



A Handbook on K-12 Policy Issues for Colorado School Board Members

October 2025 Revision



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ABOUT INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE

The Independence Institute educates and informs citizens, policymakers, opinion-makers, and the media about individual, economic, and journalistic freedoms. Since 1985, we've put ideas into action through policy briefings, groundbreaking legislation, coalition-building, ballot initiatives, and investigative reporting.

Through our policy centers, we address critical areas with a dedicated focus. The centers allow the public and media access to a concentrated source of expertise on education, taxes, healthcare, the Second Amendment, the U.S. Constitution, energy and the environment, government transparency, transportation, personal freedom, government reform, and local government.

Unlike other organizations that see government intervention as the only solution, the Independence Institute seeks to explore all alternatives, emphasizing private-sector and community-based solutions. The Independence Institute is recognized by friend and foe alike as one of the most effective organizations at setting a freedom agenda for Colorado and the United States.

ABOUT THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Independence Institute is a leader in addressing education's pressing issues in modern America. Our Education Policy Center promotes issues such as school choice, accountability, curriculum transparency, and parents' and teachers' rights through its publications, print media, websites, social media, radio, television, and policy briefings. The Education Policy Center has special projects to educate and empower parents, teachers, and school board members.

EDUCATION CENTER MISSION

The mission of the Education Policy Center is to advance K-12 public policy that empowers parents with the freedom to choose the most beneficial form of education for their children, fosters the development of effective delivery and support systems that enhance student learning, and provides accountability for the productive use of taxpayer dollars directed to education.

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School board member resources:

i2i.org/education/school-board-resources

Parent resources in English and Spanish:

schoolchoiceforkids.org

Teacher resources: independentteachers.org



ISSUES: CHOICE AND INNOVATION

OPEN ENROLLMENT

Open enrollment policies enable parental choice by allowing students to enroll in public schools or public school districts other than the ones to which they would ordinarily be assigned. Colorado has one of the least restrictive [open enrollment](#) laws in the United States. There are two types of open enrollment:

- Intradistrict open enrollment refers to students' ability to enroll in public schools other than their assigned neighborhood schools within their public school district's boundaries. Intradistrict open enrollment has been the law in Colorado since 1990.
- Interdistrict open enrollment refers to students' ability to enroll in public schools outside their district's boundaries. Interdistrict open enrollment began in the 1994-95 school year.

Colorado school districts must adopt open enrollment policies, timelines, and procedures. School districts and schools must make an effort to accept students

wishing to open enroll if there is adequate space and staff available. Additionally, parents are responsible for transportation to the school. Such requests can be denied if:

- The school does not offer appropriate programs, is not structured or equipped with the necessary facilities to meet the pupil's special needs, or does not offer a particular program requested.
- The pupil does not meet the established eligibility criteria for participation in a particular program, including age requirements, course prerequisites, and required levels of performance.
- The student has been expelled or is prohibited from enrolling for certain reasons defined in law.

Lessons and Observations

1. Individual district school boards must craft their open enrollment policies within the confines of Colorado statute. This potentially allows school boards to tailor their policies to encourage open enrollment and to create pathways through which



families from both inside and outside the district can more easily find the schools that best meet their students' needs.

2. Colorado's strong open enrollment laws create healthy competition among school districts and among schools within districts. Each student gained equates to more funding for schools and districts, which creates a strong incentive to attract and retain students. School board members should be attuned to the needs in their geographic area when it comes to creating, modifying, or expanding academic or other programs.
3. School districts should provide comprehensive information about their open enrollment policies on district websites, including details about timelines and where to submit applications.
4. Transportation to locations outside of assigned school zones can be challenging for families. School districts should provide busing options if possible.

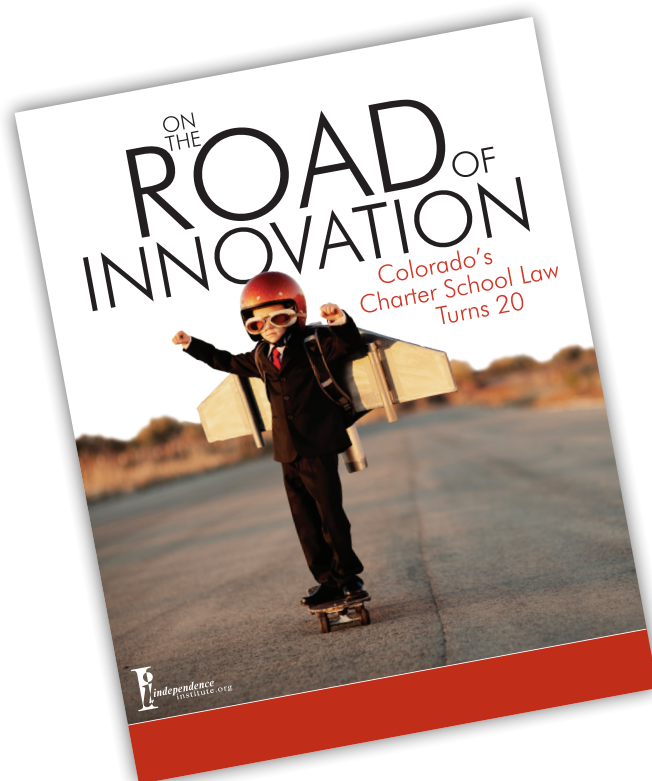
Key Resources

- [Colorado Open Enrollment Statute](#)
- History of Colorado's open enrollment law: [On the Road of Innovation: Colorado's Charter School Law Turns 20](#)
- [SchoolChoiceforKids.org open enrollment page](#)

CHARTER SCHOOLS

There are 47 states with a charter school law, plus Washington, D.C. Passed in 1993, Colorado's charter law is now over 30 years old. For historical background about the bipartisan support and the passage of Colorado's law, see [On the Road of Innovation: Colorado's Charter School Law Turns 20](#).

Charter schools are public schools that are given additional flexibility to innovate through waivers that exempt them from specific state and district requirements. Charter flexibility allows for various educational models, providing parents and students with additional options when selecting a school. For example, many charters offer a Core Knowledge, Classical, or Montessori model. Others focus specifically on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). For more information on waivers,



see the [Colorado Department of Education's Waiver Requests](#) page.

While charter schools must be authorized by a school district's board of education or the [Charter School Institute](#), (CSI) they are operated by their own boards instead of the authorizer's board. These boards are made up of parents, community members, or teachers. Some board members may include the charter school's founders, who often [made enormous sacrifices](#) to start the school.

Colorado has three charter school member organizations. The state's original charter school advocacy and support organization is the [Colorado League of Charter Schools](#). The other two organizations are the [Education Alliance of Colorado](#) and the Charter Advocacy Coalition.

Charter schools are public schools. Charter schools:

- have their own governing board
- cannot charge tuition
- cannot have special entrance requirements
- are bound by federal and state public school laws unless they receive a state-approved waiver

- must administer state academic assessments and conform to state academic standards
- may not discriminate
- must accept students with disabilities or special needs, if possible
- may not teach religion
- hire and fire personnel
- are not required to hire licensed teachers (special education is an exception)

Overview of Charter Schools in Colorado

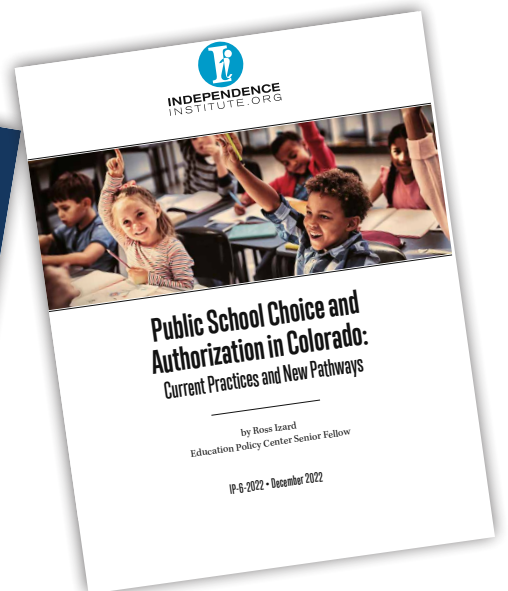
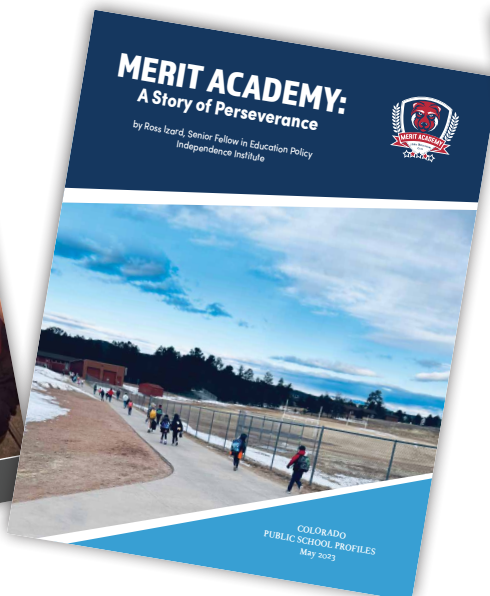
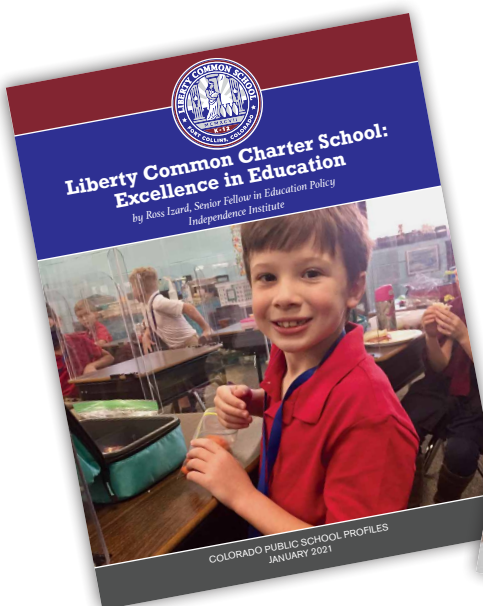
In the 2024-25 school year, 136,218 Colorado public school students were enrolled at 262 charter campuses across the state, accounting for over 15.5 percent of the state’s total public school enrollment. Despite arguments that charter schools promote racial segregation, in the 2024-2025 school year, minority students made up 52 percent of Colorado’s charter school enrollment—a slightly higher percentage than in traditional public schools (50.6 percent). Also, in 2024-25, Colorado charters served relatively fewer low-income children, with 40.5 percent of charter students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches under the National School Lunch Program compared to 45.6 percent of traditional public school students. Similarly, based on data from 2024-25, charters in Colorado serve a smaller percentage of special education students (9.4 percent) than traditional public schools (14.1 percent).¹

Charter Funding Issues

Charter schools face unique funding challenges. Across the United States, charter schools [tend to be underfunded](#) compared to traditional public schools. In Colorado, charter schools receive the same state per pupil revenue (PPR) as traditional public schools. However, some of that revenue may be charged back by a school district for central administrative costs associated with services provided to the school. Districts with enrollments under 500 students can withhold up to 15 percent of the PPR, while those with more than 500 students can withhold up to 5 percent. Authorizers must report the central administrative services provided and related costs to the charter school. Additionally, charter schools sometimes purchase services such as technology or sanitation from their authorizing districts.

In 2022, [House Bill 22-1294](#) passed, allowing charter schools to better serve special education students. One provision in the bill allows charter school networks or collaboratives to form administrative units that provide special education services to students with disabilities. Charter schools outside the network or collaborative can join the administrative unit or the Charter School Institute’s administrative unit for special education services. Previously, most charter schools were required to purchase special education services from their authorizing school district.

