

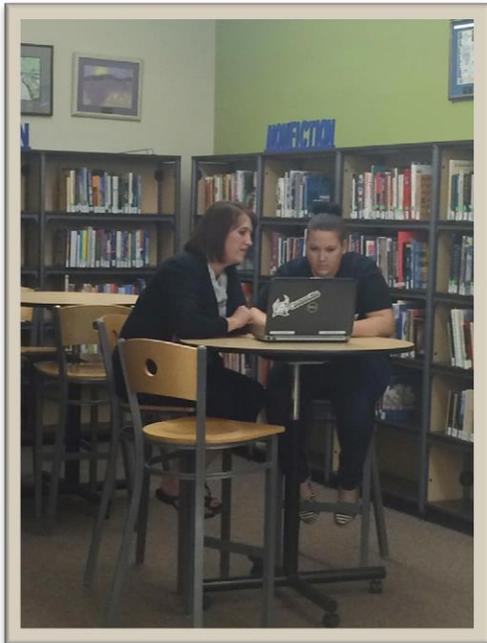


# Success Spotlight



**COLORADO**  
Department of Education

STORIES OF PROMISING PRACTICE



## Individual Career Academic Planning: How Center School District is Putting All the Pieces Together

**CENTER SCHOOL DISTRICT** sits in the heart of the scenic, high-altitude San Luis Valley, in south-central Colorado. It's a remote, rural, agricultural area, with large tracts of land dedicated to cultivation of a variety of crops, including alfalfa, barley, and carrots. But potatoes dominate the region. Large, open trucks filled to overflowing with potatoes are a common sight, lumbering along the valley's narrow roads.

Center's schools reflect the agricultural nature of the area, as well as the fact that the San Luis Valley (and all of southern Colorado) was part of Mexico until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Just over one quarter of Center's 648 preK-12<sup>th</sup>-grade students belong to migrant farmworker families, most of them from Mexico. This poses significant educational challenges, because students leave for extended periods of time as their parents follow work opportunities to Arizona and California during the winter months.

A large percentage of these students may also be undocumented, which creates additional challenges when it comes to financial aid for higher education.

Center students are almost universally low income: 94 percent qualify for subsidized lunches. The student body is 92 percent Latino, 5 percent white, and 2 percent Native American.

Colorado Department of Education surfaces and shares powerful stories from the field that get at the “why” and “how” behind the experiences and success stories teachers, students and administrators are having across the state so other districts can easily find models to apply in their own schools and foster positive learning environments for students. <http://getinspired.2revolutions.net>

[Center Consolidated School District 26JT](#), historically, has suffered from an astronomical dropout rate. “Twenty, 25 years ago it was as high as 64 percent,” said Katrina Ruggles, Center’s counselor and health and wellness coordinator. Many parents expected their children to start working at as early an age as possible, and a high school degree, let alone a college education, wasn’t a high priority.

About 38 percent of Center students come from families where neither parent finished high school, and 88 percent would be first-generation college-goers. So reducing the dropout rate and increasing the number of students enrolled in postsecondary education meant, in many cases, cutting against the grain of family expectations.

## Objective

Ruggles, a high-energy and popular fixture in Center schools, first came to the district in 2000. A native of Sanford, Colorado, 45 miles southwest of Center, Ruggles initially worked as the district’s mental health counselor. It didn’t take her long to notice that substance abuse problems – mostly alcohol – were pervasive among Center students, which further exacerbated the dropout problem.

The district lacked coherent substance abuse and teen pregnancy prevention programs.

Ruggles and Center High School Principal Kevin Jones were determined to change that, and began incorporating substance abuse and pregnancy prevention lessons into their middle- and high-school health education curriculum. Ruggles combined elements of [Botvin LifeSkills Training](#), [Glencoe Health](#) (a division of McGraw Hill), and her own lessons to strengthen the district’s approach to prevention.

In 2006, Ruggles started working with seniors on their Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP), to help them prepare for post-high school training or education to bolster their career prospects. For three years, it was an ad-hoc arrangement, with Ruggles asking teachers permission to come into their classrooms to work with students. Over time she started working with students in grades 9-12.

“It was too much for me to do well alone,” she said.

In 2009, Ruggles landed the first in a steady succession of [Colorado’s School Counselor Corps grants](#). She used that grant to get a school counseling degree and then to begin a steady overhaul and augmentation of the district’s counseling programs.



