

## Sacrificing Our Schools: Report gives Colorado public school spending an F

Sarah Kyle

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At Poudre High School, math looks a lot like building a house.

No, really.

The Fort Collins school's "Geometry in Construction" students are building their fourth house through a math program that partners with Habitat for Humanity. Based on a similar program at Loveland High School, Poudre's course "challenges us to make the connection" between math and real life, teacher Steve Sayers said.

"We are pulling the diagonals of a rectangle to show everything is square in the house," Sayers said. "... What makes it real is our ability to work through the project."

Geometry in Construction thrives due to an extensive network of community partners — Poudre School District Foundation grants provided seed money, Habitat chips in \$15,000 each year, and a network of local companies donates time and treasure to help students make each home.

But what if that project relied on public school funding alone?

"We'd definitely be much smaller scale — like a shed smaller scale," said Nathan Savig, a teacher who was hired to help start Poudre's program.

"And then you lose the whole life of the program," Sayers added.

Colorado schools are used to coming up with outside-the-box ideas to offer students hands-on learning when money is tight.

Colorado ranked among the 10 worst states for school finance in [Quality Counts 2018, an Education Week Research Center analysis](#) released in January.

The state earned a D-plus for its overall school finance climate, which was based on indicators of both equity and spending.

When it came to equity among the state's schools, Colorado ranked in the upper half of the nation at a B-plus, said Sterling Lloyd, assistant director of Education Week Research Center.

When it came to spending on public education? Colorado ranked No. 42, earning an F.

That ranking isn't revelatory for anyone who has paid attention to school funding in recent years — the amount of money Colorado spends to educate each of its public school students has trailed the national average since before the turn of the century.

Most blame the so-called "negative factor," a budget-balancing tool that allows Colorado legislators to reduce the amount of additional money they give to schools with certain "factors," such as rural schools, schools serving high populations of at-risk students and those serving communities with a high cost of living, including Colorado's resort towns.

Though Colorado's school funding climate has many contributing factors, a key question in the debate is this: Does spending more on public education result in better outcomes for students?

The jury is still out on that answer.

### **An issue of more than money**

Asked if there's a link between how well schools are funded and how well their students perform, Lloyd said providing an answer is a "perennial debate among researchers."

"There's no real consensus," he said, adding that it's "hard to draw the precise link" between the two.

Quality Counts analyzed federal data for 39 indicators to produce state-by-state grades for school finance, students' chance for success and K-12 achievement.

Of the states graded the best for school finance, six had at least one other score that was worse than Colorado's in a different category.

"Colorado has struggled in the spending but has strengths," Lloyd said.

Colorado's northern neighbor, Wyoming, came in on top for school finance and was the only state in the nation to earn an A-minus in the report.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Wyoming spent \$16,055 per pupil in fiscal year 2015, the most recent federal data available; Colorado spent \$9,245.

Wyoming's on-time high school graduation rate in 2016-17 was 80.2 percent, slightly higher than Colorado's rate of 78.9 percent.

The most recent nationwide high school graduation rate available, from 2016, was 84 percent.

In the Quality Counts measure of K-12 achievement, which looks "directly at and only at" metrics such as test scores, graduation rates and other purely academic indicators, Wyoming earned a C-minus, a fraction of a point behind Colorado's score.

"Most people support properly funding their schools, but more money for education doesn't guarantee better educated children," said David May, Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce president and CEO, referencing a 2014 CATO Institute study that found "essentially no link between state education spending (which has exploded) and the performance of students at the end of high school (which has generally stagnated or declined)."

So why does it matter if schools get more money?

Lloyd said most can agree on this: "If there's not enough money to go around in the state, it makes things harder for teachers and students. It makes it harder to boost student achievement if the resources aren't there."

### **Colorado seeks to cut into negative factor**

The future outlook of public school funding in Colorado is still very much in the making.

The negative factor funneled \$830.7 million in state funding away from Colorado public schools in 2016-17. This school year saw educators claim a small victory, with the School Finance Act reducing the negative factor by \$2.4 million, to \$828.3 million.

Colorado's total program allocation for education this year is \$6.635 billion.

Gov. John Hickenlooper has asked legislators to make another \$12.9 million dent in the negative factor in his supplemental budget request for the current fiscal year.

That's "nothing to write home about, but it's in the right direction," said Jennifer Okes, executive director of the Colorado Department of Education's School Finance Division.

Hickenlooper's budget request for 2018-19, however, calls for a \$728.3 million negative factor — a \$100 million drop from this year's original appropriation.

Okes said that request is only a starting point for the Colorado Legislature, which will spend the coming months determining how much to spend on the state's schools and competing areas of the state budget, including transportation.

But it's a "positive starting point," Oakes said while adding a word of warning: "We always say, 'Don't count on any of this.' "

Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project, said February is "a little early to make predictions or make assumptions" about the coming year's budget.

A handful of bills addressing school funding have been introduced in the Legislature so far, including one to boost public school capital construction funding and others to incrementally fund full-day kindergarten.

A group of Colorado superintendents have worked on a "modern school finance formula" that is expected to circulate through the Legislature this session.

Only time will tell what the final budget for the next school year will hold.

