubrics, formative assessment, and instructional routines can support more authentic learning. He envisions that teachers will come away from the learning this year, “learning to teach with the end in mind”, using rubrics not only to evaluate student work, but to guide feedback, peer critique, and planning decisions throughout the unit.



Slow to Go Fast:

A Thoughtful, Relationship-First Implementation Strategy

The approach Pueblo 60 is taking with Centennial is notable and distinct for how reforms are typically taken up by school districts due to a slow and deliberate pacing. Rather than launching into implementation with urgency, district leaders collaborated with school leaders in a year-long process to focus first on visioning, buy-in, and empathy building. “We had to capture their hearts before we could capture their minds,” the district leader reflected.

This began by asking school and district leaders a deceptively simple question: What do you want for your students? Not just in relation to PBL, but overall. From there, the district leader facilitated experiences that allowed leaders to see and feel what strong PBL can look like from a student’s perspective by walking in their shoes before being asked to lead teachers to engage in instructional shifts. ‘Walking in their shoes’ involved shadowing students to experience a full school day from their perspective and participating in a project as if they were a student. This step was critical in building empathy, momentum, and ownership. When they had the opportunity to experience PBL and to engage in multiple learning walks in different buildings, “I wasn’t saying, ‘this is what we’re doing,’” he explained. “They were telling me where they wanted to go. I just said, ‘okay, let’s make it happen.’” As trust deepened, the rollout expanded. Teachers were given a preliminary opportunity to engage in a PBL project, and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. In Centennial and two other schools involved with this initiative, 100% of all teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were excited to engage in implementation in the following year.



Designing for Sustainability: Structures, Culture, and People

As part of the “go slow to go fast” approach, the district is investing not only in training but in infrastructure and culture-building. This includes:

- District and school leaders co-developing shared language and expectations around PBL
- Vision-setting exercises at both district and school levels
- Explicit discussions about how to talk about students, build relationships, and create a supportive culture for deeper learning

A dedicated on-site coach will eventually support teachers at Centennial full-time, helping plan, co-teach, observe, and troubleshoot. Walkthrough tools will be used to help shape meaningful feedback loops and guide professional learning. The goal is to establish up to three high-quality PD touchpoints per year, each responsive to what’s being observed in classrooms and heard in coaching conversations. Crucially, collaboration time is being protected and reframed. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) will still examine data, but will now also incorporate time for examining rubrics, analyzing student work, and iterating on project design. “PBL is plan-heavy,” the district leader acknowledged. “There’s a lot of tweaking involved, and providing that time and space is key.”



Policies, Autonomy, and the Role of District Leadership

The district leader was frank about the need for district-level policy shifts to sustain the work. Many teachers, especially in core areas, feel bound by rigid scopes and sequences or curriculum pacing guides that leave little room for creative planning. This is a dynamic the district leader has also observed in prior work engaging with districts across the country, and he is proactively raising this issue with district leaders in Pueblo 60. “I’m going to have to advocate hard,” he noted, “for teachers to have the creative freedom to do authentic products aligned to standards.” Without that freedom, even well-trained teachers will revert to default practices. He noted that this tension is especially pronounced in English Language Arts (ELA) and math, where longstanding traditions (novel studies, rigid pacing) can “feel immovable.” Yet he remains hopeful: some ELA teachers are already excited about the possibilities, and science and social studies teachers are, in his words, “jumping on board.”



Community Engagement and Family Mindset Shift

A key component of sustainability lies in how the community understands and values the work. For that, the district leader is implementing strategies to shift mindsets, beginning with parents. One tactic he has used successfully is to survey parents about their work and invite them to participate as expert reviewers, guest speakers, or project mentors. According to the district leader, this reframes school-community relationships and validates all kinds of expertise, not just academic-based knowledge. He shared, “If we can help our parents see, ‘Oh, I’m being honored for what I know as a mechanic,’” he said, “then that shifts the whole dynamic.” A name change process signaling a new direction for the school is underway at Centennial and also serves as an opportunity to educate families about the vision and values of the school under this grant, using a monthly input process as a soft entry point for future deeper engagement.