Charter funding inequity has historically been exacerbated by their frequent exclusion from district



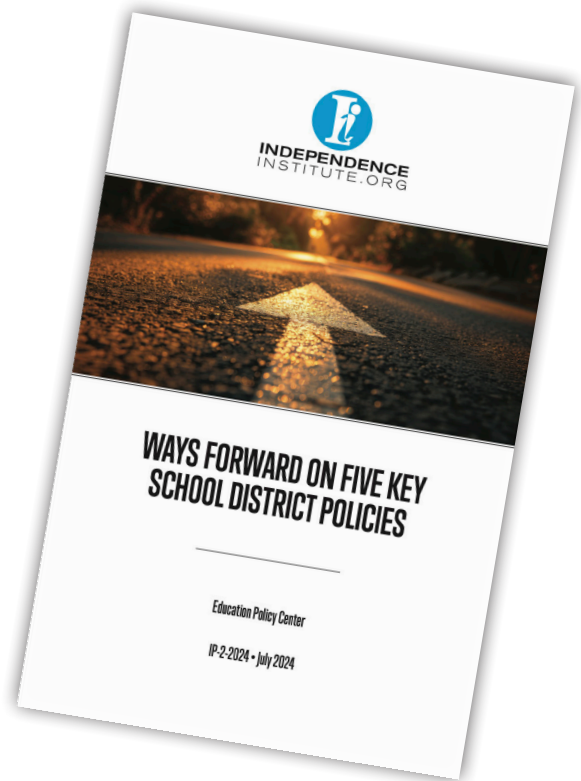
bond issues and mill levy overrides (MLO). Bond issues are voter-approved long-term debt obligations financed through property taxes. These are used to finance capital projects. MLOs, which also rely on property taxes, are voter-approved tax increases typically used to fund “soft” projects or initiatives like starting new programs, hiring teachers, or purchasing new textbooks or equipment. With the passage of 2017’s House Bill 17- 1375, Colorado’s lawmakers made clear their intention to begin addressing the issue of charter funding inequity, with the new legislation requiring school districts to either fully share MLO revenue with charter schools or to devise a plan for how to otherwise equitably distribute the revenue. The first academic year to see the law fully in effect was 2019-20.

A persistent challenge is that although charters must be included in conversations about bond issues, they are often not included in district bond requests. Thus, despite assistance from the [Charter School Capital Construction Fund](#), charter schools find themselves in a uniquely challenging position because they must pay for their own facilities out of their allotted per pupil revenue. Traditional public schools do not face this challenge, as their school facilities are funded at the district level using general fund money, certificates of participation (COPs), or voter-approved bond issues.

Charter School Academic Performance

Despite generally lower resources, typical charter school students outpace their traditional public school counterparts in math and reading, according to [a national study](#) released in 2023. For Black and Hispanic students, the gains are by large margins.

The positive trend in charter school performance is also evident in Colorado. According to the [State of Charter Schools Report 2024-2025](#), Colorado charters generally outperform non-charter schools on state performance measures overall, as well as with educationally disadvantaged subgroups. Well-run charter schools provide parents and students with powerful public school options.



Ways to Expand Charter School Options

The suggestions below are from the paper.)

Here are a few directions for school board members to consider, ranging from soft touches to potentially more controversial (but also more impactful) district policy changes:

1. **Solicit Charter School Applications from the Community** – School boards too often take a passive stance on charter applications, simply waiting for motivated parents or other community members to take the initiative and apply for charter school authorization. However, this does not have to be the case. School boards that believe parents in their districts need more educational options can actively solicit charter applications via a public resolution adopted at a board meeting, on social media, or through a media or press release. It may be surprising how many people are interested in starting a charter school—they just need a little encouragement.
2. **Start with “Yes” as a Default** – School board members who support parental choice should keep an open mind on charter school applications and start with “Yes” as their default position on new applications. The school board should approve the application if a prospective school

can demonstrate parental demand, avoid glaring issues, and meet basic requirements. “No” votes should be reserved only for situations where there are serious or egregious concerns with a school.

- 3. Voluntarily Relinquish Exclusive Chartering Authority** – Although almost all school districts in Colorado have exclusive chartering authority (ECA), they are not obligated by law to utilize it. A school board could decide to rescind or relinquish ECA voluntarily, allowing potential schools to apply to the Charter School Institute for authorization without needing consideration or a release from the local school board. Importantly, under this model, a school district and CSI remain the only two possible authorizers for public charter schools. Because these are the only two entities that can authorize charter schools under state law, there is no risk of an unknown or outside authorizer starting an unaccountable school—even if a board were to relinquish its exclusive chartering authority voluntarily.
- 4. Provide Automatic Releases to the Charter School Institute for Denied Charter Applications** – Similarly, a school board could opt to provide automatic releases to any charter schools whose applications the board does not approve, meaning those schools would be immediately able to seek authorization through CSI if the district is not willing or able to authorize directly. This would avoid the often contentious and sometimes time-consuming process of approving releases to CSI one by one.

Lessons and Observations

- School board members should remember that all charter school students are public school students. Many charter opponents treat charter students as somehow external to or different than other district students. This is simply not the case.
- School boards play an essential role in authorizing charter schools to operate in their districts. This creates exciting opportunities for school boards to encourage innovation and choice within their districts and provide more specialized education to meet the demands of their communities.
- School board members should exercise their best judgment when approving schools. They should

also monitor their charter schools’ performance and listen to charter parents’ feedback to make informed decisions on reauthorizing existing schools.

- School districts must ensure equitable funding for all charter school students under any applicable mill levy overrides. School boards should also work to include charter schools in bond issues, alleviating some of the facility-related financial burdens that charter schools may face.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [Charter Schools](#) webpage
- Colorado Department of Education, [State of Charter Schools Report 2024-2025](#)
- Independence Institute, [On the Road of Innovation: Colorado Charter School Law Turns 20](#)
- Independence Institute, [Ways Forward on Five Key School District Policies](#)
- Independence Institute, [The Challenges of Opening a Charter School: Three Colorado Case Studies](#)
- Independence Institute, [Public School Choice and Authorization in Colorado: Current Practices and New Pathways](#)
- Independence Institute Charter School Profile, [Power Technical: Preparing Educated and Ethical Leaders in the Trades](#)
- Independence Institute Charter School Profile, [Liberty Common Charter School: Excellence in Education](#)
- Independence Institute Charter School Profile, [Merit Academy: A Story of Perseverance](#)
- [Stanford University CREDO study, As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III 2023](#)

INNOVATION SCHOOLS AND WAIVERS

In 2008, the Colorado General Assembly adopted Senate Bill 08-130, the Innovation Schools Act. According to a [description](#) from the Colorado Department of Education website, the Act “provides a pathway for schools and districts to develop innovative practices, better meet the needs of individual students, and allow more autonomy to

make decisions at the school level.” The description continues:

The Act allows schools greater control over matters such as educational programming, personnel selection and evaluation, calendars and scheduling, and budgeting. Under the Act, a public school or group of public schools may submit an innovation plan to a local board of education outlining the innovative practices the school or schools intend to implement and identifying the state laws or rules and local policies that the school(s) seek to waive. Once approved by a local board of education, the district submits the innovation plans and waiver requests to the Colorado State Board of Education for approval.

According to the Colorado Department of Education’s [2024-25 Innovation Schools Annual Report](#), during the 2024-2025 school year, Colorado had 104 innovation schools serving 50,207 students across 18 districts. Denver, for whom the Act was primarily written, had by far the most such schools, with 49. Next is District 49 in El Paso County, with 11. Four rural school districts —Kit Carson, Mancos, Burlington, and Holyoke —serve their entire student population through the Innovation Schools Act.

Waiver requests provide innovation schools with the freedom to innovate. Waivers can address state laws, state regulations, and district policies. Individual schools may also opt out of collective bargaining provisions with a 60 percent vote from the affected employees. The school finance formula and the requirement to take state assessments are primary areas for which waivers cannot be provided. Innovation plans require reports that show evidence of sustained or boosted academic performance. Popular waivers requested in innovation plans include the following:

- School curriculum and program
- District calendar
- Salary schedule
- Teacher recruitment, licensure, training, evaluations, and dismissal

In 2022, [Senate Bill 22-197](#) passed, allowing an innovation school zone to use an alternative

governance structure by which the school district board of education delegates management activities of schools within the innovation zone to an alternative governing organization. Read the bill summary or the adopted legislation linked above for more details.

Lessons and Observations

1. Two primary opportunities exist with innovation status. First, a local board of education may foster a school-level culture of innovation and encourage creative requests for waivers. They can develop relationships with effective principals to bring discrete problems and opportunities into public dialogue. More ambitiously, a board may lead a [broad innovation](#) effort along the lines of District 49 in El Paso County.
2. Not all policy waivers require Innovation Schools Act procedures. Some items may need state-level waivers, but the local board can empower much of the innovation process through its own policy-making authority.
3. Innovation schools can be a useful tool in many situations, but they are not a panacea. They help to create the conditions to succeed by removing barriers, but they do not guarantee success. Their results have been mixed. As with any education model, academic achievement is dependent on the quality of the leadership, program, and instruction.
4. Consider that a new charter school may be preferred to an innovation school. The waiver power makes the two entities potentially very similar, but charters have more and easier access to needed waivers to enact their programs and policies.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [Innovation Schools](#) webpage

ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING

Both full-time online education and blended learning use internet technology to deliver instruction to students. However, blended learning blends technology with at least some face-to-face time with an instructor.

Colorado has both full-time online schools and full-time online programs. Many models enable students to access courses entirely from home, while others provide a physical location for students to access courses and receive help. Families from any location in Colorado have numerous online multi-district schools to choose from. Some school districts have authorized single-district schools or programs that serve students who primarily reside in their district. For a list of full-time online schools and programs, visit the Colorado Department of Education's [Online Schools and Programs](#) page.

Blended learning can take many forms, but, as its name suggests, blends online learning with more traditional classroom instruction or guidance. Blended learning has been defined as “a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.” Some examples of blended learning models:

- **Rotation:** Students alternate between face-to-face instruction and online lesson delivery in a classroom, computer lab, or home.
- **Flex:** The curriculum is delivered online, usually in a learning lab, while teachers provide on-site support through tutoring or small-group instruction.

- **Self-blend:** Students take traditional courses at school and self-selected online courses at home.
- **Enriched Virtual:** Students take classes online at home and check in with teachers for face-to-face learning as needed.

The benefits of effective technology integration in a classroom include reducing the time teachers spend on tasks like attendance, grading, data aggregation and analysis, and skills practice, thereby enabling teachers to focus on high-impact instructional strategies and personalized attention. Blended learning can give a teacher flexibility to have students who have mastered the material move ahead to the next online module while the teacher personally works with struggling students.

Lessons and Observations

1. Full-time online education works well for self-motivated students. Schools and programs should carefully screen students to ensure the model can meet students' educational needs. Students not motivated to learn and complete assignments in a traditional setting may not do well in a full-time online learning program. Although in some cases, students who are unhappy in a particular school social setting may be more educationally motivated in a full-time online program.
2. Blended learning can be innovative in raising

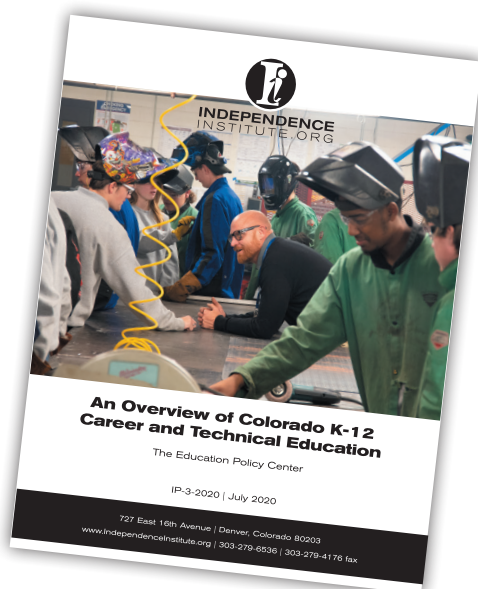


academic achievement and providing students with a personalized education. It can also be a way to reduce costs in some instances, but it is not suitable for every situation.

