

Caring for Colorado partnered with [Colorado Education Initiative](#) (CEI) in the fall of 2019 to launch [Youth Connections](#) — a \$6 million initiative designed to support public middle and high schools in fostering a culture and climate that meets students’ social, emotional and academic needs, particularly those students who experience the greatest barriers to feeling connected, supported and engaged.

Youth Connections officially commenced in January 2020 with the initial design phase process — the *LEAP Year* (Learn, Experiment, Aspire, Plan). Unaware of what the year would bring, the CEI team began their work visiting each of the four Youth Connections school district teams.



Landon Mascareñaz, Ed.D.
Colorado Education Initiative

“It was March 2020 and the CEI team headed to Alamosa to complete our final LEAP exploration visit. Following in the footsteps of visits in Sheridan, Cañon City and Grand Junction, the Alamosa visit was intended to launch the project into the design phase of the LEAP year. During the Alamosa visit, everyone was understandably agitated and distracted during the last day. This was the same day the stock market kept halting and it became clear to the United States that some level of shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic was necessary.

Two weeks later, CEI hosted conversations with Youth Connections districts to check in and ask, *is this still work that you will be able to prioritize?* What we heard from every district is that, while the pandemic was forcing significant challenges around prioritization, the work of Youth Connections was critical. In response, we forged ahead with Youth Connections despite these challenges and sought to adapt to the changing environment.

Now, one year later, all Youth Connections districts have submitted implementation plans, two districts started designing ahead of schedule with support from Caring for Colorado and we are preparing to review the next round of applicants for a second cohort. None of it could have been possible without the incredible support and encouragement of Caring for Colorado and the educators, families, and students of our partner districts. **The pandemic has put a major highlight on the need for exactly what Youth Connections offers: relationships that drive fundamentally different outcomes for kids.”**

Youth Connections COVID-19 Response Efforts

CEI Design Sprints

CEI facilitated a design sprint in June 2020 with 10 districts, including three YC districts (Alamosa, Cañon City, and Mesa County). The design sprint provided processing space for district leaders to share approaches and insights for fall reopening, and emphasized that social emotional development, relationships, connectedness, and equity are essential in the remote learning environment. This effort evolved into CEI’s Strategic Reopening Collaborative, through which CEI can share inspiring strategies and useful resources for districts and schools in Colorado and beyond.

Accelerated Implementation Fall 2020 Reopening Funding

To remain responsive to district needs, Caring for Colorado created an opportunity for Youth Connections’ district partners to access early funding for fall re-entry efforts, with an emphasis on equity. This opportunity was leveraged by two districts – Alamosa and Sheridan. Alamosa used the funds to interview *every* student and family about their needs, hopes, and concerns for reopening schools in

the fall. Sheridan focused early resources on increasing access to licensed mental health providers for staff.



Marsha Cody
*Interim Superintendent,
Alamosa School District*

"The [Accelerated Design Sprint](#) helped us develop intentional strategies to support students, families, and staff as they returned to school in fall 2020. CEI provided thought partnership and time to share ideas with other districts and Caring for Colorado provided the financial support to make it a reality. The outcome was a designated week to meet with all students and families on school lawns to discuss the coming year, sharing what they were excited for and what support they needed. It removed assumptions and identified needs (i.e., connectivity, vulnerable family members). Students and families shared that it took the fear out of returning to school, and it allowed us to provide the support families needed. Relationships between teachers and students began before the first day of school. It created a sense of community and collaboration as we started the 2020-2021 school year together."