



COLORADO

Department of
Higher Education

Path4Ward Pilot Program for Early High School Graduates

Pursuant to C.R.S. 23-3.3-1305, Fourth-Year Innovation Program



2025

The Colorado Department of Higher Education
Report to the Education Committees of the House of Representatives and of the Senate, the
Colorado Department of Education and the Governor's Office of State Planning and Budgeting
Statute: 23-3.3-1305

The Colorado Department of Higher Education (DHE), under its own authority and through the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE), oversees and coordinates policy for 31 public institutions of higher education (including community colleges, independent local district colleges and local area technical colleges) and authorizes and regulates private colleges, universities and occupational schools.

Mission – We support students, advocate and develop policies to maximize higher education opportunities for all.

Vision – All Coloradans will have an education beyond high school to pursue their dreams and improve our communities.



Prepared and submitted by the Colorado Department of Higher Education
under the Executive Leadership of Dr. Angie Paccione
Pursuant to the statutory authority of 23-3.3-1305

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Executive Summary

The Path4Ward program is a pilot initiative that awards state funding to low-income students who graduate early from high school to pursue postsecondary education and training. Program funding amounts, determined by statute, are based on how early each student graduated: up to \$4,113 for graduating before the start of their fourth year of high school, and up to \$2,468 for graduating before the start of the second semester of their fourth year. During the 2024-25 fiscal year, which was the fourth year of this five-year pilot, 381 eligible early graduates were reported from 25 participating high schools. Seventy-five eligible students from prior program years accepted scholarships totaling \$234,631 in FY 2024-25. Students used their Path4Ward funds at 20 different postsecondary programs, including private occupational schools, two-year colleges, technical colleges, and four-year universities.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) partnered with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) during the 2024-25 program cycle to perform a comprehensive review of the student lists provided by LEPs for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years. This review led to improvements in understanding of eligibility criteria by Local Education Providers (LEPs) and reduced the number of truly eligible students in 2024-25.

The Path4Ward pilot program, from year three to four, has shown signs of stabilizing in terms of the number of qualified early graduates reported, total expenditures for student scholarships, and payments to LEPs. Per HB24-1392, no new LEPs have been added to the pilot program since the 2023-24 academic year, and low scholarship utilization rates among eligible students from the original group of LEPs have continued into year four. This may be due, in part, to the withdrawal of two third-party entities which provided staff for student support services and outreach in the first three years of the program. These two external nonprofits were funded independently through a grant from Colorado Succeeds, and the grant was unable to renew funding for FY 2024-25 and future years. Early graduates during the 2024-25 academic year were therefore the first cohort that did not receive direct support and advising services from these partner agencies.

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Introduction

Implemented through Colorado Revised Statute 23-3.3-1301—1307, the Fourth-Year Innovation Pilot Program, branded as Path4Ward, is a pilot initiative that awards state funding to low-income students who graduate early from high school to pursue postsecondary education and training.

Students who graduate at least one semester early from a participating high school and are either eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program (FRL) at any point during grades 8 through 12 or who are eligible for a federal Pell grant are eligible for a Path4Ward scholarship. Scholarship funds can be used toward tuition, fees and other costs of attendance at eligible postsecondary program providers.

Eligible postsecondary program providers are defined as Colorado public higher education institutions, registered Colorado private occupational schools, and workplace training programs registered with the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) as eligible for funding under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA). Private degree-granting higher education institutions are not eligible. Eligible students have 18 months after high school graduation to begin an eligible program and submit their scholarship request to CDHE or they forfeit their scholarship amount. CDHE staff verifies all scholarship requests against the eligible student lists provided by LEP. Once the student's scholarship request is verified, CDHE asks the postsecondary program provider to confirm the student's enrollment. CDHE then transfers the student's scholarship funds to the postsecondary program provider and the provider applies the funds to tuition and fees, with any remaining funds either retained for continued study or distributed to the student. Any remaining funds can be used for other components of the cost of attendance, such as equipment, books, housing, transportation, or future education.

Participating local education providers (LEPs), defined as high schools or groups of high schools within a school district or consortium, also receive a set amount (\$1,371) from CDE for each eligible early graduate they report by July 1 of each year. The legislation encourages local education providers to direct a portion of this money to career and postsecondary counseling and to ensure potentially eligible students are aware of the pilot program and receive assistance in determining how to apply scholarship funds to their intended postsecondary program.