3. Blended learning requires a certain level of investment in the network infrastructure, software, and hardware tools necessary to make such models work. Additionally, some students may need access to technology for any work required at home. Board members should weigh the start-up costs against the potential benefits offered by blended learning.
4. School board members can and should investigate innovative new ways of allocating funds within their districts, particularly in cases where doing so could allow individual schools to build specialized programs like blended learning if they so choose. Perhaps the most promising example of such a funding mechanism is student-based budgeting. Additionally, school board members should pay close attention to strategies other districts use to cover blended learning-related costs.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education's [Online Schools and Programs](#) webpage
- Colorado Department of Education's [Blended Learning Initiative](#)
- [Colorado Empowered Learning: 2022-23 Legislative Report](#)

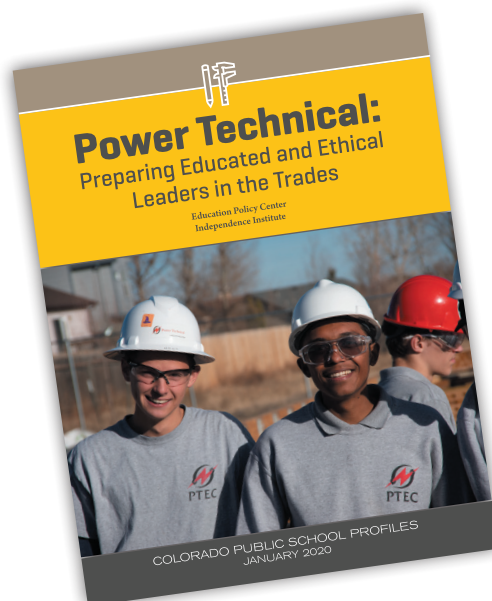


- [Colorado Digital Learning Solutions](#)
- [Maximizing Competency Education and Blended Learning](#)
- [Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation](#)
- [Aurora Institute](#)
- Independence Institute [School District Partnerships Help Colorado K-12 Blended Learning Take Flight](#) (2014)

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Technical training at the middle and high school levels has been offered to students for decades, but career and technical education (CTE) programs have garnered renewed attention in recent years. Though the umbrella term of CTE tends to elude a concise definition, the overarching aim of CTE is to emphasize instruction in skills and practical training to better integrate a student's education at the secondary level with their post-graduation careers. This means that CTE programs are not necessarily vocational training that prepares students to enter the workforce immediately upon graduating high school but may instead prepare them for postsecondary schooling. Yet, many CTE programs prepare students for skilled work immediately following high school graduation.

Colorado career and technical education programs tend to be subdivided into the following sets of updated [career clusters](#):



- Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources
- American Sign Language
- Architecture and Construction
- Barbering and Cosmetology
- Business Management and Administration
- Criminal Justice and Public Safety
- Education and Training
- Energy
- Engineering and Technology
- Entrepreneurship
- Fashion Design
- Finance
- Government and Public Administration
- Health Science
- Hospitality and Food Production
- Human Services
- Information Technology
- Manufacturing
- Marketing
- Media Arts
- Outdoor Recreational Leadership
- Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics

Even a superficial glance at the above categories reveals that many areas of career training under the CTE umbrella are not merely the type of instruction typically associated with low-skill jobs in the conventional idea of vocational education.

According to [2023-24 data](#) made available by the Colorado Community College System, 125,143 high school students and 41,892 middle school students in Colorado were enrolled in CTE programs. The same report also presents figures about student outcomes; these include high school graduation rates that are 13 percentage points higher than the statewide total, as well as a 97 percent employment, postsecondary enrollment, or military enlistment rate for CTE concentrators.

Effective instructors are key to the success of CTE programs. The Colorado Department of Education

makes available [a set of parameters](#) that prospective instructors must meet to be authorized to teach CTE courses.

Recommended reading: [An Overview of Colorado K-12 Career and Technical Education](#).

Lessons and Observations

1. Career and Technical Education programs personalize a student's academic needs, capacities, and postsecondary career interests. School and district administrators should pay special attention to their communities' characteristics for CTE instruction programs to work to their fullest potential.
2. There is much talk of a wide "skills gap" that exists in the U.S. labor market (especially in the various skilled trades), meaning that many positions remain unfilled because employers cannot find qualified applicants. CTE programs can address this issue by training students for jobs in high demand in their school's respective town, state, or region. Students who successfully complete CTE training can find fulfilling and often high-paying jobs without college debt.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education's [Career and Technical Education](#) webpage
- Colorado Community College System's CTE website, [Colorado Career and Technical Education](#)
- Independence Institute, [An Overview of Colorado K-12 Career and Technical Education](#)
- Independence Institute School Profile, [Power Technical: Preparing Educated and Ethical Leaders in the Trades](#)

LOCAL PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE: THE STORY OF THE DOUGLAS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CHOICE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

In 2003, efforts to assist families with private school tuition assistance passed Colorado's state legislature. In 2004, the [Colorado Supreme Court ruled](#) against the program based on a local school district control provision in the Colorado Constitution. This issue could not be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Based on the 2004 Colorado Supreme Court ruling, Douglas County School District, the state's third-largest school district, launched its pilot Choice Scholarship Program (CSP). The Douglas County School District Board of Education agreed that district students should have increased choice so that all students' educational needs were met. Students residing within the district's boundaries who had been enrolled in a Douglas County public school for at least one year were eligible to apply for a scholarship under the CSP and could receive as much as 75 percent of per pupil funding toward their education at a participating non-public school.

Before the program's first academic year could even commence, plaintiffs, including the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, moved to challenge the CSP. The Denver

District Court enjoined the program days before CSP participants were scheduled to begin attending their schools; subsequently, it struck the program down. The Colorado Court of Appeals then sided with the Douglas County Board and issued a ruling favorable to the scholarship program. However, this decision was overturned by a 2015 Colorado Supreme Court decision that declared that the Choice Scholarship Program provided government aid to religious institutions.

The Douglas County case made its way to the United States Supreme Court, which vacated the Colorado ruling and directed the state court to reconsider its decision in light of the 2017 decision in *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer*. Before the Colorado Supreme Court could revisit the case, the newly elected Douglas County Board of Education voted unanimously to terminate the Choice Scholarship Program in December 2017.

With the program's ending, Colorado's educational choice landscape effectively reverted to what it had been prior to 2011, as all rulings were rendered moot, and the Court handed down no decision to clarify the status of private school choice in the state.

In July 2019, the United States Supreme Court announced that it would hear the case of *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*. The petitioners were a group of mothers who wanted to send their children to private religious schools with money from a state scholarship program. A modest state tax credit incentivized philanthropic contributions to the scholarship program. The mothers challenged a state rule that barred funding from private religious schools from the program. Though the case was not perfectly analogous to what happened in Douglas County, it stood to clarify some aspects of the constitutionality of state-level Blaine provisions, which are written into a number of state constitutions to bar state aid from benefitting "sectarian" institutions.

On June 30, 2020, the [U.S. Supreme Court ruled](#) in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* that states that are subsidizing private education cannot disqualify a private school from participating in a school choice program solely because it is a religious school.



SCHOOL CHOICE

Another case regarding the constitutionality of private school choice was decided on June 21, 2022. The [U.S. Supreme Court ruled](#) in *Carson v. Makin* that Maine in 1981 violated the U.S. Constitution by no longer allowing parents to choose religious schools when participating in the Town Tuitioning Program. The program was launched in 1873 to provide tuition assistance to students to attend a private school when a public school was not located in a geographic area. The Court held that a state may not prohibit families participating in a private school choice program from choosing schools that include religious instruction.

Lessons and Observations

1. School districts interested in instituting a private school choice program should contact experts in the school choice legal field and individuals with institutional knowledge of aspects of the Douglas County School District program. Independence Institute has long been involved in viable private school choice efforts in Colorado and can make the appropriate local and national connections.
2. Public and private schools educate the public—a good relationship between the two benefits the community.

ISSUES: THE COLORADO READ ACT

THE SCIENCE OF READING

Local board of education members have the unique opportunity to impact each student enrolled in their district's public schools. As leaders, they are responsible for holding their superintendents accountable for ensuring students become proficient readers. Educators and researchers have long debated “the Reading Wars,” a term used to describe the debate over which approach to teaching reading is most effective for children. Essentially, there are two schools of thought:

- Those who advocate for reading instruction centered around the importance of explicit instruction in the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) to equip students with “the code” to learn to read the English language.
- Those who are proponents of whole language, an approach that prioritizes immersing children in authentic literature.

The key difference between the two approaches is that the first is based on explicit instruction. This means the teacher directly instructs students in the skill or content to be learned, using unambiguous language. The latter assumes that a child will learn to read independently by being immersed in literature.

The last three decades have brought important research and understanding to this age-old debate. Through modern technology, cognitive neuroscientists have been able to study the neural pathways of children who read fluently and those who struggle with reading. We now have evidence of the instruction needed to train the brain to read. As cognitive neuroscientist [Stanislas Dehaene states](#), “It simply is not true that there are hundreds of ways to learn to read.... When it comes to reading, all [children] have roughly the same brain that imposes the same constraints and the same learning sequence.”²

In 2025, only 42 percent of third-grade students in Colorado were considered proficient at reading and writing, as measured by the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the Colorado Measures of Academic

Success (CMAS). This means 58 percent of Colorado third graders do not read and write at grade level. The stark reality is that [children who miss this third-grade](#) milestone are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than their peers who read proficiently.

The Colorado legislature and Colorado State Board of Education have taken steps to provide more direction on how schools teach reading, aligning with the research on how children learn to read. The [Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act](#) (READ Act), passed into law in 2012, focuses on early literacy development for all students, especially those at risk of not reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

Children who fall below grade level on interim assessments are given individual READ plans, which must include explicit steps teachers will take to address learning gaps specific to each child's needs aggressively.

Under the READ Act, all local education providers in Colorado are required to use instructional programs in reading that are evidence- and scientifically-based and that focus on reading competency in the

areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency (including oral skills), and reading comprehension, regardless of funding source. When READ Act funds are spent on instructional programs, a school district must choose a program approved by the Colorado Department of Education.

A classroom teacher is the single most impactful component of a child's success in school. In an effort to increase a teacher's knowledge of how children learn to read, all K-3 teachers in Colorado are required to complete 45 hours of evidence-based training in teaching reading.

The requirement is not just limited to classroom teachers. The READ Act defines a 'teacher' as: "The professional responsible for the literacy instruction of the student(s) and may include the main instructor for a class, an instructional coach, reading interventionist, special education teacher, Title I teacher or other personnel who are identified as effective in the teaching of reading."

In 2022, [legislation](#) was passed requiring [principals and administrators](#) who work in schools that include



grades K-3 to complete 20 hours of evidence-based training in the Science of Reading by August 1, 2024. In 2025, [legislation](#) was passed requiring public schools, starting no later than the 2027-28 school year, to implement a screening process for identifying early elementary school students with characteristics of dyslexia.

In the fall of 2025, the Colorado Department of Education released reading [resources](#) that school districts can share with families.

