

Denver Public Schools closing 7 schools, reducing grades in 3 others, as deeper cuts to public education funding loom

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Denver Public Schools is moving forward with closing seven schools and reducing offered grades in three more despite widespread opposition from parents, students and teachers. The DPS school board voted to approve the closures on November 21 after Superintendent Alex Marrero publicly announced the district's recommendation to close the schools.

The plan was met with widespread opposition. Students at three of the targeted schools staged walkouts from their classes, and parents and teachers filled school board meetings to speak against the plan. Demands to keep the schools open were ignored by the school board, however, and they voted to approve Marrero's plan just two weeks after its release. The vote was met with chants of "shame on you" by parents and teachers attending the vote.

In total, the closures will displace 1,087 students, primarily from low income and predominately minority parts of the city, and affect about 200 teachers.

In 2023, when the district closed three schools, teachers were given a guaranteed one-year position at the consolidated school. However, this time the district has only promised to extend one-year positions to teachers with tenure. Non-tenured teachers will only be offered short term guarantees if they teach special education, middle or high school level math, or if they are bilingual and work with Spanish speaking students who are learning English. All other teachers will only be offered a position if they enroll in a program to become certified in one of those select roles.

Denver Classroom Teachers Association President Rob Gould told Chalkbeat that the union has attempted to negotiate a memorandum of understanding with the district about displaced teachers' jobs, but that the district has declined. The district said that it would respond within 10 school days of the request to negotiate.

The cuts in Denver are being overseen by a Democratic City administration and a Democrat-run school board and are being justified on the grounds of declining enrollment, with the district losing nearly 5,000 students over the past few years. This is partially the result of families moving out of Denver to less expensive areas. Denver has some of the highest housing and childcare costs in the country.

More broadly, it is the rise of charter schools that is fueling declining enrollment. Since 2009, charter school enrollment in Colorado, promoted by both the Democratic and Republican parties, has risen from around 66,000 students to nearly 138,000 in 2023. Meanwhile, public school enrollment is the lowest in a decade, at 881,000. Justified under the guise of "school choice," Colorado's public schools have been systematically gutted in preference to charter schools.

In districts across the US, funding cuts at the state and federal level have become a major issue as money is cut from education to pay for tax breaks to the ultra wealthy and funding for the military. A state budget stabilization factor has kept Colorado school funding below levels mandated by the state constitution for 15 years. Now that the stabilization factor has been paid off, the state government is enacting school funding reforms that will actually cut funding to many schools while slowing down any increased funding to others.

The Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), which is part of the National Education Association (NEA) criticized the closures but offered no opposition. Instead, the union prostrated itself before the district, asking in a November 7 statement, only that the district "approach this situation with integrity by ensuring bias training for principals and hiring teams, so that educators from closed schools aren't negatively viewed or labeled in the hiring process." The DCTA limited its demands to

calling for revised school funding and reduced class sizes, without opposing school closures directly.

The district is also expanding its enrollment zones, which allow families to choose at which school in their zone they wish to enroll. This will likely create a wider distribution of displaced students, separating classes while making it difficult for teachers to follow their students to a new school.

The new state budget will change enrollment-based funding from a formula based on a four-year moving average of enrollment to a one-year figure. This drastic change will result in schools with declining enrollment facing a faster pace of funding reduction. Additionally, the state will increase the implementation schedule from six to seven years, slowing the distribution of any increased funding.

These changes will be catastrophic for schools. While the state government has boasted that it will increase school funding by \$500 million over the next six years (or around \$83 million a year), the Colorado Fiscal Institute estimates that the changes in enrollment calculations will reduce funding by \$190 million. The state government will also allow money from the Building Excellent Schools Today (BEST) fund, paid primarily by marijuana tax revenue and used to fund infrastructure maintenance and improvements at schools, to be moved to operational school funding. Based on this change, the Democratic administration of Colorado Governor Jared Polis has proposed moving around \$60 million-\$80 million a year that would have been used for maintenance and construction to cover the deficit in school funding.

Rural districts on the Western Slope of the state are already struggling with low funding and could face additional school closures and consolidations. Falling enrollment has been a major problem. Mesa County Valley School District has seen an enrollment decline of 10 percent since 2019, while districts in Summit and Eagle counties have also seen enrollment declines. Districts like these rely on the enrollment averages to soften the blow of budget cuts and could see drastic reductions in funding with the new model.

This situation is made worse by the state's current \$920 million budget deficit. Despite recording a surplus of \$1.6 billion last year, the state was required by the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR), to return the surplus to taxpayers. Now the state is bringing in less tax revenue than expected.

This deficit will likely be exacerbated by a deal struck between the Polis administration and the organizers of

two ballot initiatives to reduce property taxes. The deal involves the state government reducing property tax rates, albeit less than the ballot initiatives, causing a decrease in property tax revenue to local governments by \$255 million in the first year. The state government will then have to step in to offset the reduction in funding for schools. The \$500 million dollar state school funding plan does not account for the loss of revenue in local property taxes or for future costs arising from inflation or population growth.

Given the history of the Colorado state government robbing public education to pay for other state expenses, it is entirely possible that the promise of increased school funding will disappear if the current budget deficit is not resolved.

Additionally, the state has proposed increasing funding to charter schools, bringing per-pupil funding up to parity with public schools.

The Democratic Party is acting as if there is not enough money to support public education, but this is simply not true. Just three billionaires in Colorado—Philip Anschutz, John Malone, and Mark Stevens—own a combined \$31.6 billion in wealth according to *Forbes*. Meanwhile, the state's flat income tax of 4.4 percent shifts the burden of taxation disproportionately to the working class.

Furthermore, property taxes are a regressive tax based on home value, with low income earners paying a larger portion of their income than their wealthier counterparts. One study from Georgetown University found that the bottom 10 percent of households pay nearly 5 percent of their annual income into property taxes while the richest 10 percent pay less than 2 percent, and renters bear an excess burden of increased taxes as landlords raise rents. Colorado already has the third-lowest state property tax rate on average, despite having one of the highest median home values.

While lowering state property taxes will reduce tax rates for working class homeowners, the reduction in public services, in particular public education, will fall hardest on these same working class households.



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