Meanwhile, Colorado's K-12 educators are making do with what they have and seeking creative ways to engage students.

In Poudre School District, which boasts a graduation rate of 81.4 percent, Poudre High's Geometry in Construction class is providing a local family reliable housing every year while helping students put math concepts to practice.

Though it's taken a "lot of work," Sayers and Savig said the program is now sustainable thanks to community partnerships — including agreements with local businesses that use the program to scout potential future hires.

Students are drawn to the class with that prospect, not to mention the promise of providing a deserving family with a home in each finished project.

"That's a huge part of (our students) showing up even when they don't want to," Sayers said.

"I can't imagine many classes I would teach ... that would bring people to tears," Savig added.

### **Quality Counts 2018: Grading the states**

Quality Counts 2018: Grading the States evaluates schools based on three categories: school finance, chance for success and K-12 achievement. Scores reflect Education Week Research Center's analysis of federal data for 39 indicators of educational achievement. Letter rankings were assigned according to rounded scores.

#### **Top 10 states for school finance:**

##### 1. Wyoming

- School finance: 91.4 (A-minus)
- Chance for success: 80.6 (B-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 71.2 (C-minus) \*
- Overall: 81.1 (B-minus)

##### 2. New York

- School finance: 89.4 (B-plus)
- Chance for success: 80.9 (B-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 70.6 (C-minus) \*
- Overall: 80.3 (B-minus)

##### 3. New Jersey

- School finance: 88.5 (B-plus)
- Chance for success: 88.2 (B-plus)
- K-12 achievement: 81 (B-minus)
- Overall: 85.9 (B)

##### 4. Connecticut

- School finance: 87.8 (B-plus)

- Chance for success: 88 (B-plus)
- K-12 achievement: 73.3 (C)
- Overall: 83 (B)

#### 5. Rhode Island

- School finance: 86.6 (B-plus)
- Chance for success: 81.6 (B-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 71 (C-minus) \*
- Overall: 79.7 (B-minus)

#### 6. Vermont

- School finance: 86.5 (B-plus)
- Chance for success: 87 (B-plus)
- K-12 achievement: 78.8 (C-plus)
- Overall: 84.1 (B)

#### 7. Maryland

- School finance: 85.6 (B)
- Chance for success: 84.7 (B)
- K-12 achievement: 76.8 (C-plus)
- Overall: 82.4 (B-minus)

#### 8. Maine

- School finance: 85.2 (B)
- Chance for success: 81 (B-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 72.4 (C-minus)
- Overall: 79.5 (B-minus)

#### 9. Pennsylvania

- School finance: 85 (B)
- Chance for success: 81.7 (B-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 74.6 (C)
- Overall: 80.4 (B-minus)

10. Alaska

- School finance: 85 (B)
- Chance for success: 73 (C) \*
- K-12 achievement: 65.6 (D) \*
- Overall: 74.5 (C)

**Bottom 10 states for school finance:**

40. Colorado

- School finance: 67 (D-plus)
- Chance for success: 82.8 (B-minus)
- K-12 achievement: 71.8 (C-minus)
- Overall: 73.9 (C)

41. Texas

- School finance: 66.8 (D-plus) \*
- Chance for success: 74.1 (C) \*
- K-12 achievement: 70.9 (C-minus) \*
- Overall: 70.6 (C-minus) \*

42. South Dakota

- School finance: 66.7 (D-plus) \*
- Chance for success: 80.3 (B-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 65.2 (D) \*
- Overall: 70.7 (C-minus) \*

43. Tennessee

- School finance: 66.2 (D-plus) \*
- Chance for success: 74.2 (C) \*
- K-12 achievement: 72 (C-minus)
- Overall: 70.8 (C-minus) \*

44. Oklahoma

- School finance: 66.2 (D-plus) \*

- Chance for success: 72.8 (C-minus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 66.1 (D-plus) \*
- Overall: 68.4 (D-plus) \*

#### 45. North Carolina

- School finance: 65.3 (D) \*
- Chance for success: 77.6 (C-plus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 69 (D-plus) \*
- Overall: 70.6 (C-minus) \*

#### 46. Arizona

- School finance: 62.3 (D-minus) \*
- Chance for success: 73 (C) \*
- K-12 achievement: 70.7 (C-minus) \*
- Overall: 68.7 (D-plus) \*

#### 47. Utah

- School finance: 61.3 (D-minus) \*
- Chance for success: 82.8 (B)
- K-12 achievement: 73.2 (C)
- Overall: 72.4 (C-minus) \*

#### 48. Nevada

- School finance: 60.9 (D-minus) \*
- Chance for success: 67.8 (D-plus) \*
- K-12 achievement: 66.2 (D) \*
- Overall: 65 (D) \*

#### 49. Idaho

- School finance: 59.7 (D-minus) \*
- Chance for success: 75.4 (C) \*
- K-12 achievement: 69.2 (D-plus) \*
- Overall: 68.1 (D-plus) \*

Note: The District of Columbia and Hawaii are single-district jurisdictions and are not issued grades for the school finance category because it analyzes the distribution of funding across districts within a state.

\* Denotes a ranking worse than Colorado's.

Source: Education Week Research Center, 2018