Every school board member should ask the following questions:

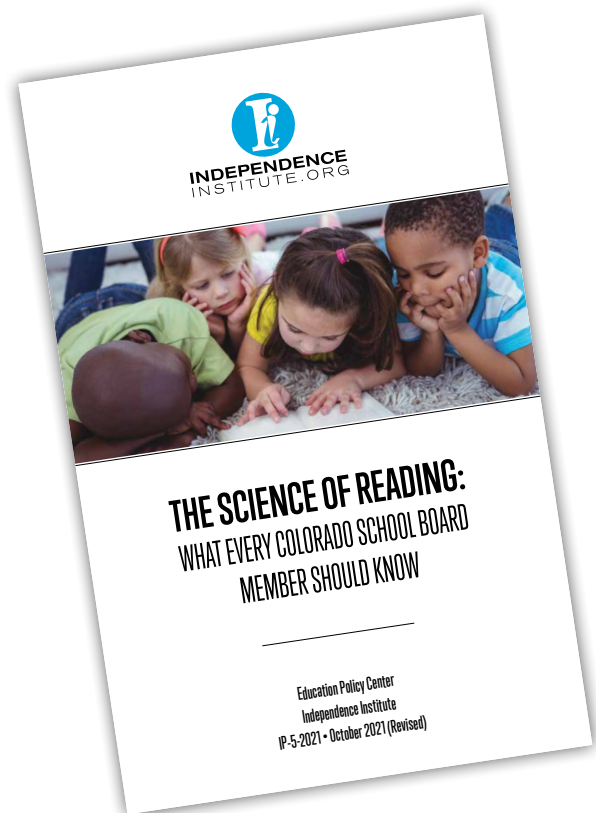
- What is the percentage of students at the district level and school level that meet or exceed proficiency on all elementary English Language Arts CMAS assessments? (Look at subgroups, too.)
- How many students at the district and school levels have a Significant Reading Deficiency?
- Are district schools using reading programs and interim assessments that are listed on the Colorado Department of Education’s advisory list?
- How is the district spending its READ Act dollars? Are the funds being used wisely?
- What percentage of the district’s required teachers, principals, and administrators have completed evidence-based training in the Science of Reading?
- Does the district offer the 45-hour training in Structured Literacy to parents and community members?
- How can I become a champion for literacy in my district?

Imagine the difference for Colorado’s children and society if all school board members followed the necessary steps to ensure every child in their districts has the appropriate instruction and supports to learn to read at grade level or above.

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [The Science of Reading: What Every Colorado School Board Member Should Know](#)
- Colorado Department of Education, [The Colorado READ Act](#) webpages

- Colorado Department of Education, [Science of Reading Resources for Families](#)
- Zaner-Bloser, [The Science of Reading: Evidence for a New Era of Reading Instruction](#)
- Amplify:
 - » Amplify Literacy [Hub: www.amplify.com/literacy-hub](http://www.amplify.com/literacy-hub)
 - » Science of Reading Podcast: <https://amplify.com/science-of-reading-the-podcast>
 - » Science of Reading Primers, scroll down for Parts 1 and 2: <https://amplify.com/literacy-hub>



ISSUES: TRANSPARENCY

CURRICULUM TRANSPARENCY

According to the Colorado state constitution in Article IX, Sections 15 and 16, Colorado school boards have the constitutional authority to control the instruction in the public schools of their respective districts. Neither the Colorado legislature nor the State Board of Education have the power to prescribe textbooks used in public schools. School boards should take this responsibility seriously and ensure that the textbooks and other materials they approve focus on academics without the infusion of political agendas.

Due to extended periods of virtual learning during school shutdowns, heightened social tensions, and extensive media coverage of a variety of hot-button issues, parents have taken a keener interest in the business of their children's education than at any other time in recent memory.

In particular, parents have demanded more access to information regarding which curricula schools adopt, which educational materials are utilized in the classroom, and how educators are trained to handle difficult or controversial subjects. The ever-increasing use of digital materials—often locked behind portals and passwords—has led to new sources of friction and technological hurdles for families to overcome as they strive to be more involved in their children's education.

Parental requests for information in the post-COVID era have highlighted an interesting challenge: existing state laws and local district policies governing the cataloging and disclosure of curricula and materials were not designed to provide the level of transparency modern parents demand.

Instead of finding the proverbial “open book” when it comes to what and how their children are taught, which one might expect from a taxpayer-funded enterprise like public education, many parents have found themselves needing to navigate refusals to provide information, complex bureaucratic processes, and disagreements about to what extent current law and policy allows them access to educational materials and other information.

Colorado's current laws and local policies could be strengthened to equip parents with the information they need to make sound educational choices and act as full partners in their children's education.

School district boards should pass curriculum transparency policies that clarify to staff and parents that all educational materials are covered under the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) and that parents should not be forced to file a CORA request to access materials used to teach their children. Policies should include supplemental materials and materials used by third-party presenters, including the content of their presentations. For more on this topic, and a model policy, read [Curriculum Transparency: A Must for Effective Parent-Teacher Partnerships](#).

U.S. Supreme Court Ruling Requires Transparency

The U.S. Supreme Court released its opinion on June 27, 2025, in the case of [Mahmoud v. Taylor](#), affirming the parental right to direct the education of their children.

The Board of Education of Montgomery County, Maryland, incorporated LGBTQ+ storybooks into the elementary Language Arts curriculum. The district



also discontinued the option for parents to opt out of these books, which was previously available. In response, a group of parents from various faith backgrounds filed a lawsuit against the district.

Justice Alito delivered the opinion of the Court. Referring to the LGBTQ+ storybooks used in the Montgomery County elementary classrooms, he stated, “These books-and associated educational instructions provided to teachers-are designed to ‘disrupt’ children’s thinking about sexuality and gender.” He declared, “A government burdens the religious exercise of parents when it requires them to submit their children to instruction that poses ‘a very real threat of undermining’ the religious beliefs and practices that the parents wish to instill.”

The High Court reversed the Court of Appeals’ decision to deny an injunction and remanded the case for further proceedings consistent with the Court’s opinion. As the lawsuit proceeds, the school district must notify parents when the books will be used in class and allow parents to excuse their children from instruction.

The ruling affects all public schools across the nation. Colorado school boards must adopt policies that align with the Court’s opinion. While public schools can continue using LGBTQ+ books, they must first notify parents and provide them with the opportunity to opt their children out of activities pertaining to the books.

In 2019, the Colorado legislature passed [HB19-1192](#), which included the teaching of the historical and social contributions of LGBTQ individuals, who are also minorities, into [Colorado’s Social Studies Academic Standards](#). The State Board of Education voted to include this requirement beginning in first grade. As public schools are required to meet or exceed state academic standards, teachers are seeking resources to achieve these standards in the classroom effectively.

For example, the children’s book *Sylvia and Marsha Start a Revolution!* is about two transgender women of color who helped kickstart the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion. This book is a resource directly tied to one of Colorado’s first-grade social studies standards and is one of many posted on the Colorado Department of

Education’s (CDE) [website as an optional resource](#) for teachers to read to their six-year-old students.

Colorado does not have an opt-out law for curriculum, except for Comprehensive Human Sexuality courses, which cannot begin until the fourth grade, and for student surveys requiring personal information.

School districts vary significantly in how their administrative and board policies address the teaching of controversial issues or the use of supplementary resources introduced into the classroom by principals or teachers. Following the *Mahmood v. Taylor* ruling, school boards may need to revise one or more policies to ensure compliance. Colorado school districts should be inclusive and respect all parents’ deeply held beliefs regarding sex and gender education, allowing opt-outs beyond those based solely on religious views.

MISCELLANEOUS TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVES

School boards must comply with the Open Meetings Act, provide online financial transparency, and adhere to the spirit of Proposition 104 in conducting open union negotiations. Local school boards should consider pursuing other advances in transparency.

The following list of questions, though not exhaustive, could open the door to changes in local policy and practice that promote good government and greater accountability to parents and taxpayers:

- Does our district live-stream board meetings and employee union negotiations (if applicable) online?
- Does our district provide the public with an online method to sign up to comment during board meetings?
- Are relevant documents and agenda items publicly posted on the website in a timely manner, using a service such as Board Docs?
- Does the district’s website include a searchable database of contracts, including the superintendent’s contract and agreements of \$10,000 or more with private vendors?
- Does our district post board-approved curricula on the district’s website?
- Since curriculum and textbook review is one of the board’s primary responsibilities, is there a policy that ensures public observation and reporting?

- Is basic information (including contact information) for school board members easily accessible on the district’s website?
- Is the information for how to submit a Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) request easy to locate and access on the district’s website?
- Do the district’s board meetings allow individual directors to remove items from the consent agenda for discussion?

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [Curriculum Transparency: A Must for Effective Parent-Teacher Partnerships](#)
- [Ballotpedia, Transparency Checklist](#)

ISSUES: DOLLARS AND CENTS

SCHOOL FUNDING FACTS

Colorado K-12 public schools are primarily funded through a combination of state, local, and federal tax dollars, along with various other revenues collected through fees and private grants.

The Colorado General Assembly has budgeted \$10 billion in student formula funds for the state’s public schools in FY 2025-26. Of that amount, \$4.6 billion is anticipated to come from local funds, and \$5.5 billion from the state. An additional \$559 million has been appropriated for categorical programs. The statewide average per-pupil revenue is projected to be \$11,858, a 3.5 percent increase from the previous school year.³

When discussing school funding levels, observers often only count per pupil revenue. But this figure excludes billions of dollars in additional revenue. According to the most recent Colorado Department of Education data, the total revenue spent on PK-12 education in FY 2023-24 was \$17.6 billion, or \$20,481 per funded pupil.⁴

Comparing state-by-state school funding data remains a challenge. In attempting to measure the same things and drawing from the same pool of information, two



different credible entities can report two different results, depending on what specific data is included and what factors are adjusted for. Additionally, most state rankings represent statewide averages that conceal that some schools or districts spend more than others based on their specific demographics and needs. Some outlets publish school finance rankings, and Colorado ranks as follows:

United States Census Bureau 2023 Public Education Finance Data: Colorado is ranked 29th in revenue and 28th in spending⁵

National Education Association 2023-24: Colorado is ranked 23rd in revenue and 21st in spending⁶

Lessons and Observations

Be wary of state-by-state K-12 revenue and expenditure comparisons because many different categories and funding sources can produce rankings that reflect a specific policy objective.

Neither spending nor revenue guarantees academic achievement.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [School Finance](#) webpage
- Colorado Department of Education explanation of [Colorado's new School Finance Formula](#)
- Independence Institute, [Counting the Cash Again: An Update on Colorado School Finance](#) (Figures from 2016, but offers valuable insights.)



SCHOOL FINANCE FORMULA

School board members should be familiar with how school districts receive funding. Each year, the state legislature sets the primary funding for Colorado public schools through the School Finance Act and appropriates funds through the state's budget bill, referred to as the Long Bill.

After three decades of the same school finance formula, the state legislature created a new formula in 2024 with the passage of [HB 24-1448](#). Changes made to the formula were meant to prioritize students and increase funding transparency. The new formula will be phased in over six years, from FY2025-26 to full implementation by FY2031-32.

The following is a high-level and simplified summary of school finance:

The legislature sets the statewide base funding amount in the School Finance Act, adds weights for students with specific needs, and then adds additional weights according to district factors.

Figure 1 on the following page is a chart from a memo by the [Colorado Legislative Council](#) that illustrates the new school finance formula.

As the chart shows, Total Program funding can be calculated starting with the uniform Foundation funding, then adding student-specific factors including the number of at-risk students, English language learners, and special education students, followed by district factors, including cost of living, size of district, locale (rural/town fringe, distant, or remote), and last by adding online and extended high school funding.

