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Dollars and Data: Colorado Springs Education Funding and Achievement

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About the Authors

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About Common Sense Institute

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Colorado's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions concerning the future of free enterprise and aims to have an impact on the issues that matter most to Coloradans. CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the economy and individual opportunity.

Teams & Fellows Statement

CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. Our work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit with academic freedom. Our team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence. The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. CSI operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

Introduction

In Colorado, there are 178 school districts. To provide more localized educational data and statistics, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) divides the state into 10 geographic regions. CDE defines the Pikes Peak region as a collective of these 27 school districts:

- Academy D20
- Big Sandy 100J
- Calhan RJ-1
- Canon City RE-1
- Cheyenne Mountain D12
- Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind
- Colorado Springs D11
- Cotopaxi RE-3
- Cripple Creek-Victor RE-1
- Custer County C-1
- Falcon 49
- Edison 54 JT
- Elbert 200
- Ellicott 22
- Fremont RE-2
- Fountain D8
- Hanover D28
- Harrison D2
- Kiowa C-2
- Lewis-Palmer D38
- Manitou Springs D14
- Miami-Yoder 60 JT
- Peyton 23 JT
- Pueblo City 60
- Pueblo County 70
- Widefield 3
- Woodland Park RE-2

Some of the data contained in this report is presented in this broader Pikes Peak regional context. However, to examine education and workforce issues specific to Colorado Springs, this report uses a narrower definition of the **Colorado Springs area**, which encompasses these 15 most proximate school districts:

- Academy D20
- Falcon 49
- Colorado Springs D11
- Harrison D2
- Widefield D3
- Fountain D8
- Lewis-Palmer D38
- Cheyenne Mountain D12
- Manitou Springs D14
- Ellicott D22
- Peyton 23 JT
- Calhan RJ-1
- Miami/Yoder 60 JT
- Hanover D28
- Edison 54 JT

Colorado Springs is the state's second-largest city by population in Colorado and is unique because it is home to several independent school districts in a concentrated area. These 15 school districts vary in size, diversity, and academic performance. They are a combination of urban, suburban, and rural districts with varied levels of resources due to different funding streams and local property values.

The state of education in the Colorado Springs area has notable implications for all stakeholders—students, parents, educators, and employers. The Institute for Education

Sciences—a federal agency within the Department of Education that conducts rigorous, independent education research, evaluation, and statistics—states third grade reading proficiency is a strong predictor of how well a student performs in high school, whether they graduate, and if they go on to college. Across the Colorado Springs region, third grade reading proficiency is 38.2%, according to Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS). Considering lifetime earnings are closely tied to educational attainment, these education data represent a disservice to students and a disadvantage to the local economy.

These dynamics provide important insights and possible pathways to ensuring every student has access to an excellent education.

Key findings

- **There must be an emphasis on improving both school quality and access across all districts since they represent such variety.** Of the 15 school districts in the Colorado Springs area, the largest is Academy 20, which serves 22.2% of the area's students. The next three largest districts by size—Falcon 49, Colorado Springs School District 11, and Harrison District 2—combine to serve 50.1% of the area's students.

- **School population growth is not uniform.** While seven Colorado Springs area districts have shrunk, eight other school districts are growing significantly. District 11's student population has shrunk by 21.6% while Falcon 49 has grown by 65.5% over the last 10 years.

- **The Colorado Springs area is a choice-rich environment, with over 39 (or 15%) of the state's 264 charter schools, based on 2020-2023 data**. Through charter schools and open-enrollment policies, and the fact that so many school districts are in close proximity, families have the advantage of options beyond the assigned school dictated by their address. Of course, other barriers exist, like transportation and interdistrict application processes.

