COLORADO STATE OF EDUCATION REPORT:
DOCUMENTING THE CURRENT EDUCATION CRISIS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS BY THE EXPERTS WHO WORK WITH COLORADO’S STUDENTS

#RedforEd FINAL COUNTDOWN | NOV. 14, 2019
THE TIME HAS COME TO DECIDE.
WHAT KIND OF COLORADO DO WE WANT TO BECOME?

One that wants the very best for its students and values educators by paying them appropriately—or a Colorado that doesn’t prioritize education or the future of students? It’s the Final Countdown.

Welcome to our first-ever State of Education report. As the voice of public education in Colorado, our more than 38,000 members represent every part of the state and are on the frontlines of the realities facing our state’s public education system. Our members are teachers, counselors, social workers, nurses, bus drivers, food service workers, paraprofessionals, mechanics, security guards, custodians, maintenance workers, office professionals, and anyone who works in a school to ensure that it’s safe, dry, and warm; together, we’re called educators. Through this report we wanted to find out: What does the State of Education mean for students and their classroom experience?

Throughout October and November, the president and vice president of the Colorado Education Association (CEA—the teachers union) traveled to every part of the state in a “Final Countdown Tour.” We visited members in 11 cities including Alamosa, Aurora, Colorado Springs, Denver, Durango, Edgewater, Ft. Morgan, Glenwood Springs, Grand Junction, Lamar and Loveland to hear about their challenges and opportunities.

Time and again educators expressed the same perilous warnings: They are facing more challenges to providing the schools our students deserve with shrinking resources. There is an ever-increasing demand to do more with less: more testing, more unfunded mandates, more mental health challenges, larger class sizes, increasing cost of living, shrinking state funding over time and reductions in retirement benefits.

“I made more money as an E4 21-year-old (no college) in the military than I do now as a 37-year-old teacher with a master’s degree.”

Amanda Connelly, Montrose
THE STATE OF EDUCATION REPORT combines data from the Final Countdown Tour, an all-member survey, thousands of one-on-one conversations, a public poll and an analysis of the recent history of education from a state and local funding perspective.

The data provides a distressing picture showing there are fewer resources going toward classrooms than ever before, and it’s having a detrimental impact on students.

The Budget Stabilization factor has reached $8.1 billion, meaning we have a long way to go to fully fund our education system since the 2008 economic recession.

Educator pay in Colorado is some of the least competitive in the country. Colorado’s average starting teacher salary is ranked 47th in the nation.

Per pupil funding is falling behind as workload rises. Average per pupil funding in Colorado has fallen to 42nd in the country, and the student-teacher ratio is 41st.1

Educators are subsidizing the system’s inadequacies by spending an average of $656 out of their own pockets in order to provide supplies and resources to their students.

Add this data to a shortage of qualified teachers and it points to an education system that is unsustainable. Our public schools aren’t failing, they’re starving.

Most importantly, CEA learned that educators are ready to take action to eliminate education funding barriers in Colorado. They are ready to take to the streets to increase pay and support for educators statewide. Not for themselves—but for their students.

Between 2009 and 2019, public education in Colorado has been underfunded by a whopping $8.1 billion.

As a result, Colorado is now 51st in the nation for wage competitiveness according to business.org.¹

A TEACHER FROM COLORADO COULD IMMEDIATELY INCREASE THEIR STANDARD OF LIVING BY 50% IF THEY MOVED TO LOUISIANA.

Colorado’s students have felt the impact of this underfunding. Colorado spends $2,703 less per student than the national average, whereas in 1982 Colorado spent $232 more per student than the national average.² Given how far we’ve fallen behind in funding, it is unsurprising that the state ranks 41st in student-teacher ratio.³

Since the National Education Association’s founding in Philadelphia in 1857, educators around the country have taken a leading interest in the status of public education in the United States. The Colorado Education Association, founded in 1875, has worked tirelessly to ensure all students in Colorado have access to high-quality education, no matter what zip code they live in.

In Colorado’s recent history, this interest has centered around a decade of education underfunding by the state. In response to the Great Recession, the Colorado Legislature in 2009 decided to apply a “stabilization factor” to reduce school funding. In essence, the state borrowed money from public schools to balance the budget during the recession. The legislature has yet to make a dent in the debt they owe. While Colorado’s economy has improved, the stabilization factor remains and continues to grow.