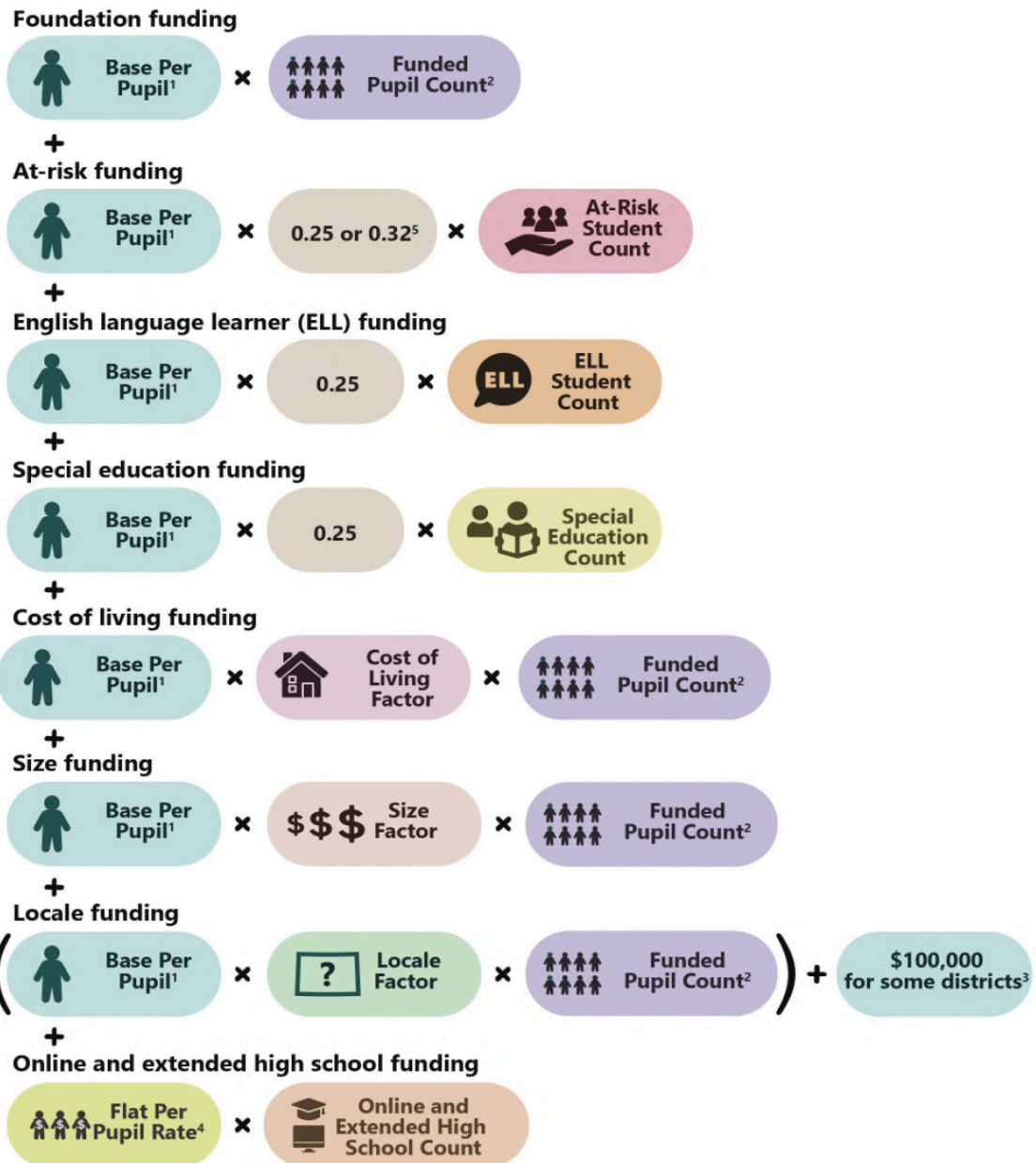
The new formula is not too dissimilar from the expiring formula. However, the new formula is simpler, more transparent, adds funding for special education, adds a locale factor, and modifies how pupil enrollment is calculated.⁷

The new formula will be phased in over a period of six years as follows:

For FY2025-26 and FY2026-27, each district and the Charter School Institute's Total Program will be the

Figure 1
New School Finance Formula Under HB24-1448

District Total Program Funding =



¹ Statewide base per pupil funding, which is constitutionally required to increase each year under Amendment 23

² Funded pupil count excluding online and extended high school students

³ Districts with a locale designation of Rural Remote or Town Remote receive an additional \$100,000

⁴ Online and extended high school students are funded at a flat per pupil rate, different than the base per pupil rate.

⁵ Only districts with less than 7,000 funded pupils and greater than 70 percent at risk students receive the 0.32 factor weight.

greater of their Total Program amount for FY2024-25, or the amount calculated under the expiring formula plus a percentage of the difference between the new and expiring formulas. In FY2025-26, the percentage will be 15 percent, and in FY2026-27, it will be 30 percent.

From FY2027-28 to FY2030-31, each district and the Charter School Institute's Total Program funding will be the greater of their Total Program amount under the expiring formula plus 1 percent of that amount, or the amount calculated under the expiring formula plus a percentage of the difference between the new and expiring formulas. In FY2027-28, the percentage will be 45 percent, in FY2028-29, it will be 60 percent, in FY2029-30, it will be 75 percent, and in FY2030-31, it will be 90 percent.

Where does the funding come from: A combination of local and state dollars pays for School Finance Act allotments to districts. The Local Share consists of money collected from a district's standard property tax assessment and from specific ownership taxes on vehicle registrations. These revenues provide the first portion of school funding in any school district.

The difference between the local share and the calculated Total Program amount is then backfilled by the State Share from the Colorado treasury. CDE pays out the amount on a monthly basis, adjusted over time from original projections to match precise figures. The state share comes from three sources of revenue: the Colorado General Fund, the State Education Fund, and the State Public School Fund.

A term commonly heard in Colorado education funding debates is the Budget Stabilization Factor (previously referred to as the Negative Factor). This theoretical figure refers to the difference between the current Total Program and the amount available in the Total Program had the state followed the funding increase the requirements of [Amendment 23, passed in 2000](#). The Budget Stabilization Factor was eliminated by Colorado legislators with the passage of HB24-1448.

Additional Funding Sources

Whether measuring the total tax revenues received by Colorado K-12 agencies or the total funds available for

operating expenses, the amount of money allocated through the state's School Finance Act represents only a portion of total funds. Other sources of revenue include:

State categorical programs: School districts receive state revenue for programs that serve special groups of students or student needs. In 2025-26, approximately \$559 million in assigned state funds will support the following categorical programs:

- Special education for children with disabilities
- English language proficiency
- Transportation
- Career and technical education
- Special education for gifted and talented education
- Expelled and at-risk student services grant Program
- Small attendance centers
- Comprehensive health education

Local mill levy overrides: Voter-approved property tax funds supplement the school district's general fund or other specific initiatives. Statewide, mill levy override revenue for FY 2023-24 totaled roughly \$1.7 billion.

Local Bonds: Voter-approved bond debt for major capital construction projects. Statewide, bonded debt mill levy revenue for FY 2023-24 brought in about \$1.5 billion.

Local and state facilities funding sources: The primary option to pay for facilities outside the general budget is to finance debt through local bond elections. The state has also made available the competitive BEST (Building Excellent Schools Today) matching grant program and a loan program for capital improvements in "growth districts."

Federal funds: For FY 2023-24, Colorado received \$1.4 billion in K-12 education funding from the federal government. These revenues include but are not limited to, funds received for vocational education, education of children with disabilities, adult education, migrant children education, and nutrition and meal programs.

Federal COVID-19 Funds: Congress passed three stimulus bills that include funding for education: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (March 2020); the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act (December 2020); and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act (March 2021). Colorado received over \$2 billion in combined COVID aid for elementary and secondary education. See the [CDE Overview](#).

Lessons and Observations

1. The only area in which local school boards can actively drive changes to revenue is through a local mill-levy override or a debt-increasing bond campaign. In the best interests of making wise use of taxpayer dollars, this approach should not be pursued before streamlining administrative overhead and seeking flexible options for financing employee PERA pensions, among other initiatives.
2. To gain taxpayers' support for an increase in school district revenue, they need to feel confident that the school district is focused on student academic achievement.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [Understanding Colorado School Finance](#)
- Colorado Department of Education, [School Finance Funding](#) (School district level details 2011-12 to present)
- Colorado Joint Budget Committee, [Appropriations Report Fiscal Year 2025-26](#)

K-12 FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY

The national movement toward greater transparency of government financial activities affects school districts and other local education agencies. In 2010, the Colorado General Assembly passed House Bill 1036, the Public School Financial Transparency Act. Signed into law by then-Governor Bill Ritter, the Act requires “local education providers” – including school districts, the Charter School Institute, charter schools, and Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) – to post a wide range of financial information online in an accessible and downloadable format. Early levels of compliance ranged from

incomplete and poor quality to “going above and beyond the call of duty” with user-friendly, searchable databases.

The passage of the 2014 Student Success Act (House Bill 1292) included a revamping of K-12 financial transparency requirements. In 2017, the state released a [website](#) where citizens can compare K-12 expenditures across districts and schools. The website supersedes and replaces the requirement for school districts to post financial information on their sites. Like nearly all school finance sources, the website only reports revenue and expenditures from specific sources.

Lessons and Observations

1. Colorado's first state legislative effort to promote online K-12 financial transparency occurred in 2009. Even before a bill passed, several school districts (including District 49 and Jefferson County) moved ahead of the curve to build greater trust with the public. Nothing in state law prevents districts from taking additional steps beyond existing requirements.
2. School boards should not discontinue all current financial transparency reporting practices simply because state requirements changed in 2017. Many posted documents and other data will remain useful.

Key Resource

- [Financial Transparency for Colorado Schools website](#)

STUDENT-BASED BUDGETING

Colorado school districts were at the forefront of the [move to student-based budgeting](#) (SBB)—also known as student-based allocation (SBA) or “backpack funding.” Such systems are most clearly identified by designating a significant share of per pupil funding to follow students to the school where they are enrolled. Funding should reach the school in the form of actual dollars that can be spent flexibly at school leaders' discretion, not as district programs or staffing formulas. In essence, SBB extends Colorado's established system of “local control” beyond district headquarters to decision-makers closer to individual

students. It also bolsters parental choice by directing more dollars to follow students directly to their chosen public school. SBB promotes the following established benefits:

- **Transparency:** to show more clearly the amount of funding distributed to individual schools and for which purposes
- **Equity:** to ensure a rough parity of funds distributed based on actual identified student need
- **Flexibility:** to give school leaders and communities the power and responsibility to make more program decisions with budgeted dollars

In addition, Colorado’s SBB practitioners demonstrate a level of diversity in detail and implementation. To learn more, read Independence Institute’s 2015 publication, [Colorado Student-Based Budgeting On the Rise.](#))

School Board Role: Little is needed except to set the direction for the superintendent or other district leaders to pursue the development of SBB. Certainly, no state intervention is required, just school board-level oversight to ensure progress is made toward smarter spending in service of student needs.

Lessons and Observations

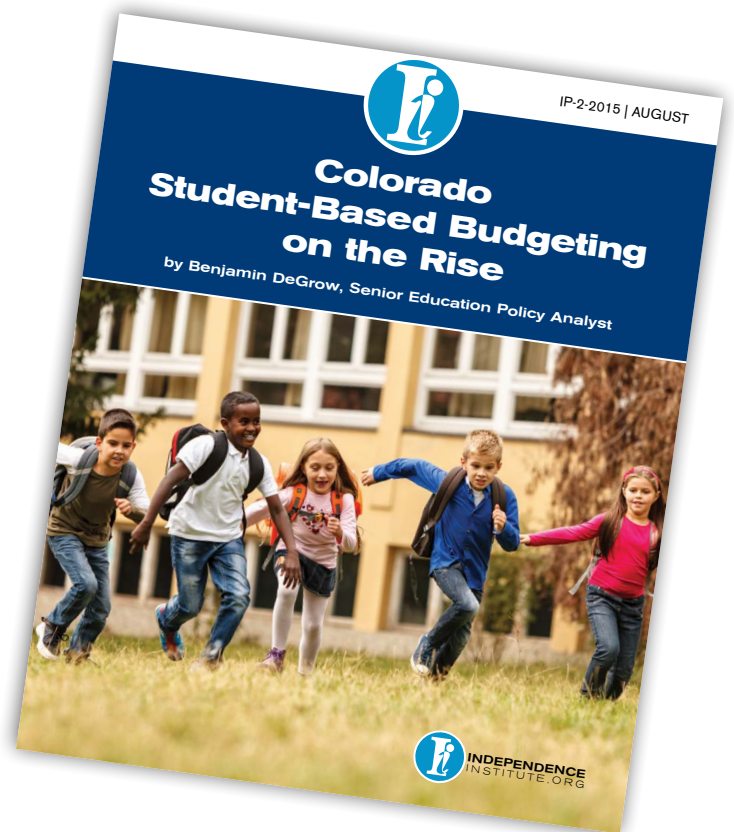
1. District leadership needs to set the standard for a culture shift, but the chief business or financial officer role is crucial to success, using accounting tools to expand opportunities for smarter school-level decision-making.
2. District officials need to communicate regularly with building leaders about their risks and opportunities and be patient for a two- to three-year transformation. Principals should be prepared to justify their decisions with their respective communities and highlight the successes enabled by a rational and inclusive SBB process.
3. There will always be limitations to funds that can be empowered at the school level, but they are likely fewer than you think. SBB districts should constantly look at ways to preserve and expand both the revenue streams and budget areas under school-level autonomy.
4. Enable individual schools to carry over funds in “savings accounts” for local priorities. This

approach stifles the “use-it-or-lose-it” mentality and empowers student-centered programming and creative solutions at the building level.