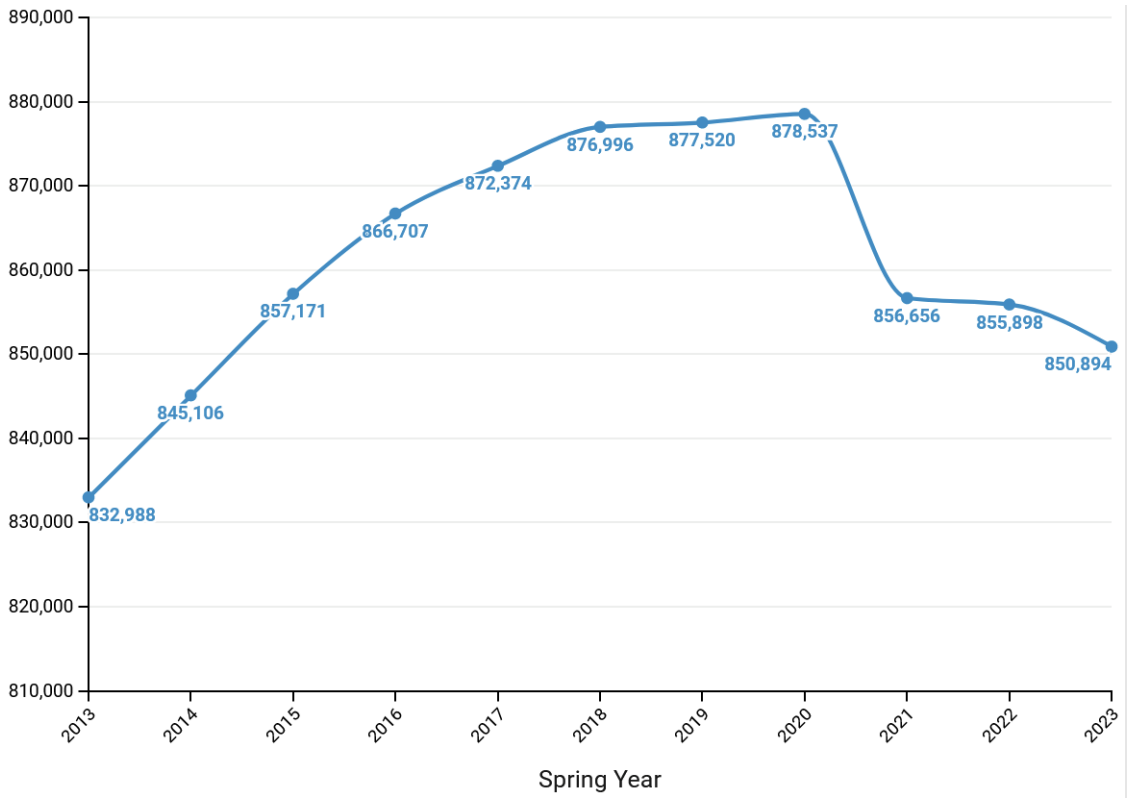
- **In the Colorado Springs area, charter schools generally have better academic outcomes than the district-operated schools.** In Colorado Springs District 11, 54.4% of charter students in the eighth grade met or exceeded grade level expectations in English Language Arts compared to 35.9% of eighth graders in district-run schools. Regarding the math assessment for third graders, 47% of students met or exceeded grade level expectations, compared to 35.7% in district-managed schools.

- **Since recent federal funding is not sustainable long term, Colorado Springs School District 11 should consider major, student-centered modernization of district schools and look to high-performing charter schools in the area as part of the remedy.** Declining enrollment trends, coupled with increased per-pupil funding, has led to significant increases in spending for remaining students in Colorado Springs School District 11.