“Our kids came into senior year about what they’d be doing next,” she said. “They were totally unprepared for life after high school.” So Ruggles set about changing that.

## Strategy

First, Ruggles took over and beefed up a longstanding, mandatory course called Senior Seminar, aimed at helping students develop skills in areas like time and money management. But the real game-changer, she and Jones said, came in 2010, when the district implemented a program called ICAP Day. One Wednesday morning each month, all middle and high students spend from 8 - 11:50 a.m. in advisories, grouped by career interests.

Ruggles wrote the ICAP Day curriculum, and to this day writes monthly lesson plans, which she distributes to all teachers. She said she ties all her lesson plans to Colorado Department of Education’s [ICAP Quality Indicators](#).

“Putting something this systematic in place led to huge, tremendous growth,” in interest among students in postsecondary options, Jones said.

During ICAP Day, students hear from guest speakers from different fields – medicine, law enforcement, business -- and work intensively on career planning, using the [College in Colorado](#) web portal.

The curriculum focuses on exploration, Ruggles said. It begins with self-exploration, determining learning styles and passions. From there it moves on to career exploration and then college exploration. It then spirals back to self-exploration, career exploration, college exploration, going deeper each round.

“We help students discover the activities they need to do, the skills they need to acquire,” Ruggles said. “They work on resumes, applications for internships. We incorporate goal-setting, including course planning.”

Ruggles said her exploration focus, in addition to being tied to ICAP Quality Indicators, also uses elements of College in Colorado’s program, as well as the College Board’s [BigFuture](#) college search website.

Students can also take concurrent enrollment college classes for credit through Colorado State University, Adams State University (in neighboring Alamosa), and Trinidad State Junior College, which has a satellite campus in Alamosa.

The large number of migrant farmworker children pose the greatest challenge for a couple of reasons, Ruggles said. First, a significant number of them are undocumented, which limits their options when it comes to college financial aid and scholarships. The district works to help those students apply for [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status](#) (DACA) through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. This allows teens and young adults to work legally, even if they are undocumented.

Second, because the students are so mobile, they tend to fall behind in their coursework, and often lack the credits and class requirements to graduate on time and enroll in college. Ruggles and district counselors work with the students to ensure that they have written course sequence documents, so that if they move to another district or state, they know what classes they need to graduate.

College visits are also a big part of the district's post-secondary focus. Ruggles, Jones, and Skoglund Middle School Principal Luis Murillo have set up a three-year rotation of college visits, so that in the course of their middle and high school career, students get to visit schools ranging from Fort Lewis College in Durango to the University of Denver and Colorado State University.

Students visit classes, eat on campus and spend the night in dorms. "I'm a sucker for getting kids on campuses," Jones said. "It has an enormous impact." This is especially true for the significant number of Center students who have never ventured outside the Valley.

## Results

Since implementing a more intentional postsecondary awareness program, Center has seen a big spike in college enrollment among its graduates. In 2011, 36 percent of Center's graduates enrolled in a two- or four-year college. By 2015, that number had skyrocketed to 78 percent.

Still, Ruggles isn't satisfied. "We've been stuck in the mid-70s for a few years," she said.

But work with students and parents now pervades the community. Ruggles said the district holds an ICAP-focused parent night once each month, during which students share their ICAPs with their parents, and parents have a chance to participate in a student-led conference with ICAP advisors. Parents who can't or don't attend these meetings get a printout of their student's ICAP sent home, and are asked to sign and return a form stating that they have reviewed the plan.

"I work with parents and the community, and I sense that Center is a community with a college-going culture," said Murillo, who is in his second year with the school district. "Parents here know: 'my kid wants to go to college.' It speaks highly of the work this district has done."

Seniors can talk about their post-high school plans with clarity and specificity. Yosedit Romero, a 17-year-old senior, plans to attend Colorado State University and study psychology.

"I thought I wanted to be a lawyer when I was in middle school, but then we had a lawyer come talk to our advisory and I watched some videos (about the legal profession) and I kind of lost interest," Romero said. Early in high school, she took the College in Colorado Interest Profiler survey, which helped her realize psychology was her passion.

"We intentionally involved parents in the process through one, advisory boards and through two, parent education.

"We learned very early on that we needed to include social-emotional learning into our ICAP process."

