



# Success Spotlight



COLORADO  
Department of Education

STORIES OF PROMISING PRACTICE



## Graduation Guidelines: How Roaring Fork Schools is Using District Capstones

**ROARING FORK SCHOOL DISTRICT** sits amid some of Colorado's most awe-inspiring mountain scenery, about three hours west of Denver. From many vantage points within the district's boundaries, the majestic Mount Sopris dominates the landscape, soaring from the valley floor to 12,966 feet above sea level.

The district generally outperforms the state on traditional measures. The 2014 four-year graduation rate was 83 percent for the district as opposed to 77 percent for the state. And the 2014 graduation rate for low-income students was 75 percent for the district as opposed to 64 percent for the state.

*Despite these generally positive numbers, however, Roaring Fork Schools struggle with gaps in college readiness similar to the rest of the state. Only about 27 percent of entering ninth graders will ultimately graduate from high school and find themselves in college with the knowledge and skills to take non-remedial courses.*

*The persistence of these gaps was the driving force among several factors that led district leaders in 2013 to conclude that the time had come to make significant changes.*

Colorado Department of Education surfaces and shares powerful stories from the field that get at the “why” and “how” behind the experiences and success stories teachers, students and administrators are having across the state so other districts can easily find models to apply in their own schools and foster positive learning environments for students. <http://getinspired.2revolutions.net>

Roaring Fork Schools serve more than 5,500 students in 11 schools located in three towns and cities: Basalt, Carbondale, and Glenwood Springs. The student population is 54 percent Latino and 43 percent white. Some 43 percent of Roaring Fork students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 49 percent live in Spanish-speaking households.

Glenwood Springs is a resort town, and the wealthy skiing mecca of Aspen is just 18 miles from Basalt. Many of the low-income, Spanish-speaking residents of the Roaring Fork Valley live in the Basalt and El Jebel communities and are service workers who commute to Aspen or Glenwood each day.

## Objective

“The impetus was a strong community mandate and desire” to make real progress on closing gaps, said Rob Stein, Roaring Fork’s superintendent.

District leaders gleaned this information from the community during a visioning process in 2013, which entailed 16 meetings attended by 1,400 parents, teachers, students, and community members. District officials asked what characteristics the community wanted in its schools and what outcomes it wanted for students. “We heard a dual commitment to academic excellence and character development,” Stein said.

Armed with that information, the board of education affirmed a new mission to “ensure that every student develops the enduring knowledge, skills, and character to thrive in a changing world.”

The board also established three overarching goals for students:

- all students will graduate with the knowledge and skills to enroll in postsecondary education without remediation;
- they will graduate with the character and life skills to succeed in college, careers, family and community;
- and they will complete high-quality projects that challenge them to develop and evidence creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, authentic learning, resilience, self-motivation, passion and responsibility for learning, and engagement in community.

Thus the district’s graduation capstone requirement was born. District capstones are one of the several options available to Colorado school districts as part of new graduation guidelines adopted by the State Board of Education in 2015, and which must be in place for the graduating class of 2021. That class enters high school in the fall of 2017.

Stein describes the Roaring Fork capstone project as “an authentic project, product, or performance that allows for exploration of a passion or curiosity and prepares students for further work or study. The learning and reflection required by a capstone is documented via journals, blog posts, or other artifacts, and, upon completion, presented in a meaningful way.”

“They have to demonstrate college readiness. It’s all organized around the learning they need in order to be college and career ready.”

*Rob Stein, Superintendent  
Roaring Fork Schools*

But capstones couldn’t materialize in isolation. Launching a capstone requirement meant instituting two other significant changes to how the district organizes itself to help students through the system and ultimately to high school graduation.

The first change was implementing a “crew” program in all Roaring Fork schools. Stein spent from 1996 to 2001 running the Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning in Denver. His experience with Expeditionary Learning (EL) made him a believer in the idea of crews, an advisory-on-steroids that is a linchpin of the EL experience.

Crews are designed to “increase support and a sense of belonging for all students, and to help students with the developmental challenges of navigating their school careers,” Stein said.