In this report, the following statutorily required information is provided:

- Number of eligible graduates receiving state funding and the LEPs from which they graduated
- The amount requested by and reimbursed to eligible graduates, the projected forfeited amount by eligible graduates, and the resulting projected total expenditure in FY25-26
- Demographic data of eligible early graduates receiving state funding
- Disbursements to LEPs
- Enrollment of eligible graduates in postsecondary programs
- Available outcome data for participating students
- Requested adjustments to the appropriation and recommended changes to pilot implementation or statutory language

Program Progress

Qualifying early graduates in fiscal year 2024-25 numbered 381, one more student than reported in FY 2023-24. During the first three years of the pilot, student word-of-mouth and improved knowledge and training among district counseling staff were increasingly effective in raising awareness of the Path4Ward pilot program and attracting student interest in the prospect of early graduation. As the final year of student eligibility under the pilot approaches for the 2025-26 academic year, it appears that awareness of the program and student interest in graduating early to qualify have leveled out.

Students received \$234,631 in scholarships in FY 2024-25, a 38% increase over the \$170,294 awarded in FY 2023-24. Of the FY 2024-25 total, \$187,326 (80%) was expended on tuition and fees, and \$47,305 (20%) was remitted to students to pay future tuition, fees, textbooks, equipment, transportation, housing, and/or other components of the cost of attendance.

Postsecondary Providers Selected by Participating Students

- A Plus Real Estate School
- Academy for Dental Assisting Careers
- Aims Community College
- Aveda Institute
- Bel-Rea Institute of Animal Technology
- Community College of Denver
- Elysian Academy of Cosmetology
- Emily Griffith Technical College
- Front Range Community College
- Institute of Business and Medical Careers
- IntelliTec Pueblo
- Metropolitan State University of Denver
- Paul Mitchell the School, Denver
- Pickens Technical College
- Pima Medical Institute
- Pueblo Community College
- Red Rocks Community College
- University of Colorado Boulder
- University of Colorado Denver

Programs of Study Declared by Enrolled Students

- Automotive Collision Repair Technology – Associate of Applied Science (AAS)
- Automotive Service Technician –Certificate
- Aviation and Aerospace – Bachelor of Science (BS)
- Barber – Registered Apprenticeship Program
- Basics of Dental Assisting & Dental Radiology – Certificate
- Business – Associate of Arts (AA)
- Business Administration – BS
- Biology – Associate of Science (AS)
- Chemistry – AS
- Commercial Driver License – Certificate
- Computer Science / Electrical & Computer Engineering – BS
- Computer Science – AS
- Cosmetology – Certificate
- Digital Marketing – Certificate
- Early Childhood Director – Certificate
- Engineering – BS
- English – Bachelor of Arts (BA)
- Health Care Management – BS
- Liberal Arts – AA
- Liberal Arts – Associate of General Studies (AGS)
- Master Automobile Service Technology – AAS
- Medical Assisting – Certificate
- Nail Technician – Registered Apprenticeship Program
- Pre-Nursing – BS
- Political Science – AA
- Psychology – AA
- Psychology – AS
- Radiology Technology – AAS
- Real Estate - Certificate
- Sociology – BA
- Surgical Technology – AAS
- Veterinary Technology – AAS
- Welding – AAS

Program Eligibility Adjustments

CDHE partnered with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) during the 2024-25 program cycle to perform a comprehensive review of the student lists provided by LEPs for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years. Student information provided by participating LEPs was compared to official CDE data regarding each student's free or reduced lunch status, the anticipated year of graduation (AYG) calculated by CDE, and the student's reported date of graduation, as part of Path4Ward student eligibility requirements. This review revealed potential eligibility issues with approximately 15% of the early graduates reported by the LEPs. There was no evidence of deliberate misrepresentation in the data provided, and no students were denied scholarship funds.

However, Path4Ward funds to LEPs were withheld for each reported early graduate determined to be ineligible – with an opportunity for the LEP to provide new data to confirm the student’s eligibility. The review highlighted some points of misunderstanding about determining historic free or reduced lunch eligibility and about the AYG determination as calculated for each high school student by CDE. A guidance letter sent October 3, 2025, to Path4Ward contacts at each participating LEP described the eligibility check performed by CDE, provided links to online resources for checking students’ free or reduced lunch eligibility and AYG, and outlined the process for using federal Pell Grant eligibility as an alternative confirmation of economic eligibility for the program. The letter also encouraged school and district staff to confirm student eligibility well in advance of a student’s early graduation and to communicate any potential issues with the student and their family with enough time to address those issues if possible.