Advice to Other Districts: Vision, Capacity, and the Right People

When asked what advice he would offer to other districts trying to do this work, the district leader did not hesitate to share: start with a clear and shared vision, and build deep capacity. “If you don’t have the people who believe what you believe,” he said, “the second you leave, it’s gone.” He emphasized the need to build culture alongside structures, attending to grading practices, beliefs about students, and time for planning and reflection. He was candid in his own learning journey, noting that as a former principal, he underestimated what would be required to ensure the work endured beyond his departure.

Moreover, he encouraged districts to think of PBL as a continuum, not a checklist. There will always be variation in implementation, especially with staff turnover, and sustainable systems must allow for ongoing coaching, observation, and recalibration. He urged leaders to ask: “What is the next appropriate intervention that we need to bring in to support this growth?”



Staying Focused: Protecting the Work from Initiative Fatigue

One of the greatest risks for any ambitious instructional redesign is that this becomes de-prioritized over time due to competing with other initiatives. The district leader’s strategy for preventing this de-prioritization is simple but powerful: make the learning visible. Looking to the future, he is planning on regular showcases and exhibitions to establish more opportunities for students to share their projects, reflect on their learning, and demonstrate ownership. He shared that not only does this engage families and community members, but it also reinforces for teachers and students that the work is meaningful. He shared, “When students own their work, you don’t need to prepare them for an exhibition,” he said, “They can talk about what they learned, what they would do differently, and why it matters.”





Salida: Embedding Purpose into the Graduation Journey



Cultivating a Local Vision for High School

Salida's approach to performance assessments and capstone work is not an offshoot of compliance with external mandates. Rather, it is the outgrowth of a deliberate and locally initiated philosophical shift. The district's journey launched with a school board asking deeper questions about what kind of experience students should have in high school and whether accumulating credits as fast as possible constituted meaningful education. "The Board of Education really sat down and said, 'How can we have a more robust high school experience?'" the superintendent recalled. "Part of that was looking at kids just racing through high school... and we were gaining a really early graduation kind of culture."

Dissatisfied with a system that rewarded speed over substance, the board developed and published a comprehensive vision for high school that placed student purpose and post-secondary and career readiness at the center. This was not simply a rhetorical shift; it was accompanied by policy changes that restructured graduation requirements, introduced courses focused on civil dialogue and financial literacy, and embedded expectations for internships and career pathway development into the high school experience.



The Evolution of Performance Assessments and Capstone Work

The shift toward performance-based assessments and capstone began within the advisory system at Salida's traditional 9–12 high school. Every student participates in advisory, and the culmination of that experience is a senior-year capstone presentation. Students are expected to articulate their learning across multiple subject areas, including English and math, through an oral presentation to their advisory group and in a public community-facing event that takes place in the school gymnasium.

The capstone process is not limited to the traditional high school. The district's alternative high school offers what the superintendent described as "an even more robust system," further affirming Salida's belief in the value of reflective, student-centered assessment. What distinguishes Salida's capstone initiative is not just the format, but its placement within a larger systemic framework that includes career pathways, real-world internships, and a redefinition of post-secondary readiness that is both individualized and grounded in the community.



Comprehensive Redesign: Career Pathways, Internships, and Policy Reform

The superintendent described a sweeping series of reforms, each of which was carefully crafted to align with the district's evolving vision of student success. Among the most notable changes:

- Graduation requirements were altered to include mandatory coursework in economics and personal finance.
- A new senior seminar course was introduced to teach civil discourse and engage students in difficult societal conversations.
- The board adopted a requirement for career pathway development, compelling students and staff alike to think more explicitly about the link between academic work and future aspirations.

Most notably, the district began requiring real internships for students, not just opportunities "to shadow" at work. Nearly two-thirds of Salida seniors now participate in internships through a partnership with Colorado Mountain College (CMC), with placements ranging from engineering and health care to trades and real estate. But these changes were not without controversy. The superintendent acknowledged, "We've turned over more than half of our staff at the high school...it's been warfare almost... newspaper picket lines... the ugly side of humanity as teachers were being asked to work differently than before."

