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COLORADO'S ECONOMIC INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Colorado teachers and education support professionals know that investing in classroom priorities which build the foundation for student learning is necessary to support both student learning and educators' professional excellence.

We know that research ties the quality of education to a community's quality of life, and we believe that education is the best investment we can make in the Colorado quality of life.

Investing in our public schools leads to higher wages and increased employment stability for individuals, higher property tax values, and towns and cities that are attractive to employers. This is true for big cities and small towns alike because a well-educated local workforce produces a better-paid workforce which adds wealth to the community.

Investing in our public schools leads to higher lifetime earnings for individuals. The higher the level of educational attainment, the higher the lifetime earnings. A Bachelor's degree-holder could increase lifetime earnings by 75% over someone with only a high school diploma.

Yet, too many Colorado students do not attend preschool where they get a good foundation for learning. Too many drop out of high school and pass up college or career training. This threatens not only our communities' quality of life but each individual's quality of life, as well.

Colorado's 21st century economy puts new demands on our public schools; employers are clamoring for workers who have excellent basic skills and higher-order thinking skills, as well as an aptitude for on-the-job learning. There are fewer jobs for high school dropouts and students who finish high school without basic skills.

This means all students must get a quality education to prosper as adults – and because today's students will be tomorrow's citizens and leaders in our communities, every Coloradan shares both the problem of Colorado's low economic investment in our public schools and the challenge of achieving sustainable funding for a quality, 21st century public education system.

Colorado's existing funding system for public education does not support the goal of preparing all students for success in a competitive global economy.

Colorado is one of the fastest-growing states in the nation, attracting more families each year who expect an excellent education for their children. Along with more students, many school districts are enrolling more English language learners and students from low-income families and, consequently, spending more to provide services for these students.

State budget cuts have increased inequities among school districts. Wealthier districts can offset cuts through local tax increases, fee hikes, gifts, grants, and fundraisers, while poorer districts without these means slip further behind. Funding cuts often eliminate art, music, athletics, and other programs and extracurricular activities that keep students engaged in school.

Our current investment in public education is not enough to address changing student needs and meet the challenges of improving student achievement. If Colorado were to invest in public education in a more forward-thinking approach, the investment would pay high dividends because:

- Preschool and kindergarten start our youngest learners on the right path.
- Smaller class sizes allow educators to individualize their instruction.
- Expanded learning opportunities use students' interests to engage them in learning.
- State-of-the-art classroom technology makes learning more meaningful to students.
- Blended learning's combination of online and classroom learning offers more paths to graduation and reduces the number of high school dropouts.

“Some of my government classes that were 20 to 22 students are up to 29 and 30, and the activities we get to do are limited. I can see the impact on students when I take a class of 30 to the library and we have 22 computers. Eight students are left out.”

*– Gary Smith, High School Social Studies
Alamosa Education Association*



Colorado's investment in public education is also not sufficient to address recent changes in state law that provide a framework for transforming the state's schools to better prepare students for postsecondary education and the workforce. School districts do not have the resources to effectively implement the following laws: SB 08-212, Colorado's Achievement Plan for Kids; SB 09-163, Education Accountability Act; SB 10-191, Great Teachers and Great Leaders/Educator Effectiveness and Evaluation; and HB 1238, Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (Colorado READ Act).

In December 2011, a Denver District Court decision in the *Lobato v. Colorado* school funding case concluded that "the Colorado public school finance system is not rationally related to the mandate to establish and maintain a thorough and uniform system of free public schools. On the contrary, the public school finance system is irrational, arbitrary, and severely underfunded."

Colorado is a wealthy state, but we are in the bottom third of all states in how much of our wealth we invest in our schools. It is clear to us that Colorado must change our existing funding system and invest more in public education to meet the 21st century demands and help educators prepare all students for success.

Every Coloradan shares the responsibility for the future of our state and our students. Providing students and schools adequate resources is the best way to strengthen our commitment to a brighter future in which all students are prepared to compete in the global economy, regardless of where they attend school in Colorado. CEA will work with all stakeholders to make this goal a reality.

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"Budget cuts are a very discouraging part of education. Our students are not getting the supplies, individual attention, and technology they need. The kids see it and understand it. They wonder, 'Where do we fit? Why don't we matter?' The situation really discourages teachers and our students."

*- Mary Beth Skerjanec, Middle School Language Arts
South Platte Education Association*