

# Case Study: Mesa County Valley School District 51

*Rural communities can use the power of networks to find and engage partners*

[Mesa County Valley School District 51](#) is located in the western part of Colorado, and faces challenges similar to those of other rural districts: Business partners are few and far between, both in terms of numbers and distance, making it difficult to provide students with the kinds of work-based learning opportunities they need. Fortunately, thanks to district and community leaders invested in providing those opportunities, they were able to gather essential information on local workforce needs while at the same time securing work-based learning experiences for students across the district.

## **BACKGROUND**

Mesa County Valley School District 51 covers all of Mesa County, Colorado, serving 22,000 students through a network of schools that includes four high schools, each of which houses Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. Located in a rural area, Mesa County industry sectors include agriculture, advanced manufacturing, technology, and healthcare, but partners are spread across a wide geographic area.

The district, led until recently by Superintendent Ken Haptonstall, has taken some innovative steps in recent years to ensure a high-quality education for all students. They are pursuing a competency-based education model, in which students advanced based on mastery rather than seat time, and pursuing investments in CTE, such as working with advanced manufacturing firms to secure a standalone warehouse to be used as a training center. The support provided by the community for these and other types of innovative strategies is evident in the way that industry and the workforce system, despite the challenges of a rural environment, have come together to support work-based learning efforts across the district.

## **THE POWER THAT COMES FROM BUILDING A COALITION**

District 51 is fortunate to be located in a county with several organizations with an interest in workforce development. According to Andrea Bolton, Career and College Readiness Assistant Director for the district (and serving until recently as its Career & Technical Education Coordinator), representatives of

several of these institutions, including the [Mesa County Workforce Center](#) and the [Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce](#), have been meeting on a monthly basis for years with the school district, Colorado Mesa University, and Western Colorado Community College (a division of Colorado Mesa University), along with multiple individual business representatives, to discuss workforce needs and issues in order to coordinate activities and to ensure that secondary and postsecondary partners have accurate information on industry activities and needs. It should be noted that the district's superintendent not only attends many of these meetings, but additionally hosts his own business/education advisory group in order to gather as much industry input as possible.

### Establishing Staffing Infrastructure

One of the most powerful developments arising from this group's efforts has been the hiring of a dedicated Workforce Learning Coordinator who works full-time to build career awareness and establish work-based learning opportunities for district students. This position is funded in equal parts by the district, the Grand Junction Chamber, and the Mesa County Workforce Center, and her work is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding executed among the partners.

Housed at the Chamber office, this Workforce Learning Coordinator leads a Young Entrepreneurship Academy, which meets weekly at different locations, and culminates in students making a "Shark Tank"-type pitch to a panel of business leaders. In addition, she establishes work-based learning opportunities and considers ways of streamlining the internship process (which is traditionally very time-intensive) and promote work-based learning to students and their teachers.

### Postsecondary Engagement

The district is partnering with Colorado Mesa University directly on a shared career advisory program, in which they set up monthly industry tours for students of both institutions. The two institutions also partner on career fairs, coordinating efforts and industry participation in order to make these fairs as valuable as possible for both students and industry partners.

### Student and Employer Engagement with the Workforce Center

Some partners, like Mesa County Workforce Center, are spearheading initiatives (again with the support of other industry and education partners) to further strengthen workforce quality and connections within the county.

For example, the Workforce Center is currently building a destination website called "Find Your Future" (not yet online) which provides a suite of resources for students of all ages in terms of career exploration, with virtual job shadows, career information, links to local information and resources, locally produced industry content, and a community calendar highlighting opportunities for those interested in learning more about local companies and professions.

In addition to this new online resource, the Workforce Center has actively been working on a Work-Ready Community Initiative, part of a national program hosted by ACT. As the first county in Colorado to participate in this initiative, they have had a great deal of success in working with the schools to provide students with opportunities to earn a National Career Readiness Certificate, with 663 students earning the certificate during the 2017-2018 school year. They also work with industry to ensure their understanding and acceptance of such certificates: As of this writing, 126 area businesses officially recognize this certificate and look for it in their hiring activities.

## FUTURE PLANS

While District 51 and their education, workforce, chamber, and industry partners have built some excellent initiatives thanks to their collaborative efforts, in many ways they are just at the beginning stages of their work. They continue to increase the number of work-based learning opportunities available to students thanks to the Chamber-housed workplace learning position, and the efforts managed by Colorado Mesa University, including establishing workplace site visits and coordinating career fairs, are still at their early stages.

Additionally, while Mesa County Workforce Center has made remarkable progress with its Work-Ready Community Initiative, there is plenty of room for growth, while its “Find Your Future” website is still in pre-launch mode, which will require not only finalization but substantial promotion among its target audiences. So, while the partners have built a very strong collaborative base, they must continue to work together to build a truly great and sustainable workforce pipeline for Mesa County.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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## 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/>.