5. Examine and pursue ways to use SBB to reward schools for meeting performance targets based on multiple valid measures aligned with local academic goals.

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [Colorado Student-Based Budgeting on the Rise](#)
- Georgetown University, [Edconomics Lab](#)
- Reason Foundation Policy Brief Series, [Student-Centered Funding Roadmap for Policymakers](#)
- Reason Foundation, [Weighted Student Funding Yearbook 2019](#) (Includes Denver, Douglas County, Jefferson County, and Poudre school districts.)
- Reason Foundation, [A Handbook for Student-Based Budgeting, Principal Autonomy, and School Choice](#)



COURSE-LEVEL FUNDING

Many Colorado secondary students may benefit from the flexibility to choose digital courses from outside their district while maintaining enrollment in their district school. Students' ability to "self-blend" courses in this manner is hampered by school district control of per pupil funding and course options. According to a [report](#) by the Digital Learning Collaborative, as of September 2019, 15 states had bypassed the old system and enacted a version of Course Choice or Course Access.

To maximize student choice and access, some share of per pupil revenue or other dedicated funding stream needs to be portable and student directed. A central agency can oversee and advertise the course catalog. The preferred form of quality oversight would be to tie at least half of the funding to successful course completion.

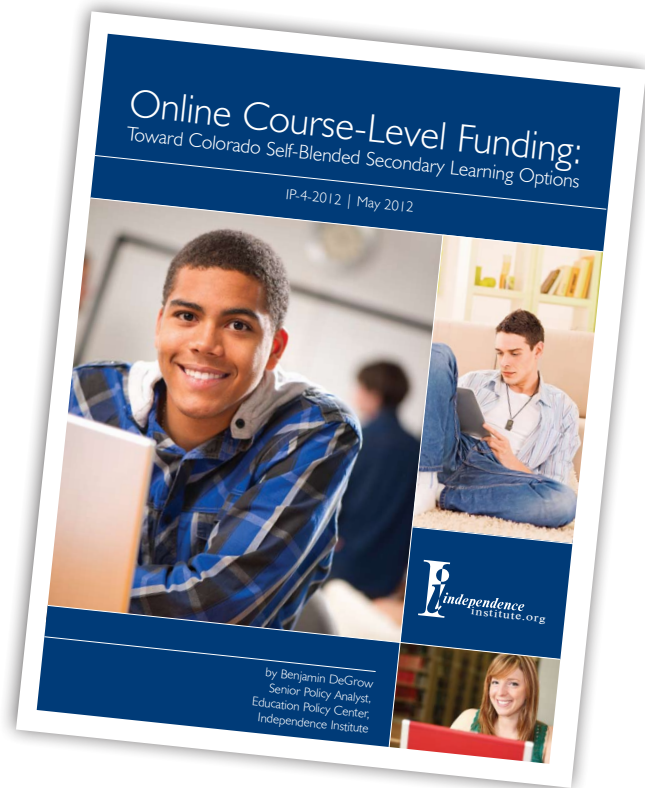
School Board Role: Creating statewide student-centered course access must be done through the General Assembly. Under such a system, innovative school districts could leverage their educational strengths to compete in course offerings.

Lessons and Observations

1. Unresolved disputes about ownership of student achievement data under the state's current accountability system would require changes to current law.
2. There is significant reason to believe this type of program would not interest a significant number of students, but the demand for student-directed and individualized programming is growing.

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [Online Course-Level Funding: Toward Colorado Self-Blended Secondary Learning Options](#)
- Foundation for Excellence in Education, [Course Access](#)
- [Louisiana Course Choice](#)
- [Colorado Digital Learning Solutions](#)



ISSUES: TEACHERS AND UNIONS

TEACHER EVALUATIONS

Quality instruction is key to student academic performance. It is, therefore, critically important to ensure that every student has an effective teacher. Thus, the fundamental goal of any educator evaluation system should be to determine a teacher's effectiveness.

Unfortunately, evaluation systems relying solely on subjective classroom observations have proven inadequate by [classifying nearly 100 percent of teachers](#) as effective. In the absence of other forms of effectiveness measurement, these systems treat all teachers as being precisely the same in terms of performance. They implicitly encourage the idea that teachers are simply interchangeable widgets—a notion called the “Widget Effect.”

A system that does not meaningfully differentiate performance makes it impossible to reward great teachers, build performance-based compensation systems, or dismiss ineffective teachers. It is, therefore, critically important that evaluation systems find ways to augment subjective evaluations of teacher effectiveness.

EVALUATION REQUIREMENTS UNDER SB 191

Historical Background: Passed in 2010, Colorado's [Senate Bill 10-191](#) (SB 10-191) significantly altered the



landscape surrounding how teachers were evaluated and their ability to remain in the classroom.

Republicans unanimously supported the bill, though it caused deep rifts in the Democratic Party. SB 10-191 was vehemently opposed by the Colorado Education Association, Colorado's largest teachers union. SB 10-191 had four primary features:

- Requiring that 50 percent of teacher and principal effectiveness ratings be tied to multiple measures of student academic growth. (This requirement later changed.)
- Requiring that teacher effectiveness ratings be tied to the earning or loss of non-probationary status, which triggers additional procedural job protections. Non-probationary status can be earned after three consecutive years of demonstrated effectiveness and lost after two years of demonstrated ineffectiveness.
- Requiring the “mutual consent” of both a teacher and a principal when placing the teacher into a new school.
- Requiring effectiveness ratings be a significant factor in layoff decisions, with seniority considered after effectiveness instead of the other way around.

Basing the earning of non-probationary status on teachers' effectiveness in the classroom—and allowing teachers to lose such status if they perform poorly—is an essential step toward ensuring children are taught by effective teachers. However, such provisions rely on evaluation systems that can meaningfully differentiate teacher performance using multiple measures of effectiveness.

Many misconceptions arose about this requirement. Some argued, either implicitly or explicitly, that the entire 50 percent of evaluations allotted to student learning data had to be from state tests or median growth percentiles calculated under the Colorado Growth Model, but the reality was more nuanced.

It is true that SB 10-191 and its associated rules required incorporating state assessment data and Colorado Growth Model data when appropriate. However, there was no requirement for how these data should be weighted within the 50 percent of evaluations dedicated to student learning data, or even if they should be applied individually (results

from only one teacher) or collectively (results from all teachers in a school, or a specific subset of those teachers). Additional measures—student learning objective results based on pre-and post-tests at the course level, district assessments, school performance frameworks, and even teacher-developed assessments—could have also been used, giving teachers, schools, and districts the flexibility to design assessment systems that work best for them. Some districts had been [developing and utilizing such systems for quite some time](#). Expectations for student academic growth were required by law to take into account factors such as special needs students, student mobility, and instances in which teachers have very high percentages of low-income students.

A trend against high-stakes testing has taken hold in Colorado in recent years. In 2022, [Senate Bill 22-070](#) made key changes to teacher and principal evaluations. By the beginning of the 2023-24 school year, the legislative act directed CDE to comply with the following duties:

- Create a modified rubric for evaluating personnel who are consistently rated highly effective;
- Create specialized rubrics for particular teacher or principal roles;
- Provide free evaluator training for school districts and boards of cooperative services (BOCES);
- Provide guidelines for incorporating a licensed person's professional growth achievements into the evaluation; and
- Provide best practices in methods of conducting evaluations.

Additionally, the Colorado State Board of Education was directed by the legislature to adopt rules as necessary to ensure that, beginning with evaluations completed in the 2023-24 school year:

- 30% of a teacher's or principal's evaluation is based on the academic growth of students, and the remainder is based on the teacher's or principal's attainment of quality standards;
- Of that 30%, up to 10% of a teacher's or principal's evaluation may be based on measures of collective student academic growth for a particular grade level or an entire school, but the evaluation must not include measures of collective student

academic growth for students who are not enrolled in the school at which the teacher or principal is employed; and

- If a licensed person has been employed by a school district or BOCES for one year or less, the person's evaluation must not include data created before the licensed person's employment began.

Furthermore, state assessment data are no longer required to be included in the academic growth measure in teacher evaluations. The Colorado State Board of Education made the [rule change](#) in May 2023. If available, the data from the School Performance Framework must be included in principal evaluations.

TEACHER TENURE

Before Senate Bill 10-191, teachers, in a sense, had a property right to their jobs after they had completed three years of continuous employment. This non-probationary status has often been referred to as tenure. Once a teacher was granted non-probationary status, it became extremely difficult and expensive for districts to let the teacher go without first completing an arduous and costly due process—even if that teacher was ineffective in the classroom.

Colorado school district teachers hold a probationary status for their first three years of teaching. They must be rated effective or highly effective on their evaluations for three consecutive years and be hired for a fourth year to earn non-probationary status.

Non-probationary teachers no longer have guaranteed jobs since Senate Bill 10-191 became law. If they receive an ineffective rating for one year, they will not be immediately dismissed. They



receive a remediation plan—including professional development opportunities—designed to help them achieve an effective rating on their next evaluation. When teachers are rated ineffective the following year, their non-probationary status is revoked. This allows a district or school to cancel the teacher’s contract if they choose to do so.

For more detailed information on teacher tenure reform, SB 10-191, and educator evaluations, see Independence Institute’s 2016 publication, [*Eternal LIFO: Unlawful Layoff Procedures in Unionized Colorado School Districts*](#).

Lessons and Observations

1. Teachers are the single most important school-related factor in students’ academic achievement. School boards should ensure the district develops meaningful, rigorous methods to evaluate teachers’ performance in the classroom.
2. Though no longer required, school districts are encouraged to include academic student growth state assessment data in teacher evaluations.
3. Teacher buy-in is an essential factor in the success of any evaluation system. Teachers should be closely involved in developing and implementing district evaluation systems. District administration should clearly explain to teachers and the public how its evaluation system works, the factors it includes, the possible outcomes of negative evaluations under SB 10-191, and the importance of rigorous evaluation.
4. As required by Senate Bill 10-191, school board members should develop policies prioritizing performance over seniority in cases of teacher displacement or reductions in force. In districts under collective bargaining agreements, school board members should include these issues in negotiations.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [Educator Effectiveness webpage](#)
- Independence Institute, [*Eternal LIFO: Unlawful Layoff Procedures in Unionized Colorado School Districts*](#)

COMPENSATION REFORM

The prevailing traditional teacher compensation system is based strictly on years of experience, graduate credit, and degrees earned. The traditional salary schedule rose to prominence from the 1920s to the 1950s to combat gender discrimination. It has become entrenched through a combination of administrative convenience and union political and negotiating power. Various K-12 compensation reforms have been attempted in the past, to varying degrees of success. First, it is important to understand the different types of compensation reform and related concepts:

- **Strategic compensation** is a comprehensive description that entails various means of linking pay to the promotion of strategic group or individual objectives
- **Performance(-based) pay or pay for performance** distinguishes individual salary earnings based on objective measures of student academic data and/or professional evaluations
- **Merit pay** is an alternative definition of “performance pay” that often carries a connotation of linking compensation solely or primarily to student test scores
- **Incentive pay** offers bonuses for meeting professional goals or provides incentives to work in hard-to-serve schools or fill extra roles (e.g., mentorship)
- **Differential pay** gives extra pay to teachers based on non-traditional external qualifications or service in a harder-to-fill capacity (e.g., math and special education)
- **Market-based pay** is a form of differential pay that uses measures of supply and demand to pay teachers different amounts by specialty or job description