Part 1: Enrollment & Demographics

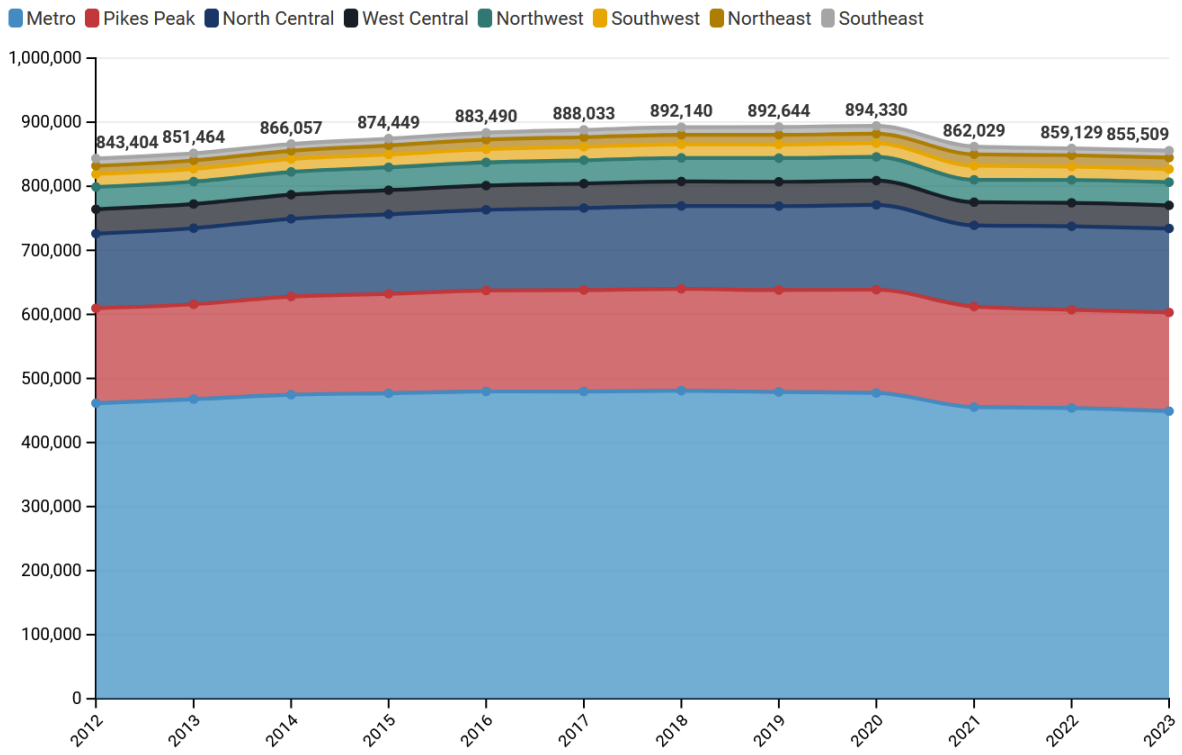
An examination of statewide student enrollment data shows a stark change in the long-time trajectory of steady growth in Colorado. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment was increasing year over year, but the rate of growth has been slowing over time and is now in decline over the last 3 years (see Figure 1). Notably, as discussed later in this report, the decline in the number of students served does not mean a corresponding decrease in total funding.

Figure 1: Colorado K-12 enrollment over time



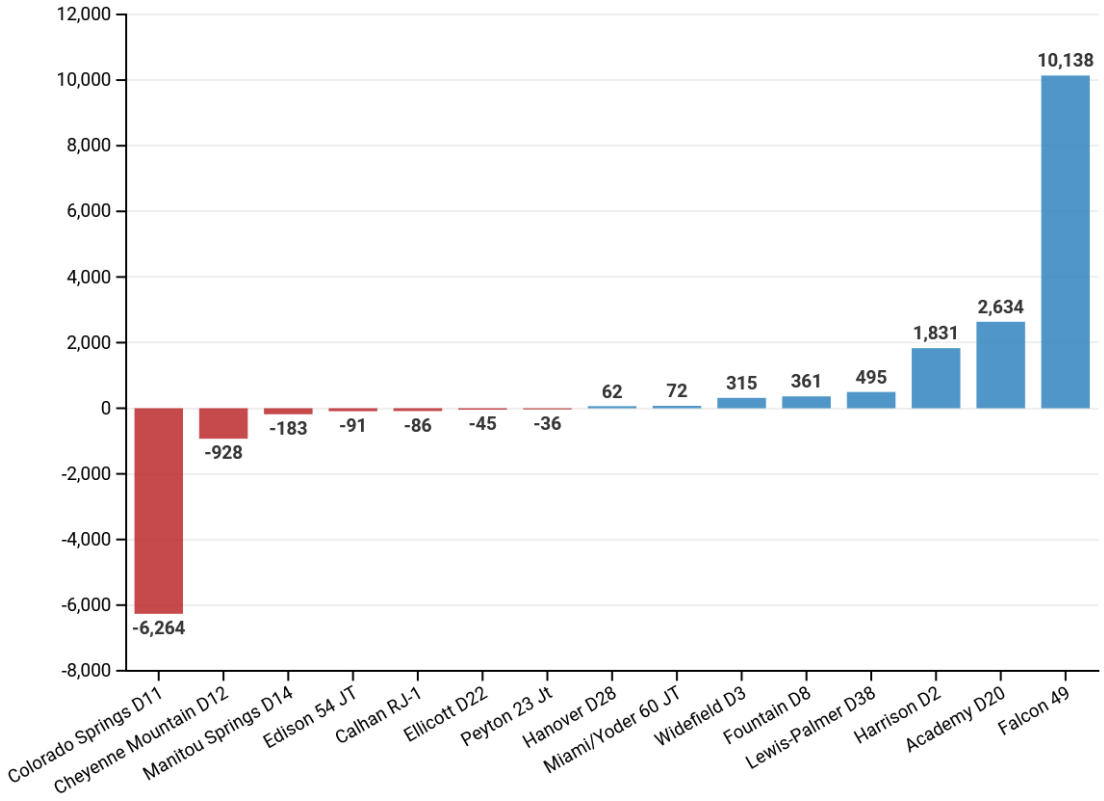
Statewide K–12 enrollment is down by 27,500 students from its peak in 2020. But those declines are not evenly distributed. As Figure 2 below shows, virtually all the enrollment loss has come from Denver metro-area districts. Four regions—including Pikes Peak—saw modest enrollment increases. However, considering the acute enrollment drop over the last 10 years in Colorado Springs School District 11—plus related demographic factors like rising costs of living—these could be a harbinger of other challenges and conditions like those seen in the Denver Metro region.

