



Dear Chair Lukens and members of the House Education Committee,

On behalf of the Adams County Regional Economic Partnership (AC-REP), we support and value the goal of HB26-1317 to better coordinate education, training, and workforce systems to address Colorado's economic needs. We agree that our current workforce system can be complex and fragmented, especially for businesses. Streamlining pathways for workers and employers is a necessary goal to grow our available talent.

However, we want to underscore a critical point: local workforce boards are where strategy meets reality. Local workforce boards are directly connected to employers, industry trends, and real-time workforce needs. In Adams County, they serve as the front line for our citizens, aligning training programs with the actual jobs that exist today and the skills that will be needed tomorrow.

While the HB26-1317 includes representation from state agencies and broader stakeholders, the transition committee, as currently structured, does not guarantee strong, business-informed local workforce representation tied to regional economies. As the state considers a major structural shift to transition oversight of workforce programs to the Department of Higher Education, we believe it is critical to have a local perspective on this process.

AC-REP respectfully requests a simple but important amendment to require at least one dedicated seat on the transition committee for a local workforce board member representing business and industry needs, particularly from high-growth or high-demand regions like Adams County.

If we get this right, Colorado can lead the nation in connecting talent to opportunity. If we get it wrong, we risk further disconnecting systems from the employers they are meant to serve.

Thank you for your consideration, and we stand ready to partner on a solution that strengthens both our workforce and our economy. I regret that I could not participate in the Education Committee hearing on March 25th, as I am currently attending the National Association of Workforce Boards Forum representing the Adams County Workforce Board.

Lisa Hough, President/CEO
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RE: Testimony in Support of HB 26-1317

*Presented by Xan Pearson, Executive Director of CareerWise Colorado
House Education Committee • Colorado General Assembly • March 2026*

Testimony Statement

Chair Lukens, Vice Chair Martinez, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of HB 26-1317. My name is Xan Pearson, and I serve as the Executive Director of CareerWise Colorado, the state's leading apprenticeship intermediary. CareerWise was founded here in Colorado ten years ago and now operates in over 20 states. We serve apprentices across the full postsecondary continuum — high school students earning college credits and wages in career-track apprenticeships, adults earning a bachelor's degree while teaching full-time through the Colorado Teacher Degree Apprenticeship program, and adult apprentices entering the healthcare workforce. We wanted to submit this testimony today because House Bill 1317 is among the most important structural steps Colorado can take to make apprenticeship work at the scale this state needs.

Let me ground this in where we are right now. Since CareerWise was founded in 2016, we have served thousands of apprentices in Colorado. In 2026, we anticipate 330 active apprentices through our work with partner programs throughout the state, with another 479 pre-apprentices enrolled — nearly 1,000 students in the pipeline. That includes 81 current teacher apprentices across 14 school districts in 10 counties, and this spring we will graduate our very first teacher through that program. Eighty percent of our active business partners have already committed to hiring in 2026. We have sector coalitions forming in advanced manufacturing, healthcare, construction/skilled trades, automotive, and behavioral health — with many of the largest employers in Colorado. We have district partnerships in the Denver Metro area and rural communities across the state.

We are proving the model works. But I want to be honest with this committee about what is holding us back: it is the fragmented state infrastructure that this bill begins to fix.

Right now, apprenticeship sits between systems — and that is true at every level we operate. A high school student earning college credits through a registered apprenticeship spans K-12 and higher education. A paraprofessional earning a bachelor's degree while teaching full-time through our Teacher Degree Apprenticeship program — legislation CareerWise helped pass in 2023 and became the proud sponsor

of in Colorado — spans higher education and workforce. An adult entering healthcare apprenticeship spans workforce training and employer HR systems. This is an opportunity to create more efficiencies and make the experience more valuable for learners and employers alike. Today, the agencies that support these pathways often operate independently, and apprentices and their employers must navigate between them. Connecting those systems is the single most important thing Colorado can do to accelerate what we are building together.