To help mitigate resistance, district leaders paired policy shifts with supports that made the reforms more feasible. The board's adjustments to graduation requirements increased flexibility in course-taking, enabling teachers to integrate new pathways without adding burdens. Strong backing from local businesses and community organizations generated visible momentum and validated the work, while the superintendent shielded schools from competing state mandates, preserving coherence and keeping the focus on a single vision. Over time, these strategies, combined with steady leadership, allowed the reforms to take hold despite initial turmoil.

Yet the disruption has yielded powerful results. Not only has the rate of concurrent enrollment soared with over fifty percent of students now participating, but there has been a 20-point increase in post-secondary matriculation. Remarkably, that growth was equally reflected in special education students, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and male students, who previously lagged behind female students in matriculating into post-secondary institutions.



Professional Learning: Acknowledging Gaps and Making Use of What's Possible

Professional development remains a challenge in Salida, largely due to the constraints of one of the shortest teacher calendars in the country (156 contract days), with just a handful of days available for professional learning. "That's our weak spot in our district," the superintendent admitted candidly. "If you compete against that tyranny of the urgent with teachers trying to get ready for the first day of school, you're not getting good PD."

Despite this, Salida has leveraged creative strategies to support learning among educators. School leaders from both Salida and CMC now co-plan the year together. Monthly “First Tuesday” sessions bring career speakers into advisory classes to introduce students, and by extension, their teachers, to different professional pathways. Teachers are involved in preparing and co-facilitating these sessions, giving them indirect but meaningful exposure to student-centered, career-connected pedagogy. The district has also collaborated with outside organizations like the state’s Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) office and with peer districts such as Cañon City. The latter partnership culminated in a work-based learning conference for educators across the region.



A Unique Relationship with the Community

One of the defining elements in Salida’s story is its remarkable integration of community members, businesses, and parents into the life of the school system. The superintendent, who has served in the district for nearly 15 years, emphasized that these relationships have deep roots, cultivated through dialogue, shared projects, and a mutual commitment to the community’s wellbeing.

In one early example, a community conversation about housing led to the creation of a trades program in which the students helped build teacher housing units. This represents an initiative that continues today. The Superintendent shared, “That was a success story, and it was hard...but that nurtured relationships and extended lots of people in the room... to be engaged in that conversation.”

In Salida, Main Street business owners are not an external stakeholder group; they represent parents, are members of the district accountability committee, and leaders of the athletic boosters. This embeddedness with the district explains why the school district has been recognized not only as Business of the Year by the local chamber of commerce, but Entrepreneurial Business of the Year as well.



Data, Belonging, and the Research Behind the Redesign

A critical driver of the district’s redesign has been a continuous reflection on the data that not only focuses on test scores or graduation rates. The superintendent focused his doctoral dissertation research to analyze matriculation patterns, post-secondary success, and student perception data. He identified a key concern: less than half of all Salida students were matriculating into post-secondary education or training, despite the perception that the high school staff provided a strong and supportive environment for students. “Just because students are happy at school doesn’t mean we’re meeting the mark,” he shared. He further explained, “Less than 50% of my kids were matriculating into post-secondary education or workforce training experiences...which meant half of my kids were moving into poverty according to data [from the Department of Labor]...so the board started with that data point and agreed, “this doesn’t work for us...and they disrupted [the prevailing idea of] what was perceived as a good high school.”

His research also uncovered that belonging was the most significant predictor of post-secondary persistence. Armed with that information, the district shifted how it structured advisory, designed clubs, and prioritized extracurricular participation. Now, over 80% of the student body is involved in some form of activity intended to strengthen students’ social networks through internships, concurrent enrollment opportunities, and activities such as drama, climbing, and poker club. Advisory was also restructured to support stronger student-

teacher connections and to host weekly passion-based activities to build school culture and relational depth. The Superintendent reflected, “We changed the conversation...by investing heavily in [social activities] and letting that guide our programming.”



From Compliance to Authentic ICAPs

Perhaps the most impactful shift that took place in the district is in how the district now views the Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) that all students are expected to develop under Colorado’s graduation guidelines. The superintendent described the early ICAP years as compliance-driven and shallow: “It started with ICAP, which became students making a PowerPoint and talking to their advisor or doing a science fair board in the gym... it was junk. It’s embarrassing junk.” But now, the process has evolved with students completing real internships, engaging in concurrent enrollment, participating in career exploration events, and crafting academic plans that align to genuine interests and goals. According to the Superintendent, “the district is now poised to reclaim ICAP as a legitimate and reflective tool.” He noted that teachers are now the ones asking school leaders and the district to deepen this work. “They started talking about all kids,” he emphasized. “Not just the high-flyers... but how do we court the bottom 10% of students to succeed in these opportunities.”