A preliminary eligibility review was also conducted for students listed as early graduates from the 2024-25 school year. Of the 380 students identified by LEPs before the July 1, 2025, deadline, 23 were deemed ineligible. Additionally, 23 other student cases were referred to the reporting LEP to confirm free or reduced lunch eligibility or current Pell Grant eligibility.

Until June 30, 2024, CDHE partnered with Zero Dropouts and RESCHOOL Colorado, external nonprofits which were funded independently through a grant from Colorado Succeeds to support the Path4Ward program and charged with providing direct assistance to eligible early graduates. Zero Dropouts provided navigational support and sent reminders to eligible students, while RESCHOOL managed data collection and reporting on those efforts. These partners were unable to renew funding for FY 2024-25 and future years. Early graduates during the 2024-25 academic year were therefore the first cohort that did not receive direct support and advising services from these partner agencies. CDHE staff worked to facilitate this transition by providing additional program materials and customizable Path4Ward communication pieces for LEPs to send to eligible high school students and their families.

As directed by HB24-1392, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education implemented a cap on adding any local education providers or schools to the pilot program after the 2023-24 academic year.

Program Data for Year 4 (Fiscal Year 2024-25)

Program Funding – Actual and Projected

Program funding amounts are determined by C.R.S. 23-3.3-1302(11). Students receive scholarships based on how early they graduated: \$4,113 for graduating before the start of their fourth year of high school, and \$2,468 for graduating before the start of the second semester of their fourth year. Table 1 shows the maximum potential scholarship expenditure if all eligible students were to request funding within 18 months of graduation. In addition, LEPs receive \$1,371 per eligible student reported by July 1 each year, as determined by C.R.S. 23-3.3-1303(3)(b)(II). Table 2 shows district funding allocations generated by the number of eligible graduates reported by July 1, 2025. Establishing the Path4Ward program in rural high schools remains an issue. Some of the smaller rural districts did not report any eligible early graduates in FY 2024-25 and therefore did not receive funding. Conversations with staff from rural districts participating in the pilot suggest this has more to do with limited capacity among high school counselors and a general lack of financial resources to develop programs that could offer accelerated credit accumulation opportunities and less about student interest in the scholarship program. Table 3 includes the current number of scholarship requests received by CDHE and projected requests and scholarship forfeits over the remainder of FY2025-26.

Table 1: Path4Ward Eligible Early Graduates, Fiscal Year 2024-25

Local Education Provider	Number of 3-Year Graduates	Number of 3.5-Year Graduates	Total Eligible Students
Adams 12 Five Star Schools*	16	39	55
Aurora Public Schools	11	38	49
Cañon City Schools**	<10	13	<20
Clear Creek School District	0	0	0
Colorado Early Colleges	19	27	46
Cotopaxi School District	0	0	0
East Grand School District	0	0	0
Greeley-Evans School District 6	59	153	212
Harrison School District	0	0	0

Local Education Provider	Number of 3-Year Graduates	Number of 3.5-Year Graduates	Total Eligible Students
Montezuma-Cortez School District	0	0	0
West Grand School District	0	0	0
Total	>110	270	>380

Source: Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2024-25 reports of early graduates' data from participating LEPs

*One additional eligible graduate was reported after the July 1 deadline.

**Data suppressed to protect student privacy.

Table 2: Path4Ward LEP Funding Actuals, Fiscal Year 2024-25

Local Education Provider	Number of Early Graduates Reported by LEP on July 1	Number Confirmed Eligible for Disbursement to LEP/School District***	LEP Funding Allocated
Adams 12 Five Star Schools*	54	44	\$60,330
Aurora Public Schools	49	27	\$37,021
Cañon City School Schools	19	17	\$23,309
Clear Creek School District	0	0	0
Colorado Early Colleges	46	42	\$57,587
Cotopaxi School District	0	0	0
East Grand School District	0	0	0
Greeley-Evans School District 6	212	204	\$279,711
Harrison School District	0	0	0
Montezuma-Cortez School District	0	0	0
West Grand School District	0	0	0
Total*	380	334**	\$457,958

Sources: Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2024-25 reports of early graduates' data from participating LEPs.

Colorado Department of Education, review of LEP lists of early graduates verified against student data reported for the Student End of Year data collection.