Crew is a dedicated time in the day to focus on character skills, social-emotional learning and academic goal-setting. Crew provides each student a relationship with an adult crew leader at the school, as well as a consistent and ongoing small-scale peer community.

The second big change was to revise and narrow the district’s graduation requirements. “We committed to narrowing the opportunity gap by providing pathways and supports to allow all graduates to demonstrate college readiness in core subjects on approved academic assessments,” Stein said. In some cases, students can now demonstrate competency in subject areas rather than having to take a certain number of credits. The move away from credit requirements to competency is still a work in progress.

With crew providing the necessary supports and revised graduation requirements promising the required flexibility, a capstone project as a new graduation requirement becomes possible.

“Capstones are something different than how people typically see high school in America,” Stein said. “Capstones will be asynchronous, and can take very different forms. One student might take a trip abroad to study something in-depth. Another might land an internship with a local welder.”

At the conclusion of the capstone experience, a student must present what he or she has learned in a format that educators can evaluate, be it a paper, video, slide presentation, or some other tangible demonstration of learning.

## Strategy

The capstone program will phase in over the next two years. In 2016-17, a small cohort of students in each of the district's three high schools will pilot capstone projects. Ultimately, in 2018, every graduating senior will have completed a capstone project.

Crews, meanwhile, launched at different times in different schools during the 2015-16 school year, with some schools going all in and others taking it more gradually.

At Glenwood High School, only ninth-graders are in crews, which meet once a week. The idea is to get them comfortable with the concept and with each other, so that by the time they are ready to embark on their capstone projects, most in junior or senior year, they will have a small, intimate community to support them. Students stay in their same crew, with the same crew leader (teacher) for all four years of high school.

On an unseasonably warm April morning, Glenwood High School science teacher Lauren Wilson gathered her crew in an airy science room for a team-building exercise. First, they read a quote from poet E.E. Cummings:

*"We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit."*

Wilson asked how many of the students were filled with self doubt. Several hesitant hands went up.

"All the time," one girl said softly.

"I am still plagued with lots and lots of self doubt," Wilson told the group. "What do you do when you start to doubt yourself?" She asked each student to answer.

"I draw," said one student. "I run or swim," said another. "I talk to friends," a girl said. "I look at what I have achieved." "I listen to certain songs on repeat." "It just stays there no matter what I do." "I read."

Wilson then had the group of 17 students crowd onto a patchwork of colored construction paper, which they had to figure out how to flip 180 degrees without stepping off. Many of the students were uncomfortable standing so close together, and after 10 minutes they were no closer to solving the puzzle.

That's OK, Wilson told them. Not everything is easy or comfortable. "There is a solution," she promised. "It's not easy. I'm not going to tell you what it is. I'll bring this back next week and we can try again."

Wilson said some Glenwood High School teachers were resistant to launching crews mid-year. "But the kids, and I, have found it to be a good home base."

At Basalt High School, a half-hour up the Roaring Fork Valley, crew-like structures under different names have been in place for several years, as enrichment, or study hall, or advisory.

"We're trying to combine crew with what we already had going" in advisory groups, said Brent Hayes, a science teacher who has been at Basalt High for eight years. His current crew consists of juniors; students he has worked with since their freshman year. "Trying to hybridize this has been a struggle. Getting juniors to sit around in a circle talking about feelings is like pulling teeth."

Still, Hayes said, he expects students in subsequent years who know crew and capstones are requirements will be more compliant and bought into the program.

"One of the shifts that needs to occur is a shift in how teachers see their role. Instead of prescribing what students need to learn and then assessing whether they've learned it, they help students identify their own goals and then coach and support students through the process."

*Rob Stein, Superintendent  
Roaring Fork Schools*

Hayes will be piloting capstones with some of his students next year. "There is some anxiety," he acknowledged. "We're still figuring out how to do this thing that has the potential to be really cool."

Bo Takarabe, Basalt High's counselor, said students are starting to show interest in the idea of a capstone project. She said she expects students to enter the capstone pipeline at different points in their high school careers, which will make the workload easier for teachers to manage.

"Let's say there are 15 kids in my crew. If three are ready and motivated sophomore year, and another six or seven junior year, then there will only be five to get through it senior year," she said.