Looking Ahead: Sustaining the Work

Looking to the future, the district is doubling down on its founding principle: that every student should be able to articulate a personal definition of success and demonstrate a plan to pursue it. The high school staff have adopted this as their grounding vision. As the Superintendent reflected, “human beings with purpose and ownership are more likely to take responsibility for their futures.”

To sustain this work, the district has invested in staffing, including a dedicated work-based learning coordinator and partnerships that allow for seamless interaction between the high school and Colorado Mountain College. Students begin career exposure in sophomore year, attend a full-day junior career conference with over 140 local volunteers, and complete internships in their senior year. Advisory remains the backbone of this system as a space for reflection, coaching, and planning.

When asked how the district ensures this work doesn’t get buried under other initiatives, the Superintendent was candid about making this work a priority. As he noted, “This has to be viewed and framed as all the same important work being done to achieve a district’s vision...or else a superintendent will just bury this and this goes nowhere.”

When asked what advice he would offer to other districts, the Superintendent noted some key principles. Success, he believes, hinges on visionary and courageous local leadership, particularly from school boards, and on leadership stability to carry out this vision. “If you don’t have a board that’s willing to pay that social price... when it matters, it’ll fold,” he said. He also noted that leadership instability is a well-known phenomenon impacting all school districts including rural districts, “There’s very few superintendents like me who’ve been in their position for 20 years” and remarked that leadership instability is highly detrimental for sustaining long-term reform efforts.



Cañon City: Embedding Graduation Competencies into a Coherent K–12 Vision



A Decade in the Making: Vision-Driven Transformation

In Cañon City, the commitment to graduation readiness is not a recent initiative. It is the culmination of a decade-long, systemwide effort to build a coherent K–12 experience centered on “Learning for Life.” This vision, first articulated during the 2016–17 school year, was grounded in a desire to move beyond compliance-based education and toward a broader conception of whole-child development.

The superintendent described early conversations as focused on naming what schools aspired to do for students, beyond what state assessments measured. “We value more than what is currently being assessed,” he explained, reflecting on the development of the district’s graduate profile. That profile has since become the cornerstone of instructional coherence, hiring practices, and accountability. Today, the district expects all students to complete a capstone and participate in work-based learning, with both experiences aligned to a defined set of graduate competencies that emphasize skills such as collaboration, communication, problem solving, and civic engagement.

Unlike districts where performance assessments are limited to single schools or specialized programs, Cañon City’s approach is integrated across the educational system. The capstone is not only a graduation requirement, but it also reflects the broader aspirations embedded in the graduate profile. The district has begun reinforcing these expectations in earlier grades through initiatives like Career Catalyze, a middle school experience that combines career exploration with authentic demonstration of learning.



Creating Coherence Through Shared Language and Structures

The district's implementation strategy centers on clarity, alignment, and reinforcement. Teachers and staff are supported to understand how their work connects to the graduate profile, regardless of role or subject. One moment of reflection came when a middle school math teacher asked the superintendent, "Where do I fit in here?" At the time, he acknowledged, he could not answer her. That conversation became a turning point for the district, catalyzing efforts to ensure that every employee, from bus drivers to paraprofessionals to classroom educators, could see how their contributions supported the broader vision.

This shared language now appears across district priorities and systems. Core beliefs and graduate competencies are embedded into strategic plans, curriculum review processes, and professional development. The district's leadership team works intentionally to ensure consistency across levels, reinforcing key terms and expectations to support coherence.



Building Accountability and Community Ownership

Cañon City's approach to community engagement is grounded in the belief that schools and communities are mutually accountable. "We want to make it impossible for the community to see the schools as separate from them," the superintendent explained. That commitment is most visible in the district's annual local instructional program review and the capstone exhibitions which brings together a diverse group of stakeholders, including parents, business leaders, students, board members, and educators.