House Bill 1317 addresses that directly. By creating a transition committee charged with integrating postsecondary education, training, and employment under a unified department mission, this bill creates the conditions to reduce administrative burden, lower costs, and make it far easier for students, workers, and employers to find and navigate pathways. And it says something that needs to be said: apprenticeship is not a niche workforce program. It is an options multiplier — giving opportunity to those who may not have the means to pursue higher education right away, those who want to explore careers before committing to a degree, and those who need to earn an income while attaining credentials. Apprenticeship is not designed to replace higher education; it expands access to it. With a unified system like the one this bill proposes, apprentices can earn educational credit without compromising the industry-led components that make apprenticeship work. Union programs, for example, should be able to earn academic credit for their proven approaches without adding unnecessary administrative oversight or disrupting what makes those programs effective.

The bill's explicit direction to position adult and youth registered apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeship, and work-based learning within the Department of Higher Education's mission is exactly the right framing — apprenticeship is a form of education. Our Teacher Degree Apprenticeship program — our fastest-growing pathway, now partnering with six higher education institutions including UNC, CU Denver, and CSU Global — is proof of what becomes possible when education and workforce systems genuinely align. The state is best positioned to bring these systems together and create the conditions for intermediaries to successfully coordinate, administer, and scale apprenticeship statewide.

I want to be clear about what this bill is and is not. It is a planning process, not a completed reorganization. The transition committee's work will be as consequential as the legislation itself. What gives us confidence is what the bill gets structurally right: it protects the State Apprenticeship Agency's Type 1 status and its federal compliance obligations, it preserves the integrity of the State Apprenticeship Council, it requires the committee to hear from employers, apprentices, and registered apprenticeship programs, and it preserves the role of labor organizations and ensures high-quality program design. Those guardrails matter enormously.

What we will be advocating for in that process: a unified entry point for students and employers into the apprenticeship system; common language, definitions, and data tracking across programs; funding streams that treat apprenticeship as a postsecondary



investment at every level; credit articulation that follows apprentices across institutions; consistent competency standards that reflect real industry demand; and accountability measures tied to credential attainment and wage progression, not just enrollment numbers. One principle must guide the transition committee's work above all others: this system has to be built around employer demand, not institutional convenience. Apprenticeship scales when employers are co-architects of the system — with real governance authority — not when they are consulted after the fact. The system must be designed to continuously signal and respond to what industries actually need. CareerWise's growth is proof of what happens when you start with employer commitment and build backwards from there.

CareerWise has built something real — employer relationships, district partnerships, higher education partners, and nearly 1,000 Coloradans in apprenticeship pathways — largely by bridging systems that were never designed to connect. Imagine what becomes possible when the state builds that infrastructure intentionally. HB 1317 is the beginning of that work, and Colorado has every ingredient to become the national model for what a unified apprenticeship system can achieve. We are ready to help build it.

We urge your support. Thank you.

Xan Pearson
Executive Director, CareerWise Colorado

Colorado Succeeds Testimony HB 26-1317 | Unified Postsecondary Talent Development System

Chair Lukens, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a written testimony. My name is Madison Knapp, Director of Impact at Colorado Succeeds, a business-led education and workforce organization.

I am writing on behalf of our Board of Directors, asking for a yes vote on HB26-1317.

Right now, a Colorado worker trying to upskill may navigate three separate state agencies, each with its own entry points, eligibility requirements, and programs meant to support them. A high school student pursuing a credential tied to a job may never connect to the workforce office located just down the road from their school even though it has supports meant to serve them. An employer trying to find homegrown talent participates in half a dozen convenings or meetings each quarter meant to help them get more talent but rarely understands if their presence in these meetings is moving the needle.

That fragmentation is a policy choice. And it's one we can change.

What this legislation does is create the conditions to build something Colorado is ready for: a unified postsecondary talent development system that serves learners and employers from the same coherent infrastructure. One system.

For learners, that means better alignment between education, training, and employment. It means the credentials they earn are connected to the jobs that are actually available. It means less time lost navigating a confusing system and more time building a career.

For employers, it means a state partner that understands the full pipeline, across high school, apprenticeship, workforce center, college, or across industry. It means a government that speaks the language of economic opportunity, not only academic attainment.

The transition process outlined in this bill is thoughtful. It brings the right people to the table. It gives the state time to plan responsibly. And it asks the hard questions about governance, data, technology, and alignment that we know will be needed to bring this vision to fruition.

Colorado Succeeds has been alongside each of these agencies as we partner on initiatives to bring postsecondary and workforce readiness to more high schools, as we engage employers in signaling their demands as sectors rather than individuals, and as we support the implementation of longitudinal data that will help us better understand which pathways are helping which Coloradoans.