Takarabe said her crew of ninth-graders is already talking about capstones. “We’re discussing what are you into, what excites you?” she said. “Each one of them will start when ready.”

That sense of ownership is what makes capstones so potentially game-changing, said Peter Mueller, Basalt High’s principal. “It is a big shift in education for kids to take on more ownership of their own learning,” he said. One key question, Mueller said, “is how do you make this a passion institutionally, rather than a requirement?”

## Results

Change is hard, and people have a natural tendency to resist it, especially in its earliest stages. Cognizant of this reality, Roaring Fork district officials decided to start gradually, building in two years of research and planning time before launching on a small scale in the fall of 2016.

Excitement and trepidation are building in the district, in what appears to be roughly equal measure.

Basalt High counselor Takarabe showed a visitor a survey she conducted with ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> graders to learn their preliminary thoughts about capstones. She found the results encouraging: many students were clearly thinking seriously about a major project as part of their high school career.

By the end of the school year, several students had developed detailed capstone ideas. A few examples:

- A summer internship at Glenwood Valley Hospital for a young woman who aspires to a career in medicine.
- An “experimental, part scripted, part documentary film” about being popular in high school by a young man who has made many films and has a “very satiric and unconventional view of high school.”
- A student who dances with the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet wants to do a business-side internship with the dance company. “I want to find out what the difference is between being a dancer and helping (run the) company.”
- An avid outdoorsman wants to create a “journal or database of hiking sites” in the Roaring Fork Valley. Doing this would build journaling, photography, writing, and physical fitness skills, the student asserts.

Stein feels confident that the deep and protracted community process created the kind of buy-in that will be necessary as the district undergoes a seismic shift. This is important, he said, because if the capstone program is to succeed, the community is going to have to step up and provide mentoring and internships. Teachers will have to shift the focus of their teaching to provide necessary supports for students. And administrators will have to ensure that teachers are getting ongoing professional development to make that shift possible.



“This grew up not from a bunch of district people sitting around, but from the community,” Stein said. “The challenge is to continually remind people from whence it came.”



## How to Do It: Tips for Implementing a District Capstone Requirement

### 1. Objective

- How can a capstone project requirement make learning more relevant to students?
- How can capstones involve the broader community more deeply in schools?
- How can revised graduation requirements and some kind of advisory structure facilitate successful capstone implementation?

### 2. Preparation

- Read about Colorado's changing [graduation requirements](#) and the [capstone section](#).
- Study Roaring Fork's new [graduation requirements](#).
- Read more about [Expeditionary Learning crews](#).
- Read Roaring Fork's [capstone action team](#).
- Examine promising capstone practices from other schools and districts, and find one that best fits your vision. Here are two promising candidates:

- I. [University High School, Greeley](#)
- II. [Denver School of Science and Technology, Stapleton](#)

- Create capstone teams in every high school, consisting of administrators, teachers, and counselors.
  - I. Have teams spend time with teachers so that they understand what capstones look like, and what their purpose is, as well as what expectations there will be of them.
  - II. Communicate that this is different work, not more work.
- Spend time with students so that they understand what will be expected of them.
- Organize community meetings to discuss capstones and garner support for the plan.
- Bring in a consultant to help plan and implement, preferably from a district that has successfully implemented a capstone program.

“Capstones aren’t simply about the project; capstones are another opportunity to get students engaged. If your goal is the capstone, you have a whole bunch of work that you have to build on from here all the way across until you get to this big project.”

*Matthew Hamilton, Director  
Aspen Skiing Company*



### 3. Implementation

- Start slowly, allowing plenty of time to plan.
  - I. If your district or school plans to implement a crew or advisory class, phase it in first, before capstones begin.
- Be sure that you don't try to copy exactly what some other school or district has done. "Be organic to your environment," as one Roaring Fork educator said.
- At the same time, do not feel you need to "reinvent the wheel" if practices elsewhere seem to fit what you want to do.
- Keep ownership of the idea and its implementation at the school staff level to the greatest extent possible.

### 4. Assessment/reflection

- What worked?
- What did not work?
- How can it be adjusted?