The annual review brings together school and community members to evaluate progress toward the graduate profile and guide improvement. Stakeholder participation in the review process has grown to the point where the district now faces logistical challenges in accommodating all contributors. Local leaders regularly reference their connection to the schools with pride, highlighting a sense of shared purpose that extends beyond formal partnerships.

The district has also prioritized community participation in the student learning experiences connected to capstone projects. Families and local professionals serve as internship hosts, project mentors, and capstone panelists. These contributions have deepened student learning while reinforcing the relevance of school to the wider community. As the superintendent reflected, "If we tried to get rid of capstones or internships now, the community would say, 'No, we've come to expect that.'" Through years of intentional relationship-building, the district has fostered not just support, but collective investment in its graduation readiness vision.



Learning Through Continuous Improvement

Cañon City's approach to graduation readiness is shaped not only by long-term vision, but by a discipline of continuous improvement. The district has institutionalized cycles of reflection and feedback, using them to refine both vision and practice over time. "We're constantly pausing and asking, 'Are we actually measuring the right things?'" the superintendent noted.

The local instructional program review, originally conceived as a one-time accountability event, has evolved into an annual improvement cycle. Each year, diverse stakeholders review how well the district is living out its graduate profile, identifying areas of strength and challenge. As the superintendent described, this is not about checking boxes. "It forces us to come back to our core beliefs, to ask if we're really aligning our actions with what we say we value."

The district also embraces iteration at the instructional level. When early efforts at implementing graduate competencies revealed inconsistencies, district leaders paused to clarify expectations, provide additional support, and adjust professional learning. Feedback from teachers played

a central role in these adaptations. Rather than rushing toward uniform implementation, the superintendent emphasized a more responsive stance: “We didn’t want people to feel like we were just layering on new requirements. We wanted to make sure it actually made sense in practice.”



Leveraging Technology and Innovation

Cañon City is approaching technology not as a shortcut, but as a catalyst for deeper learning and more equitable demonstration of graduate competencies. To support consistency in how those competencies are taught and assessed, the district has introduced digital tools such as Unrulr and AI-supported platforms that help educators identify and reflect on evidence of student learning. “We are using AI to call out elements of the graduate profile,” the superintendent noted, “but we are not outsourcing the work.” These tools serve as a support for educators, helping surface patterns across student artifacts, without replacing the professional judgment of teachers and staff.

The district’s approach to these technology tools reflects a careful balance of innovation and integrity. Rather than rushing to scale new tools, district leaders have partnered with a small group of teacher pioneers to pilot technologies in real-time classroom settings. These pilots have generated critical feedback about usability, alignment, and equity of access. Lessons from these early efforts inform district-wide decisions. “We need people inside the work helping us figure this out,” the superintendent explained, underscoring a belief that the best innovations are grounded in educator insight and student experience.

Participation in the Carnegie Foundation’s Future of High School Network and the Colorado Education Initiative’s (CEI) Elevate AI initiative has also expanded the district’s learning network. These partnerships allow Cañon City to test ideas alongside other forward-looking systems while reinforcing its own commitment to local capacity. For Cañon City, innovation is not about adopting the latest tool. It is about building and expanding capacity to continually reflect, refine, and align new approaches with a vision that remains centered on student learning and the values expressed in the graduation profile.



Sustaining the Vision Beyond a Single Leader

Sustainability in Cañon City is not framed as preserving any single initiative. It is based on building systems, structures, and norms that will endure beyond individual leadership. The superintendent has taken a long-term view of leadership, with succession planning, internal talent development, and strategic alignment guiding his approach. “We want these things to go on beyond the current board and superintendent,” he shared.

The district’s strategic plan serves as an organizing tool, consolidating rather than expanding initiatives. It centers on four enduring priorities: learning, people, resources, and engagement. These themes are echoed across district improvement plans, school-level goals, and onboarding for new staff. New educators are introduced to the graduate profile on day one, and the language of the profile is consistently used in leadership meetings, communications, and board discussions.