Figure 2: PreK–12 enrollment by region



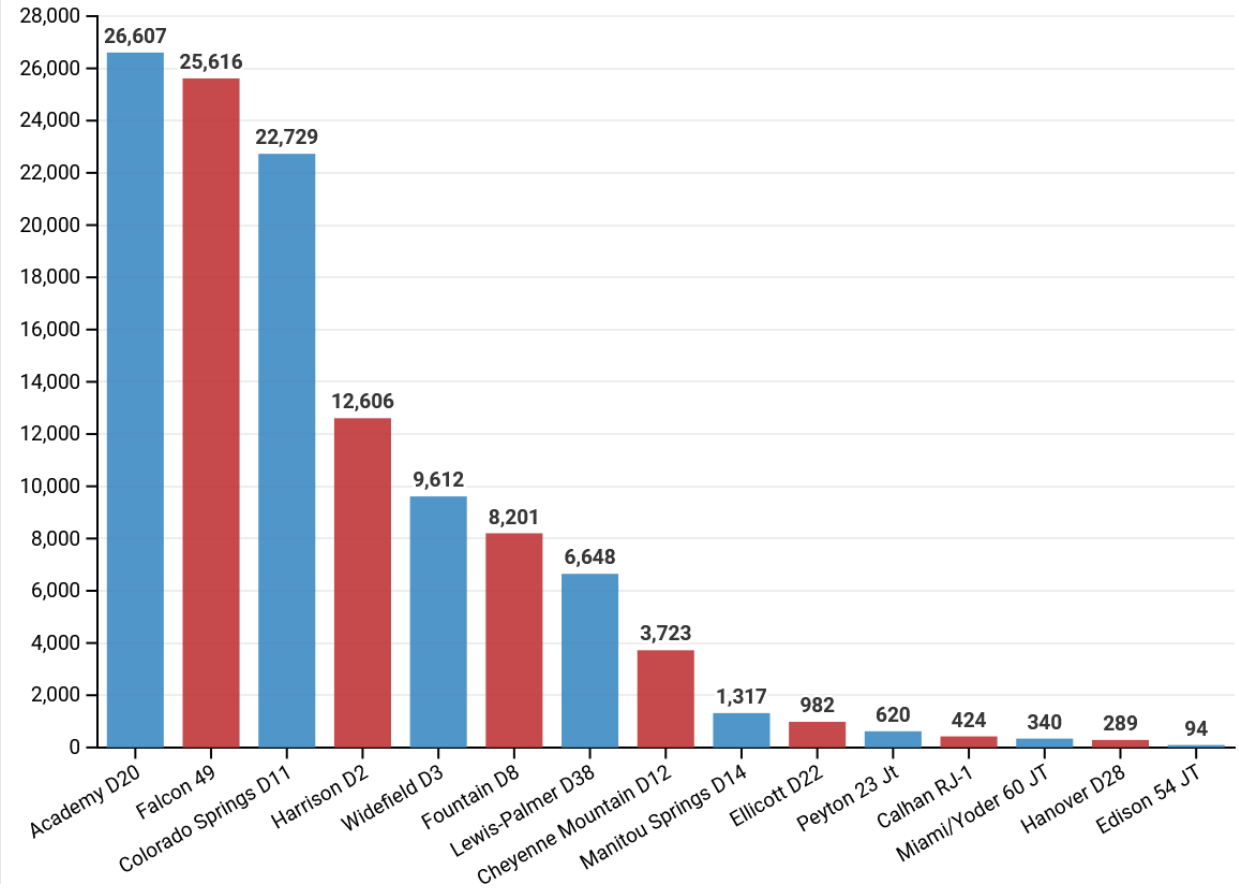
The Colorado Department of Education divides the state into eight geographic regions. In addition to providing annually updated information of specific school districts, the department also aggregates data to illustrate regional dynamics regarding enrollment, revenue, expenses, and student performance. Consistent with historical trends, the Pikes Peak region remains the second-most populous region in the state, even as different districts within the region have very different enrollment trajectories.

