

# Case Study: Cherry Creek School District

*Coordinated efforts at the district level enhance work-based learning for all students*

Located near Denver in a suburban setting, [Cherry Creek School District](#) (CCSD) is one of the state's larger districts, serving 54,000 students across a range of schools that includes six high schools and one alternative school. Over the past few years, the district has begun to move away from a "four year college for all" mentality and towards a broader focus on college and career preparation and success, which necessarily includes a greater emphasis on providing work-based learning opportunities for all students to assist with career awareness, exploration, and preparedness. In addition to maintaining a strong network of Career and Technical Education (CTE) classes within the district's high schools, this has taken the form of a year-long class for all students on career awareness and preparation, as well as a coordinated, district-wide effort to give students opportunities to connect with local employers.

## **STRONG CAREER-CONNECTED OPPORTUNITIES**

Even before its increased focus on career and life readiness, Cherry Creek School District had a strong network of CTE classes across its schools, connected to key local industry sectors. The district reached an enrollment of more than 13,000 CTE students during the 2017-18 school year, with more than 1,700 of those participating in Career and Technical Student Organizations; they also saw 3,884 enrollments in Concurrent Enrollment (CE) courses for college credit through Arapahoe Community College or the Community College of Aurora, with 11,919 college credits earned by CCSD students. Importantly, the district has also broken ground on a new standalone Innovation Campus, which is expected to open in August 2019 and focus on the following pathways:

- Advanced Manufacturing: Fabrication, Design, Line Development
- Business Services: Banking, Investing, Entrepreneurial, Marketing
- Culinary/Hospitality: Hotel/Resort Management, Event Planning, Culinary, Restaurant Operation, ProStart
- Health Sciences: Pharmacy Tech, Nursing/CNA, EMT, Behavioral Science Tech, Biomedical/BioTech, Phlebotomy, Sports Medicine
- Infrastructure Engineering: Plumbing, Electrical, HVAC, Welding, Residential & Commercial
- IT/STEAM: Development, Game Design, App Development, Networking Security, Programming

- Transportation (Auto/Aviation): Light Diesel, Auto Body, Auto Tech, Paint Shop, Auto Design, Flight School, Drones, Airframe & Powerplant

## THE CAREER CONNECTIONS TEAM

To run the Career Exploration class and support work-based learning in CTE and other programs across its schools, the district office has established a strong Career Connections team within the district CTE office. Members of this team, including Kelli Buffo, Dan Draper, and Mike Wadleigh, are responsible for building employer relationships throughout the region and working with employers and students to establish quality work-based learning experiences. While teachers of individual CTE classes are responsible for recruiting industry partners of their own, members of the Career Connections team play an invaluable supporting role, spending a significant amount of time in the field to meet employers and connecting them with both students and teachers to increase the number and quality of work-based learning experiences available throughout the system.

## CAREER CONNECTIONS CLASS

Within the Cherry Creek high schools, juniors and seniors are eligible to take a year-long course titled "Career Connections." Started three years ago, this class is focused on helping all students, including those not otherwise participating in a CTE program of study, to explore careers and career pathways within the context of their personal interests, strengths, and preferences. The class focuses on professional preparedness, including topics such as career awareness, employment skills, and an understanding of career pathways, as well as personal and life preparedness with a focus on financial literacy and self-knowledge.

While there is some classwork, the emphasis of this class is on real-world learning: Instructors therefore work to provide as many industry connections as possible. Last year, students participated in six site visits, while the district offered up to 14 additional opportunities for small groups based on interests. Instructors also work to bring in up to 30 career speakers each year from a range of industries. Students who express an interest in a particular option are also encouraged to, and assisted in, pursuing a job shadow or internship opportunity.

## FOCUS ON INTERNSHIPS

In order to provide students with immersive experiences in their chosen fields, CCSD places a strong emphasis on establishing internships with industry partners. There are two types of internships available:

- **Career Exploration Internships:** Students who have successfully completed the Career Exploration curriculum may be eligible for an internship in an industry of interest. Internships are broadly educational in scope and allow students to have an experience in a career field they would like to pursue upon graduation.
- **Executive Internships:** The Executive Internship Program provides an opportunity for selected students to have experiences in a career field that they would like to pursue after graduation. An academic internship is a form of a first-hand learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skill development in a professional setting.

The Career Connections team has had significant success in placing students in internships, with 116 such experiences logged during the 2017-2018 school year.

CCSD has also established 18 apprenticeship positions by working with [CareerWise Colorado](#), a statewide organization that creates opportunities for youth and businesses across Colorado by developing and supporting an innovative, sustainable youth apprenticeship programs. The team works with students to establish expectations and goals, provides employers with guidance on establishing a quality experience, checks in regularly to gauge progress and the need for revision, and ensures that evaluation efforts take place, both in terms of gaining employer feedback and in ensuring students reflect on their experience.

## EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

While teachers are responsible for connecting with employers, the Career Connections team plays an important role in this process. The district has established relationships with more than 100 industry partners, largely due to this team's efforts to network at industry events, make presentations to various groups, and establish direct connections with major employers in the area. Once these relationships are developed, the team either connects them with educators in various program areas or establishes individual work-based learning experiences such as internships for students who have shown an interest in a particular area.

## EMPLOYER PROFILE: WESTERN STATES FIRE PROTECTION

One of the district's most active partners is Western States Fire Protection, a company providing services including installation of fire sprinklers and suppression systems as well as alarm installation and monitoring. According to Bo Clapper, Service Department Manager, it can be challenging for some employers to build awareness of the opportunities they offer, and his work with Cherry Creek School District has been both very positive and very encouraging.

In addition to acting as a guest speaker, participating in career days and taking part in mock interviews, Clapper has already taken two interns from the district. He found the district to be very helpful in identifying and screening possible candidates, and then working with him through the design and establishment of the internships. (Western States Fire Protection offers paid internships, placing a premium on the opportunities they offer.)

The company takes one intern at a time, and makes sure they experience a wide range of occupations within the company, doing everything from installation of systems (including wiring and hanging alarm boxes) to project management to reviewing budgets. Interns work with a variety of employees, including both field and office staff.

Clapper notes that these internships address a real company need; they help the employer find quality people and allows them to evaluate them over a long period of time in a real-world setting. While the process can be time-intensive, the rewards can be similarly substantial.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information, contact Kelli Buffo, CTE Specialist, at [kbuffo@cherrycreekschools.org](mailto:kbuffo@cherrycreekschools.org); Dan Draper, Career Connections Coordinator, at [ddraper2@cherrycreekschools.org](mailto:ddraper2@cherrycreekschools.org); or Mike Wadleigh, Internship and Apprenticeship Specialist, at [mwadleigh@cherrycreekschools.org](mailto:mwadleigh@cherrycreekschools.org).

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Colorado CTE, housed at the Colorado Community College System to help Colorado CTE educators build strong and lasting relationships with employers and other stakeholders. For more information on CTE and other resources available to help you, please visit <http://coloradostateplan.com/>.