¹ https://www.business.org/hr/employees/best-us-states-for-teachers/
It’s no wonder that educator turnover has increased in Colorado. Between 2012 and 2018, teacher pay only increased by 12%, but the median household income rose 28%.\(^1\) Starting salary is particularly low in Colorado, ranking 47th in the nation at just $33,483. That means starting teachers are paid 40% less than the average Colorado salary, ranking dead last in the nation.\(^2\)

Some have argued that there is little to be done at the state level, but this is simply not true. While total state funding for education has increased in the last ten years, the share of state funding dedicated to education has actually decreased over time.\(^3\) In fact, the percent of the state budget going to education decreased by 14.4% between the 2010-11 and 2019-20 fiscal years.

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\(^1\) [https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/staffcurrent](https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/staffcurrent); [https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html)

\(^2\) [https://www.business.org/hr/employees/best-us-states-for-teachers/](https://www.business.org/hr/employees/best-us-states-for-teachers/)

\(^3\) [https://leg.colorado.gov/publication-search/?search_api_views_fulltext=Budget in Brief&field_publication_type=All&field_agency=17&sort_combine=field_date%20DESC&field_subjects=All](https://leg.colorado.gov/publication-search/?search_api_views_fulltext=Budget in Brief&field_publication_type=All&field_agency=17&sort_combine=field_date%20DESC&field_subjects=All)
FURTHER, EDUCATORS HAVE PUBLIC OPINION ON THEIR SIDE.

Three quarters of Americans support raising educator pay, their highest level of support in a decade. A recent poll found that 76% of Coloradans think teacher pay falls short, up from 51% in 2011.

Amidst these problems in Colorado’s school funding, educators are fighting back. Teachers and paraprofessionals in three districts have gone on strike in 18 months, centered around educators’ inability to afford to live in the communities where they work. Over 17,000 educators participated in a two-day walkout in April 2018 to protest the lack of resources allocated to our schools. Educators around the state and the country know that the time to fight for the funding our public schools deserve is now.

After working in the profession for a decade with a master’s I just broke the $50k mark.

Laura Light-Kovais, Loveland
Over the course of five weeks, CEA hosted 13 #RedForEd Fall Forum Focus Groups, where over 500 educators gathered to talk about the most pressing issues facing their schools and the actions they are willing to take.

During the forums, educators shared their stories about how the lack of school funding impacts their ability to deliver the best possible education to their students and their ability to live in Colorado. Educators were then asked to text answers to an online polling system to rank priorities and discuss the actions they are ready to take to ensure their top priorities become a reality.

The results are overwhelming and present a loud and unified educator voice in how public education needs to change in the state of Colorado.

Our members have clearly identified 5 main issues that they want to tackle: minimizing the influence of corporations; not enough mental health supports for educators and students; educator pay isn’t a living wage; educator workloads are too heavy and class sizes are too big; and educator evaluations don’t accurately reflect how educators are doing in their job.

Through our forums, educators were asked to identify which issue they want to tackle first in 2020. A clear majority, 52%, identified “Educator Pay Isn’t a Living Wage” as the most urgent issue facing public education in Colorado. Educators’ second priority was about class size and workload.
EDUCATORS WERE ALSO ASKED TO IDENTIFY POSSIBLE LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR THESE 5 ISSUES. HERE ARE SOME OF THE IDEAS WE HEARD:

RETAINING HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATORS THROUGH FAIR COMPENSATION

When low pay for educators has led to a serious educator shortage across the state, we know that Colorado isn’t doing enough to retain high-quality educators. With an equitable base minimum salary for teachers and a base minimum wage for education support professionals—both based on cost of living in a district—Colorado would not only be able to recruit the best professionals to be educators in our state, but we would also be able to retain our educators who are quickly leaving the profession because of low pay.

ENSURING SUSTAINABLE WORKLOADS FOR EDUCATORS

Workloads must be manageable for educators to regularly and sustainably meet the needs of all their students. This means working towards real class size relief, reduction in paperwork and mandates for teaching to the test and focused professional development designed and implemented in collaboration with educators.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

Creating sustainable system-wide supports for students in all public schools with realistic ratios for counselors, school psychologists, social workers and trauma-informed practices. In addition, ensuring that educators have the professional supports for their own mental health needs.

EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM UPDATES

Move away from an unfunded punitive evaluation and accountability system and instead ensure that there is a system developed by educators that emphasizes student and educator day-to-day learning needs and supports social and emotional growth and development.

PRIORITIZING OUR CLASSROOMS OVER THE INFLUENCE OF CORPORATIONS

Reducing, with the ultimate goal of ending, public funding to corporations, for-profit entities and non-profits that partner with corporations. Ending the process of providing corporations tax breaks, incentives and fiscal support and instead utilizing these as methods to fund education.
When asked how far educators are willing to go to win a livable wage in Colorado.

Members discussed different levels of action, in order from least extreme to most extreme:

- Talk to a colleague
- Wear a button
- Sign a petition
- Attend a rally
- Walk-ins and walk-outs
- Strike

Attendees were then asked to pick the highest action they are willing to take to fight for fair compensation and just schools.

“I’m a single mom and regularly work 10+ hour days and spend weekends doing professional development to try to climb the payscale. I cannot afford to rent in my city and have to live with a roommate because my 12-year-old car isn’t reliable. My daughter is growing up without me so that I can raise others’ children.

Mariah Osborn, Colorado Springs

50% of members are ready to go on strike if the state legislature does not take action to improve funding for better pay. They know the time is now to stand up for the schools our students deserve.

83% of educators were willing to take one of the top two levels of action: Strike or Walkouts.
LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

EDUCATORS IN COLORADO KNOW THAT OUR FUNDING PRIORITIES ARE UPSIDE DOWN.

According to a CEA all-member survey conducted in Spring 2019, 72% of members believe “improving working conditions and student supports and ensuring we have the funding to do so” is their top priority. Further, 92% of educators surveyed support legislation stopping corporate tax breaks until education is fully funded in Colorado.

In one-on-one, small groups, and school site meetings, through member surveys, listening tours, and emails, and most recently through our CEA #RedForEd Fall Member Forums, the voice of 38,000 educators has been clear. Our public schools need the autonomy and resources to create learning environments where our students’ educational curiosity can be nourished and thrive.

In Colorado, the path to truly supporting public education, including increasing educator pay, is clear: ending the Budget Stabilization factor by fully funding public education by 2022. For over a decade, the state of Colorado has been borrowing money from public school students to balance the budget. Educators have been demanding an end to this broken funding system for too long—the legislature must act NOW. Ending the Budget Stabilization factor would not only allow for districts to pay educators fairly; this would also free up funds for other clear needs in public schools, such as lowering class sizes and caseloads.

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN COLORADO IS CLEAR. WITHOUT BOLD ACTION FROM THE LEGISLATURE, SCHOOLS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PROVIDE STUDENTS THE EDUCATION THEY DESERVE.

SPECIFICALLY DURING THE 2020 LEGISLATIVE SESSION, OUR TOP PRIORITY IS TO IMPROVE EDUCATOR COMPENSATION ACROSS THE STATE. WE EXPECT THE LEGISLATURE TO CREATE A PATHWAY FOR DISTRICTS TO IMMEDIATELY AND MEANINGFULLY INCREASE EDUCATOR COMPENSATION IN ORDER TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN QUALITY EDUCATORS ACROSS THE STATE.

The legislature has the ability to make this vision a reality by enacting meaningful legislative changes to retain educators and support quality teaching and learning environments. Lack of action is not a “can’t” but a “won’t”—an unwillingness to give our educators and students what they need and deserve. COLORADO NEEDS TO DO BETTER.

Workers know that striking is a last resort, but educators across Colorado are prepared to make that hard choice for their students if this fundamental crisis is not fixed.
#RedForEd Forums

**THE FINAL COUNTDOWN TOUR**

Earlier this year at Delegate Assembly, CEA members made it clear that it’s time to demand action from our elected officials. If legislators don’t increase funding for education in 2020 and use those funds to directly support educators — **we will be ready to take action!**

**CEA needs to hear from YOU!** If we want to win, it’s going to take all of us. President Amie Baca-Oehlert and Vice President Kevin Vick will be traveling around the state to get input from educators in 17 cities at our #RedForEd Forums on the Final Countdown Tour.

Your voice is vital in making a difference — **will you join us?**

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*Several events were cancelled due to weather and a virtual forum was added.*
CEA is the largest union of educators in the state with more than 38,000 K-12 teachers, higher ed faculty, and education support professionals, as well as students preparing to become teachers, and retired educators.