School board members need to be clear regarding their goals. Compensation reform can be built and used as a tool to accomplish one or more of the following objectives:

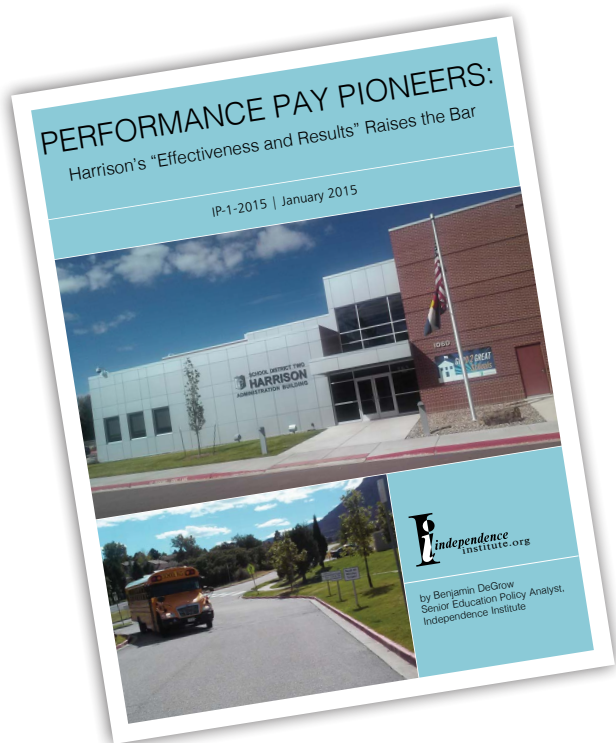
- Motivate current teachers to put forth more effort
- Incentivize high-quality teachers to continue in the profession
- Attract new, quality teachers into the workforce

The research supporting the effectiveness of the first approach is mixed and somewhat weak. The evidence for achieving the other two objectives is somewhat stronger. Direct links between revised pay systems and large-scale improved student achievement are limited and unclear. But other reasons exist for pursuing sensible compensation reform: to build an excellent teaching workforce focused on achieving district goals.

Examples of Colorado school districts that have implemented significant versions of compensation reform at some point include Denver Public Schools, Jefferson County, Douglas County, Harrison 2, Mesa 51, and Eagle County. Numerous Colorado public charter schools have also implemented their own non-traditional pay plans.

Lessons and Observations

1. There is no one-size-fits-all pay plan that promises the most effective results for all K-12 systems. Current conditions and policy goals should be considered carefully.
2. Engage teachers and principals in the process of studying and crafting a pay plan, but make certain to include a broader group of stakeholders in the process. Do not concede the power to any third-party group, including an exclusive union bargaining agent.



3. Reforming compensation will be less effective if done in isolation from a review of evaluations, professional development, student assessment, and recruitment and hiring.
4. Consider a strategic pay plan that addresses not only teachers but also principals and other district personnel. Discuss it as systemic innovation.

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [Performance Pay Pioneers, Harrison's 'Effectiveness and Results' Raises the Bar](#)
- Independence Institute, [Douglas County, Building a Better Education Model](#)
- Independence Institute, [Pioneering Teacher Compensation Reform, K-12 Educator Pay Innovations in Colorado](#)
- Independence Institute, [The Ignacio Market-Driven Compensation System and Why It Fell Short](#)
- Colorado Department of Education, [School/District Staff Statistics](#) (Includes employee salaries and turnover rates.)
- Manhattan Institute, [Teachers Matter](#)

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING REFORM

Of Colorado's 178 school districts, fewer than 40 have a formal bargaining relationship with one or more employee unions. Under the Colorado Collective Bargaining Sunshine Act, all school districts with collective bargaining agreements must post them on the district's website.

A [Cornell University](#) study shows that restrictive bargaining policies can have a negative impact on students.

The dynamics of union negotiations can make it difficult for reform-minded school board directors to effect positive change. They should keep in mind the following:

- **Prior Contract Terms:** Timing will determine a great deal of strategy. Certain elements of a negotiated agreement may be off-limits to discuss or change except in years when the contract's terms are set to expire. Pursue fiscally responsible and student-centered reforms as the previously negotiated scope allows. Study the current

agreement to ensure deadlines are met, then work toward a more flexible agreement or other arrangements.

- **Board-Staff Alignment:** A competent, focused, and aligned district negotiating team can make a huge difference in favor of pursuing reform goals and strategies. Think carefully about what can address union privileges, focus personnel policies on smart, performance-based systems, and reasonably promote individual teachers' working environment, benefits, and culture.
- **Open Negotiations Law:** Under Proposition 104, which 70 percent of Colorado voters approved in 2014, all negotiation sessions must be held in public. Under the hot light of transparency, it is difficult for union negotiators to defend unreasonable positions.

Commonsense changes that can be pursued include the following:

- **Stop using seniority to place teachers:** SB 10-191 helps empower school boards to end provisions that favor less effective but more senior teachers in deciding transfers and avoiding layoffs. Procedures like coin flips should no longer be used to make personnel decisions.
- **Encourage more decision-making authority at the school level,** including collaboration between building principals and effective master teachers.
- **Ensure agreements do not directly neglect students** by restricting a teacher's ability to help students after school.

There are also several other lessons and changes that can be applied by school districts interested in maintaining local control and scaling back union involvement in their school districts. These lessons and changes are covered in detail in the Independence Institute's [Education Labor Handbook: A Guide to Collective Bargaining Reform in Colorado](#).

School boards should consider exploring alternatives to the traditional bargaining model. The following options are available:

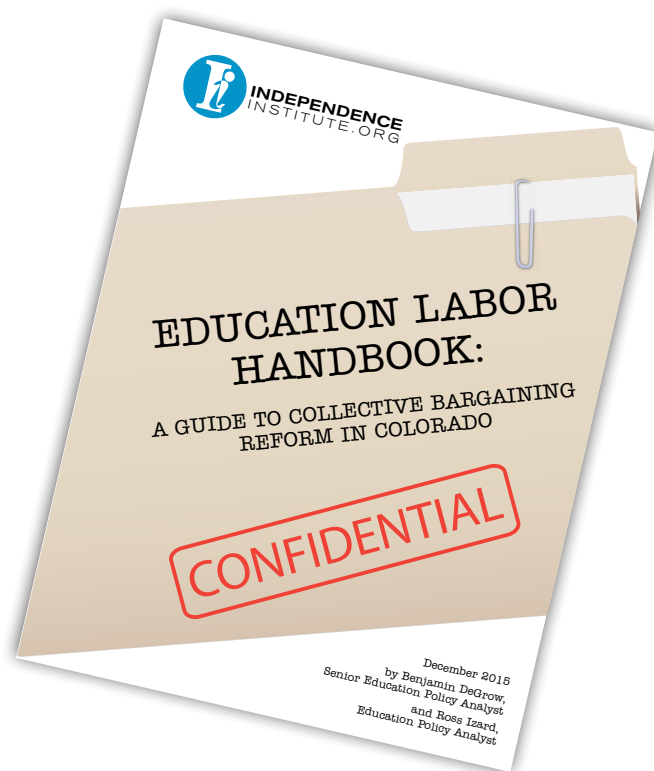
1. The example of some Colorado school districts can be followed by terminating exclusive bargaining or other negotiation privileges entirely.

2. Districts may switch from the traditional monopoly bargaining scheme to an informal, non-binding, meet-and-confer arrangement with teachers in an open and transparent setting.
3. Teachers from districts in other states have pursued a [local-only union](#) by seceding from the state and national union chapters, reducing dues rates while putting more burden on local union leaders. This change is not achieved without some friction. (Such a change must be initiated by the teachers, not the school board.)

Lessons and Observations

In Colorado, collective bargaining is not mandated between a school district and a union. The board of education is in the driver's seat for collective bargaining reform. Board members should be thoughtful and strategic, but seize the opportunity to set the reform agenda at the union bargaining table.

[On December 11, 2024](#), the Colorado Springs District 11 School Board resolved not to continue the Master Agreement between the Board of Education and Colorado Springs Education Association (CSEA). The district was the only school district in El Paso County with a collective bargaining agreement, which expired on June 30, 2025.



1. When possible, start renegotiating a collective bargaining agreement from scratch rather than tinker around the edges of existing contracts. It is easier to achieve a lean, efficient, and flexible contract when the starting point is neutral, the focus is on student achievement, and the public can watch.
2. Think carefully about the transition from union to non-union arrangements. Guide the transition, demonstrate good faith in rewarding teacher professionalism, and welcome input from individual teachers. Individual teachers have legitimate job security concerns.
3. If currently a non-union district, continue to focus on keeping your professional teachers happy and respected.
4. Welcome [alternative organizations](#) to inform teachers about their services and benefits.

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [Nine Key Changes at the Bargaining Table: A Policy Handbook for Colorado School Reform Leaders](#)
- Independence Institute, [Ways Forward on Five Key School District Policies](#)
- Independence Institute, [The State of K-12 Union Contract Transparency](#)
- IndependentTeachers.org, [Collective Bargaining webpage](#)
- IndependentTeachers.org, [Local-Only Union Option webpage](#)

DUES DEDUCTION AND UNION PRIVILEGES

Most local teachers unions in Colorado are affiliated with the Colorado Education Association and the National Education Association. Members must belong to all three union levels and remit over \$800 a year in dues on average. Colorado teachers have legislated right-to-work protections, which prevent them from losing their jobs for refusing to join or subsidize a union. Still, that right is generally hindered in two different ways through local policies:

- In nearly all bargaining districts, only union representatives are allowed to communicate with new and veteran teachers through induction and orientation sessions, district mailboxes and email systems, and other forms of official communication. Teachers may not be aware that alternatives exist.
- Teachers can join the union at any time. But in many districts, teachers who belong to the association can only terminate their membership [during a limited window of time](#), in many cases by visiting the union office in person to submit forms.

Thanks to the United States Supreme Court’s 2018 decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*, public sector employees can no longer be assessed “agency fees,” “dues equivalencies,” or “fair-share provision fees.” In Colorado, the practice of collecting such fees was not widespread, though it was in force in a handful of districts.



School Board Role: School boards do not have absolute power over union membership policies (such as the second bullet above), but they can make stipulations as long as district resources are involved or can stop making those resources available. Even if a union is denied the use of public payroll to collect dues yet continues to force onerous opt-out provisions on its members, boards can use district resources to notify teachers of their options.

Labor unions are private organizations that have accorded to themselves several tax-funded privileges. While these privileges are often established and enforced through formal collective bargaining agreements, they are known to occur in non-union districts as well. Opportunities for reform lie at the union negotiating table and through the board's unilateral policymaking authority.

Key examples of common privileges that can be addressed through one of these primary means include the following:

- **End union payroll dues deduction services.** Collecting funds for groups that finance local board candidates creates real and potential conflicts of interest. Suspending the privilege still allows educators the option to support a union through private transactions.
- **Allow union members to opt-out at any time.** Employees could be set free from tight timelines and onerous procedures to opt out of union membership.
- **Provide equal access to district systems.** Honor teachers' right to know about their various [membership options](#) by repealing measures that give unions free and privileged use of school district property and communication systems and exclusive access to events and information.
- **End / Bring accountability to union release days.** Many agreements allow educators tax-funded release time from classroom responsibilities to perform union business—including lobbying—an [unaccountable practice](#) that should end.
- **Make unions pay for their officers' services.** No local teachers union should be subsidized for the extended leave time their presidents and other officers receive to perform union service. State

union officers on leave from district employment still may accrue PERA service, even though the union reimburses salary and other benefits.