* Number of early graduates reported by LEPs prior to the July 1 deadline.

*** As described in the Program Adjustments section above, early graduates reported by LEPs during the 2024-25 academic year were subject to a more detailed review of program eligibility. As a result, 23 of the 280 students reported by LEPs have been determined ineligible for LEP payments and an additional 23 have been referred to the reporting LEP to confirm free or reduced lunch eligibility or current Pell grant eligibility.

Table 3: Path4Ward Student Funding Actuals and Projections, Fiscal Year 2025-26

Scholarship Type	Total Students Reported as Eligible	Requests Received (% of Total)	Requests Remaining as of 10/14/25*	Projected Forfeit Number**	Projected Forfeit Total**	Projected Total Requests Number	Projected Requests Total***
3-Year Grad Funds	111	12 (11%)	99	74	\$304,390	36	\$148,082
3.5-Year Grad Funds	270	13 (5%)	257	193	\$476,330	77	\$190,038
Total	381	25 (7%)	355	266	\$780,720	113	\$338,120

Source: Colorado Department of Higher Education, completed opt-in forms from eligible students.

*Requests remaining is the count of eligible students who have not submitted a scholarship request.

**Projected forfeit number is calculated as 75% of students who had not submitted scholarship request as of October 14, based on uptake rates for prior program years.

***Projected requests total is the amount of scholarship funding expenditure expected in FY25-26.

Demographics and Outcomes of Participating Students, FY 2024-25

Tables 4 and 5 report on race/ethnicity and completion status, respectively, for students who received Path4Ward funds during the 2024-25 fiscal year. Demographic breakdowns for race/ethnicity by completion status between program years cannot be published due to the small sample size participating in the pilot program each year. However, a comprehensive final program report due November 1, 2026, will include a multi-year analysis of these data.

Table 4: Path4Ward Race/Ethnicity of Funded Students, Fiscal Year 2024-25

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Funded Students
African American or Black	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%
Asian	2%
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%
Hispanic or Latinx	52%
Two or More Races	3%
White	37%
Total	100%

Source: Colorado Department of Higher Education, Academic Year End Reports required from each postsecondary program provider that enrolled at least one Path4Ward eligible student during the year.

Table 5: Path4Ward Postsecondary Completion Status of Funded Students, Fiscal Year 2024-25

Postsecondary Program Completion Status	Percent of Funded Students
Completed postsecondary program	16%
Ongoing (student remains enrolled in program)	64%
Transferred (to alternate postsecondary program)	0%
Incomplete (student stopped out or otherwise exited program without completing)	18%
Other (student paused program or otherwise on hiatus)	1%

Source: Colorado Department of Higher Education, Academic Year-End Reports required from each postsecondary program provider that enrolled at least one Path4Ward eligible student during the year.

Conclusion

The Path4Ward pilot program, from year three to four, has shown signs of stabilizing in terms of the number of qualified early graduates reported, total expenditures for student scholarships, and payments to LEPs. Several factors have contributed to this stabilization.

House Bill 24-1392 limited the LEPs and schools eligible to participate in the pilot to those already participating by the end of the 2023-24 academic year, purposely placing a cap on the total pool of potential early graduates that could be served under the pilot program.

Additionally, CDHE and CDE worked collaboratively to conduct a more thorough review of each student’s program eligibility data for the last two years. The two agencies worked to identify potential reporting issues and to withhold LEP per-student funding in cases where student eligibility could not be confirmed.

Low scholarship utilization rates among eligible students have continued into FY 2024-25. The loss of dedicated student navigation support and student outreach efforts from Zero Dropouts, which provided 2.0 FTE to the pilot in previous years, impeded efforts to increase utilization rates in year four of this five-year pilot. The most common reasons for qualifying students to

not use their Path4Ward scholarship (as collected from the student opt-in form) included direct entry into the workforce, enrollment in a postsecondary program that is not eligible for Path4Ward funding (out-of-state programs or private institutions of higher education) and failing to complete a release form required by their postsecondary program once enrolled.

In addition to capping LEP participation in the Path4Ward Pilot Program, HB24-1392 requires CDHE to submit a final evaluation of the program by November 1, 2026. The 2026 report will provide comprehensive analysis of data from all annual reports to date as well as objective measures of student behavior changes since the inception of the program, analysis of the cost-effectiveness of the pilot, and recommendations regarding possible continuation of the program beyond the pilot stage.