Leadership development is another core pillar. The superintendent is actively mentoring prospective leaders within the district, ensuring that the next generation of leadership is fluent in the systems, values, and expectations that define the district’s approach. Public communication is similarly intentional, with consistent framing and language used to reinforce the graduate profile as the unifying thread across all work. By investing in internal alignment and shared purpose, the district has created conditions for its graduation readiness efforts to remain durable and adaptive, even as leadership inevitably changes. Sustainability, in this context, is reinforcing a common vision and ensuring the systems are in place for that vision to thrive over time.



Cross-District Insights: Toward Meaningful Graduation Readiness

Despite differences in context, the interviews with district leaders at Pueblo 60, Salida, and Cañon City highlight a shared set of lessons for other districts aiming to rethink their approach to evaluating graduation readiness:



1. Beginning the Work with a Clear Vision

Across all three districts, a strong vision, whether it came from a board, superintendent, or strategic lead, was the necessary starting point. What stands out is how that vision was not imposed. Instead, it was co-constructed, locally shared, and revisited often. Salida's board launched a philosophical shift by asking what students should experience in high school. Pueblo 60 built vision through empathy-building exercises with school leaders. In Cañon City, a decade-long process centered on "Learning for Life" evolved from a desire to move beyond compliance toward whole-child development. The graduate profile, anchored in traits such as collaboration, communication, and solution seeking, became not just a document but the connective tissue linking instructional practice, hiring, and accountability. In all three contexts, vision was layered. It was threaded through policy, relationships, instructional design, and community engagement, rather than isolated in a single initiative.



2. Authentic Learning Requires Supportive Structures

The success of capstones and performance assessments hinges on the systems built around them. Salida embedded capstone within advisory, career pathways, and internships. Pueblo 60 is investing in backward design, coaching infrastructure, and rethinking PLC time to accommodate the planning-intensive nature of PBL. Cañon City's systemwide coherence is especially notable in how capstone is embedded as a core component of the graduation experience across all schools

and grade levels. It is reinforced by tools like digital portfolios, a middle school precursor called Career Catalyze, and a shared graduate profile that guides everything from classroom instruction to strategic planning. Their deliberate use of technology tools such as Unrulr and AI platforms provides a scalable way to highlight graduate competencies while keeping educators at the center of assessment. Across all districts, advisory periods, rubrics, walkthroughs, and scheduling are not just logistics. They are enabling conditions that make deep, authentic learning possible.



3. Cultural Shifts Must Precede Instructional Shifts

All three districts recognized that shifting instructional practice requires more than new units or training. It demands a cultural reorientation. Teachers must feel safe trying new methods. School leaders must see students differently. Community members must see their knowledge honored. Salida did this by focusing on belonging and building a strong advisory culture. Pueblo 60 deliberately started slow to go fast, focusing first on capturing teachers' hearts. In Cañon City, the cultural shift involved clarifying how every adult, from teachers to paraprofessionals to bus drivers, contributes to a shared graduate vision. The result from this shift is a district culture in which staff, students, and community members share a common vocabulary and a sense of purpose grounded in the graduate profile.



4. Sustainability Depends on People, Not Just Programs

Finally, all three interviews reinforced a crucial aspect of this work: initiatives do not sustain themselves, but people do. Whether it is a principal who leaves, a district leader who steps back, or a cohort of teachers without ongoing support, these efforts can falter quickly if capacity is concentrated in too few hands. Leaders emphasized the importance of building shared ownership, investing in leadership teams, and distributing expertise. Salida's superintendent was blunt: "If you haven't brought others along, you have to prepare for the reality that the second you leave, it's gone." Pueblo 60's lead emphasized the need to scaffold deeply and create systemwide investment in the work. Cañon City has taken a long-view approach to leadership and sustainability. The superintendent has mentored future leaders, built structures that outlast personnel, and embedded shared language into every layer of the organization, from onboarding to board meetings. Just as importantly, the district has cultivated public expectations that reinforce and protect the work. In Cañon City, graduation readiness is not seen as a program to be implemented, but as a set of practices and values that the community recognizes, supports, and expects from its schools.

These districts remind us that graduation does not only represent completion, but also reflects an opportunity to affirm a student's readiness to thrive in college, career, and civic life. With clear vision, intentional structures, and strong community ties, districts can ensure that every student graduates from high school not only with a diploma, but with direction and purpose.