Lessons and Observations

1. Establish fair and appropriate local labor reform policies that can only be altered or rescinded by a public board vote or action.
2. Keep in mind that taxpayers' dollars should support educational services, not private organizations.

Key Resources

- Independence Institute, [Education Labor Handbook: A Guide to Collective Bargaining Reform in Colorado](#)
- Independence Institute, [IndependentTeachers.org](#)
- Independence Institute, [Colorado Schools and Association Release Time: Making the Privilege Accountable to Citizens](#)
- IndependentTeachers.org, [Membership Options](#)
- IndependentTeachers.org, [Revocation of Membership](#)

ISSUES: ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

COLORADO ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The Colorado State Board of Education (SBE) adopts [state academic standards](#) for preschool through high school public education. All public schools must “meet” or “exceed” state academic standards. Standards describe the expectations of what students need to know and be able to do at the end of each grade. They are reviewed and sometimes revised every six years.

Colorado school boards have a state constitutional right to direct instruction in their schools. Standards differ significantly from curricula. The state cannot prescribe textbooks or other educational materials. Some say standards are like “guardrails” for teachers to follow. An academic program rich in content should go beyond the basic requirements found in state standards.

Colorado has academic standards in the following content areas:

- Visual and Performing Arts (Dance, Drama and Theatre Arts, Music, and Visual Arts)
- Comprehensive Health
- Computer Science
- English Language Proficiency
- Mathematics
- Physical Education
- Reading, Writing, and Communicating
- Science
- Social Studies (Geography, Economics, Civics, History, and Financial Literacy)
- World Languages

CONTROVERSY REGARDING THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

There is often confusion about the [Common Core State Standards](#) and how they relate to the Colorado Academic Standards. A new version of the Colorado Academic Standards was created in 2008 by the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids Act, or CAP4K.

The Colorado State Board of Education (SBE) officially adopted these standards in 2009. The Common Core State Standards were also being developed during this time, and Colorado was one of six states asked to provide feedback during that process.

In 2010, the SBE adopted the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Math. These standards were folded into the Colorado Academic Standards. Thus, the Colorado Academic Standards encapsulate the entirety of the Common Core State Standards, but the Common Core State Standards do not encapsulate the entirety of the Colorado Academic Standards.

The Common Core State Standards have garnered significant criticism since their introduction. In particular, this criticism has focused on the Race to the Top (RTT) program’s role in incentivizing states to adopt the standards. Created in 2009 with a portion of the \$800 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, RTT set aside \$4.35 billion in competitive grant money for state education reform. States’ chances of winning this money were tied to their adoption of a number of educational reforms, each of which was worth a certain number of points on a 500-point rubric. Forty of these 500 points were tied to “adopting common standards,” which was most easily attainable by adopting the Common Core State Standards.

Contrary to popular perception, Race to the Top did not explicitly require the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Yet the functional result of the competitive points system was that most states did



adopt the standards. Thus, the Common Core State Standards have raised significant concerns about the federal role in education, the use of competitive grants by the federal government, and whether standards are best developed in a one-size-fits-all fashion or on a state-by-state basis.

Some national education experts contend that the implementation of Common Core was [flawed](#), and the standards' quality and rigor [may not be as high as advertised](#).

Technically speaking, there is no “Common Core curriculum.” However, the nature of academic standards and their alignment with Common Core-based assessments necessarily result in some influence on curricula and materials used in the classroom. It is impossible to fully disentangle standards from curricula and assessments.

Lessons and Observations

1. Since the State Board of Education has the final say about the contents of state academic standards, school board members cannot directly affect the standards, but they should not ignore the revision process. School boards should be aware of the standards revision process and participate in public comment. CDE requests school districts to identify teachers to participate as members of revision committees. As the public education system in many communities has become



focused on polarizing social and political issues, school board members should speak to their superintendents about recommending teachers who focus on academics.

2. School boards should exercise their constitutional right to control district curricula, materials, and instruction.
3. Clear avenues for parents concerned about textbooks or other curricular materials should be created. This should include a formal, transparent review process that allows community members, parents, students, teachers, board representatives, and district officials to participate.
4. Board members should pay close attention to what is being taught in their district's classrooms and should be prepared to raise issues with district officials should they have concerns.
5. If problems are found, there are various options at a school board's disposal, including curricular shifts or transitioning to new materials. A strong district academic staff can be immensely helpful during such processes, particularly when monitoring the impact of new curricula or materials on student achievement.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [Academic Standards Information Page](#)
- Colorado Department of Education, [Common Core State Standards as a part of the Colorado Academic Standards](#)

STATE ASSESSMENTS

The State of Colorado requires assessments in various subjects and grade levels. The federal government requires the administration of certain state assessments before a state can receive specific federal education dollars. As a result of the onset of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, both the state and federal governments put a hold on the administration of state assessments. In 2021, the federal government required state testing but allowed modifications. The U.S. Department of Education accepted the Colorado waiver request to reduce the number of assessments for the 2020-21 school year.

In the 2025-2026 school year, the following assessments will be administered to public school students:

- Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) English Language Arts/Literacy, and Math in grades 3 through 8
- CMAS Science in grades 5, 8, and 11
- CMAS Social Studies in grades 4 and 7 (sampling of schools)
- PSAT in English Language Arts and Math in grades 9 and 10
- Colorado SAT in 11th grade

School district boards of education have the right to view their schools' assessment results, including any results that may not be publicly posted due to small cohorts of students.

Lessons and Observations

1. Public schools, including charter schools, are required to administer state-mandated assessments. Even though parents have the right to opt their children out of state assessments, school staff should not encourage them to do so.
2. Board members should note that research conducted for a legislatively mandated Standards and Assessments Task Force found that a large percentage of overall testing and preparation time is accounted for by district- and school-level assessments not mandated by state or federal law. In cases where lost instructional time is a concern, the easiest place to make reductions is in non-mandated school and district assessments. However, educators often view these assessments as valuable, and discretion should be used.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, [State Assessment Results](#)
- Colorado Department of Education, [State Assessment Fact Sheets and FAQs](#)

ACCREDITATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Colorado's school and district accountability system is primarily based on District and School Performance Frameworks (DPFs and SPFs). These frameworks determine accreditation ratings for districts and schools. The possible accreditation ratings for districts are:

- **Accredited with Distinction:** The district meets or exceeds statewide attainment on the performance indicators and is required to adopt and implement a Performance Plan.
- **Accredited:** The district meets statewide attainment on the performance indicators and is required to adopt and implement a Performance Plan.
- **Accredited with Improvement Plan:** The district is required to adopt and implement an Improvement Plan.
- **Accredited with Priority Improvement Plan:** The district is required to adopt and implement a Priority Improvement Plan.
- **Accredited with Turnaround Plan:** The district is required to adopt and implement a Turnaround Plan.

School performance frameworks assign one of four types of plans based on performance:

- **Performance Plan:** The school meets or exceeds statewide attainment on the performance indicators and is required to adopt and implement a Performance Plan.
- **Improvement Plan:** The school is required to adopt and implement an Improvement Plan.



- **Priority Improvement Plan:** The school is required to adopt and implement a Priority Improvement Plan.
- **Turnaround Plan:** The school is required to adopt and implement a Turnaround Plan.

In 2024, CDE assessed performance based on the following three indicators:

- **Academic achievement:** How students performed on achievement tests in English language arts, math, and science. Specifically, this indicator examines whether students scored at or above proficiency. This indicator is weighted at 40 percent of a school’s total score in elementary and middle school and 30 percent in high schools and school districts.
- **Academic Growth:** How much students grew academically year-over-year in comparison to their academic peers or students with similar score histories. This indicator relies on the [Colorado Growth Model’s](#) median growth percentile calculation and is less prone to statistical bias than raw achievement scores. It is possible, for instance, for a child with very low academic achievement scores to exhibit very high growth. This indicator is weighted at 60 percent of a school’s total score in elementary and middle schools and 40 percent in high schools and school districts. [CDE’s Growth Model Fact Sheet](#) for parents provides a helpful explanation. Colorado will be implementing a new “[On Track](#)” growth measure.
- **Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness:** Used only for high schools and school districts, this indicator includes graduation rates, dropout rates, matriculation rates, and the 11th-grade average Colorado SAT composite scores. It is weighted at 30 percent in the frameworks in which it is included.

District and school performance frameworks can be found by visiting the Colorado Department of Education’s School View system. Some parents and concerned community members also rely on GreatSchools.org.

Lessons and Observations

1. Student academic success should be the goal of every board of education. However, measuring success requires that school board members be able to find and interpret state-level educational achievement data. These data can illustrate trends, show impacts, and provide easily comparable points of reference between schools and districts.
2. School board members should know how to find and interpret both district and school performance frameworks. Performance frameworks can be used to dig deeper into academic performance. In particular, data produced by the Colorado Growth Model can be very informative.
3. District chief academic officers are excellent sources of data, analysis, and comparison for busy school board members. However, the presentation makes a great deal of difference when it comes to interpreting data, and some district officials may not present information in a way that school board members find helpful. Board members should be prepared to discuss the data based on their own research and to request further information if necessary.

Key Resources

- Colorado Department of Education, View district and school level results: [Assessment Data](#)
- Colorado Department of Education Accountability, [School Quality and Support Home Page](#)

ISSUES: STATE GOVERNANCE

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

The Colorado State Board of Education is a nine-member elected board entrusted by the state constitution with “general supervision of the public schools.” They usually meet for two days, the second week of each month. The meetings are live-streamed and archived for later viewing. School district board members are encouraged to view the informative sessions.

Each Congressional district elects one member on a partisan basis to serve a six-year term of office. Since Colorado now has eight congressional districts, an at-large member was also elected. As of July 2025, the following elected officials are members of the Colorado State Board of Education:

Lisa Escárcega (D), 1st District

Kathy Gebhardt (D), 2nd District

Sherri Wright (R), 3rd District

Kristi Burton Brown (R), 4th District

Steve Durham (R), 5th District

Rebecca McClellan (D), 6th District

Karla Esser (D), 7th District

Yazmin Navarro (D), 8th District

Kathy Plomer (D), At-Large

The State Board of Education selects a Commissioner of Education who oversees the implementation of initiatives through the Colorado Department of Education. In June 2023, Susana Córdova was named Colorado’s 18th commissioner.

For many enacted K-12 laws, the General Assembly grants the State Board rulemaking authority. Among the State Board’s other primary responsibilities are overseeing teacher licensure and related disciplinary

cases, accrediting public school districts, approving waiver and innovation requests, and hearing charter school appeals in cases of disputes with an authorizer.

Key Resource

- [Colorado State Board of Education](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Colorado Department of Education, *State of Charter Schools Report 2024-2025*, pages 8, 33, and 35. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/publications>.
- 2 Laura Stewart, *The Science of Reading: Evidence for a New Era of Reading Instruction*, (Zaner-Bloser), page 3, https://www.zaner-bloser.com/reading/superkids-reading-program/pdfs/Whitepaper_TheScienceofReading.pdf.
- 3 Colorado Joint Budget Committee, *Appropriations Report Fiscal Year 2025-26*, Part II, pages 28-36, <https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/fy25-26apprept.pdf>.
- 4 Colorado Department of Education, [School Finance Unit home page](#), “Statutory Compliance Reporting,” “[Report on District Revenues and Expenditures](#),” “Fiscal year 2023-24” “Comparison of Revenues and Other Sources,” See the last tab on the workbook at the bottom (Tab IC), line 1220, column K, IA_IB_IC.xlsx (live.com).
- 5 United States Census Bureau, 2023 Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data, Summary Tables, Table 11, Sheet 11, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html>.
- 6 NEA Research April 2025, “Rankings of the States 2024 and Estimates of School Statistics 2025,” pages 21 and 28, https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2025_rankings_and_estimates_report.pdf.
- 7 Colorado Department of Education, “TOTAL PROGRAM FUNDING: Expiring and New Formulas,” page 5, <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/totalprogramfundingfactsheet>.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES on K-12 education policy can be found at IndependenceInstitute.org

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