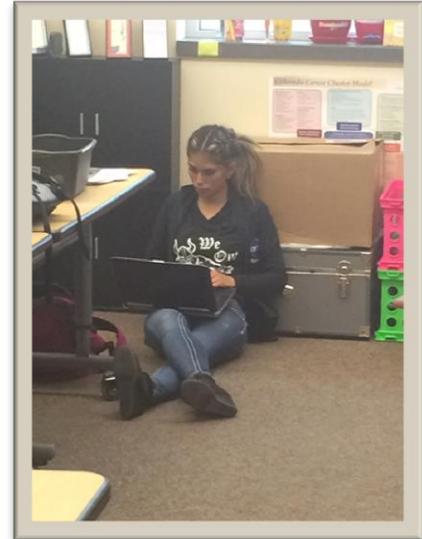
*Katrina Ruggles, Counselor  
Center School District*

Jasmine Peña never dreamed she would want to be a teacher. “I used to hate school, and I didn’t like teachers very much either,” the 17-year-old senior said. “I used to think I wanted to be a tattoo artist, then a cosmetologist, then a nurse.”

But as she worked on her ICAP and explored her options carefully, she came to realize that she had a passion for working with small children. She’ll be attending Trinidad State Junior College this fall, working toward an associate’s degree in early childhood development.

Students said the Senior Seminar is what Ruggles’ 18-year-old daughter Carmen called “the culmination of ICAP.”

“It helps you pull it all together, make it a reality,” she said. She hopes to attend Colorado State University to study environmental engineering.



A beneficial side effect of producing more career-focused students has been a dramatic decline in the teen pregnancy rate over the past decade. There were 54 births per 1,000 teen girls in 2004. By 2013, there were 18 births per 1,000 teen girls.

While stressing that no studies have linked the ICAP program to lower teen birth rates, there’s little doubt that “a vision for the future helps kids make better decisions,” Ruggles said.

Despite all its successes, Center still struggles with a high remediation rate, Ruggles said, meaning that many students arrive at their two- or four-year college unprepared to do college-level work. Attacking that is a district goal for the coming years.

Ruggles also hopes to incorporate career development work into other content areas, to make school seem relevant to students. In English classes, for example, students might work on their personal essays for scholarship and college applications.

District leaders express pride in what has been accomplished over the past several years, and are confident the momentum will continue to build. “The level of conversation I have with kids about their future is on a much higher level now,” Jones said. “When I ask a kid ‘what do you want to do with your life?’ I get at least an educated guess from everyone now. Our job is to support them in achieving those goals.”

## How to Do It: Tips for Implementing a Systemic ICAP Program

### 1. Objective

- How can implementing a strategically focused Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) program that feels relevant to students help boost their post-secondary participation and success?
- How can identifying all the pieces prepare graduating seniors for post- high school life?



### 2. Preparation

- Learn about Center School District’s ICAP Day program.
  - I. Watch this [introductory video](#).
  - II. Reach out to [Katrina Ruggles](#), who is now a Colorado Department of Education (CDE) ICAP trainer.
- Study best practices research and standards.
  - I. Study CDE’s [ICAP Quality Indicators](#).
  - II. Study [American School Counselor Association](#) standards.
  - III. Read the University of Chicago Consortium On Chicago School Research report [From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College](#).
  - IV. View [Colorado Counselor Corps Professional Development Modules](#).
- Work with teachers to put together a comprehensive plan for a robust ICAP program “It’s not extra work if done right; it’s working smarter.”
- Reach out to local businesses and colleges to gauge interest in participating.
- Read about [Botvin LifeSkills Training](#) and [Glencoe Health](#), two positive health and personal development programs used by Center.

### 3. Implementation

- Study [Colorado’s new graduation guidelines](#); align your work to them.
- Start slow and small, with one grade level or class.
- Choose an expert from among your staff to write lesson plans for teachers in the program’s early days.



- Restructure the school calendar to free up one day per month for ICAP day (half-day) and professional development around ICAP (half-day).
- Forge strong relationships with local businesses, governmental agencies, and colleges.
  - I. Businesses and agencies can provide internships. Shadowing opportunities, and guest speakers.
  - II. Colleges can provide concurrent enrollment opportunities, either online or on campus, depending on your district's geographical location.
  - III. College visits can also be set up for groups of students.

#### **4. Assessment/reflection**

- What worked?
- What did not work?
- How can it be adjusted?