
Successful Implementation of Colorado's Water Plan Requires a Data-driven Mindset

Nicole Seltzer
Executive Director, Colorado Foundation for Water Education

In the 15 years that I've conducted water education and outreach in Colorado, I've learned that the conversation never stops at water. To have an intelligent conversation about water, I also need to understand western history, ecology, forest health, economic development, recreation management and so much more. There are thousands of public policy issues you can connect back to water.

I think this is why I've so appreciated my time as the executive director of the Colorado Foundation for Water Education. As someone who enjoys making connections between people and issues, CFWE is the perfect home to explore meaningful topics through a lens of water. Even seemingly disconnected topics like leadership skills or behavior change are absolutely relevant to water conversations.

I've recently had the pleasure to work alongside Colorado Water Conservation Board staff to discuss implementation of the education and outreach strategies in Colorado's Water Plan. The conversation initially focused on the actions outlined in Chapter 9.5 to examine current gaps in water education, and use that information to support dedicated funding for outreach activities statewide. This is sorely needed, and will be a great starting point.

The plan contains much to be proud of, from goals around municipal water conservation to integration with land use planning to stream health to funding mechanisms. While they are wide ranging and diverse, I believe there is a common thread that connects them. None, in my opinion, are achievable without dedicated outreach and engagement strategies that have clear goals and metrics to measure success.

Good water education increases awareness of the severity and complexity of water issues, creating concern and the desire to get involved. Good water education broadens perspectives and helps us walk a mile in another's shoes, developing compassion for other viewpoints and a willingness to explore rather than disengage in the midst of disagreement. Good water education widens the number of people invested in our water and river systems, producing collaborative solutions that meet multiple needs. Good water education promotes uncommon alliances by connecting people around common interests instead of dividing them with their differences.

How, as the Colorado water community, can we support the CWCB as it seeks to implement these goals we've adopted together? From my vantage point, I see one fundamental priority that would put us on the right path. Adopting a data-driven mindset about water education would immediately increase the amount, quality and effectiveness of these programs, which is a backbone of water plan implementation.

Our profession is driven by and beholden to numbers: gallons per capita per day, milligrams per liter, pounds per square inch. But we rarely apply the same logic to outreach and education programs, or if we do, it is through proxies like the number of people at an event

or how many factsheets were handed out. What if we began to hold ourselves to a higher standard? Instead of collecting no or loosely relevant data, we clearly identified the outcomes we sought, and developed robust mechanisms to track them?

Two actions would help us move in the right direction, both of which are currently being considered by CWCB as they work to prioritize implementation of water plan goals.

First, the development and funding of a centralized, regularly repeated statewide survey of public knowledge, attitudes and values. We need a baseline as a state against which we can measure the success of education and outreach programs. There are numerous surveys that have been completed in the last 5 years, but most seek to answer a narrow set of questions, are limited to a certain geography and are never repeated. Just like we track the water quality in a stream before, during and after a project, we should measure shifts in public opinion and knowledge on water. To be truly useful, this undertaking must be a statewide partnership that is developed, funded and used by a wide variety of entities. And it must be repeated on a regular basis to have lasting value.

Second, we must create a set of consistent metrics that water education professionals could opt to use to gauge their effectiveness. You cannot understand that which you do not measure. A standardized set of metrics that can be used by all outreach and education programs in Colorado will help us set collective goals, hold ourselves accountable to meeting them, and create an ethic of outcomes-based success that does not currently exist.

CFWE has already taken several strategic steps that align well with water plan goals. These include fostering our Water Educator Network to increase the amount, quality and effectiveness of water education programs in Colorado, developing our Water Fluency program which empowers community leaders who are not currently engaged in water to critically think about these issues, and focusing our print and online content to examine a wider array of public policy issues through a lens of water. We also collect a large amount of both quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of our work, and use that to regularly reflect and improve upon our programs.

As Colorado's leader in water education, CFWE is excited to be CWCB's partner in the planning and execution of these important and far-reaching goals. Though I will step down as executive director in December, CFWE will remain committed to its core values of maintaining an unbiased, objective viewpoint that encompasses diverse perspectives on water resource issues and producing high-quality educational tools and experiences. We will use our expertise to help lead the way in implementing Colorado's outreach and education goals, and foster the conservations necessary to get there. And of course, we'll do all of this while also having a good time.

About the author: Nicole Seltzer is the Executive Director of the Colorado Foundation for Water Education, a non-profit organization whose vision is that all Coloradans make more informed water resource decisions through exposure to accurate and balanced water information. Nicole developed a passion for water issues while at the University of Kansas, and then expanded her knowledge with a Masters degree in Water Resources from the University of Vermont. She previously performed community and media relations work for the U.S. EPA and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, and volunteered on several non-profit Boards including the Colorado Watershed Assembly. She has led the Foundation through a period of growth by doubling staffing levels, diversifying programs, and increasing the budget by over 60% during her tenure.