We know how much it takes to align systems across agencies, institutions, and regions. This bill creates the statutory foundation to do that work at scale.

Colorado's learners and businesses deserve a system built for how the economy actually works. This legislation moves us in that direction.

We urge your support.

HB26-1317

Colorado has a choice.

HB26-1317 can either become a nation-leading model for a **just public system**—or a well-intentioned restructuring that makes an inequitable system run more smoothly.

Right now, it is on track to do the latter.

The Core Truth: Complexity Is a Policy Choice

Colorado's workforce and postsecondary systems are not just fragmented—they are **designed in ways that advantage those with time, knowledge, and support**, while leaving others to navigate confusion, delay, and dead ends.

HB26-1317 correctly identifies this problem. But recognition alone is not reform.

If this bill stops at consolidation—if it delivers a “one-stop shop” without changing how the system behaves—then we will have **centralized inequity, not solved it**.

Access Is Not Justice

This bill assumes that if people can more easily *find* options, they will succeed.

That assumption is wrong.

For many Coloradans—especially those who are:

- working multiple jobs
- first-generation students
- navigating poverty or instability
- disconnected from institutional networks

—the barrier is not just access. It is **decision overload, unclear pathways, and inconsistent support**.

A single doorway into a confusing system is still a confusing system.

Justice requires more than access to options. It requires **systems that produce fair outcomes—by design**.

Where HB26-1317 Falls Short

Without stronger direction, this bill risks reinforcing the very inequities it seeks to address:

It does not require equitable outcomes

There are no mandates to:

- Measure success across race, income, or geography
- Close gaps in credential attainment
- Prioritize those most underserved

If we do not define equity, we will not deliver it.

It preserves the burden on the individual

Even in a unified system, users are still expected to:

- Choose among complex pathways
- Interpret unclear tradeoffs
- Advocate for themselves

This is not a neutral design—it systematically advantages those with the most agency.

It lacks enforceable accountability

The bill creates a planning structure, but not a **justice structure**:

- No required public reporting on disparities
- No consequences for unequal outcomes
- No clear ownership of system performance

What gets designed without accountability gets reproduced—not reformed.

It risks inconsistent experiences

Without statewide standards:

- Services will vary by region, provider, and implementation
- Outcomes will depend on where someone lives—not what they need

That is not a system. That is a patchwork.

What Justice Requires

If Colorado is serious about building a system that works for everyone—especially those with the least ability to navigate it—then HB26-1317 must go further.

Not incrementally. Structurally.

1. Guarantee Equity—Do Not Assume It

- Set clear, measurable goals for closing attainment gaps
- Tie funding and system authority to progress
- Require disaggregated public reporting

2. Replace Options with Pathways

- Default users into clear, supported education-to-career routes
- Make navigation a built-in function—not an optional service
- Reduce the number of decisions individuals must make alone

3. Make Transparency Real

- Require plain-language system design
- Provide real-time, user-facing data on outcomes and pathways
- Eliminate hidden rules and informal barriers

4. Enforce Consistency

- Establish statewide service standards
- Limit variation that produces unequal experiences
- Ensure that access to opportunity does not depend on geography

5. Build Accountability Into the System Itself

- Assign clear ownership for outcomes
- Require regular reporting to the public and legislature
- Create consequences for failing to deliver equitable results

The Stakes

Colorado is not just reorganizing agencies. It is deciding:

- Whether public systems should work **only for those who can navigate them**
- Or whether they should work **for everyone—by design**

HB26-1317 opens the door to transformation. But without explicit commitments to equity, fairness, transparency, and consistency, that door will not stay open for those who need it most.

Call to Leadership

Governor Polis, President Coleman, Speaker McCluskie

Do not settle for a system that is easier to access but still unequal in its outcomes.

Do not confuse coordination with justice.

Use this moment to ensure that Colorado builds a system that:

- does not rely on individual advantage
- does not reward those who already know how to navigate it
- and does not leave others behind—again

This is not just a structural reform. It is a test of whether Colorado is willing to design public systems that are **truly just**.

The difference will not be in how the system is organized.

It will be in **who it works for—and who it doesn't**.

In Strength,

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