Figure 3: Enrollment changes between the 2013 and 2023 school years by district



In the Colorado Springs area—like the Denver Metro region—urban public schools are losing students while suburban schools are largely growing. In the urban core and geographic center of Colorado Springs, School District 11 lost 6,264 students over the last 10 years. During that same period, the district's neighbor to the northeast, Falcon School District 49, grew by 10,138. This means, over the last decade, District 11's student population has shrunk by 21.6% while Falcon 49 has grown by 65.5%.

Figure 4: Pre-K-12 enrollment by grade (2023)



Ten years ago, District 11 had the largest student enrollment in the region by far, with Academy District 20 behind by over 5,000 students. Today, Academy 20 is larger by nearly 3,900 students, and is now the largest school district in the region by student enrollment. However, District 49 is growing at a faster rate and will likely soon become the region's most populous district.

Table 1: 2022-2023 preschool (PK) through 12th pupil count, percent minority, and percent of free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligibility for all 15 school districts

District Name	District Setting	Total PK-12 Pupil Count	% Minority	% FRL Eligibility
Academy D20	Urban-Suburban, Large	26,607	31.5%	11.7%
Falcon D49	Urban-Suburban, Large	25,616	47.1%	34.0%
Colorado Springs D11	Urban-Suburban, Large	22,729	52.5%	56.4%
Harrison D2	Urban-Suburban, Medium	12,606	74.4%	72.0%
Widefield D3	Urban-Suburban, Medium	9,612	55.8%	31.8%
Fountain D8	Urban-Suburban, Medium	8,201	54.0%	40.6%
Lewis-Palmer D38	Urban-Suburban, Medium	6,648	22.4%	9.9%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	Urban-Suburban, Medium	3,723	28.2%	10.0%
Manitou Springs D14	Urban-Suburban, Medium	1,317	20.8%	21.7%
Ellicott D22	Rural, Small	982	49.3%	58.7%
Peyton 23 JT	Rural, Small	620	23.4%	22.6%
Calhan RJ-1	Rural, Small	424	13.2%	50.5%
Miami/Yoder 60 JT	Rural, Small	340	33.8%	45.9%
Hanover D28	Rural, Small	289	42.6%	64.4%
Edison 54 JT	Rural, Small	94	16.0%	Suppressed
TOTAL		**119,808**	**46.16%**	**35.66%**

The approximately 120,000 students attending schools in the Colorado Springs area reflect a highly diverse spectrum of district and student profiles. District settings include urban, suburban, and rural, and range in size from small to medium and large. Students represent a wide range of demographic backgrounds as well—both racial and economic.

Part 2: Revenue

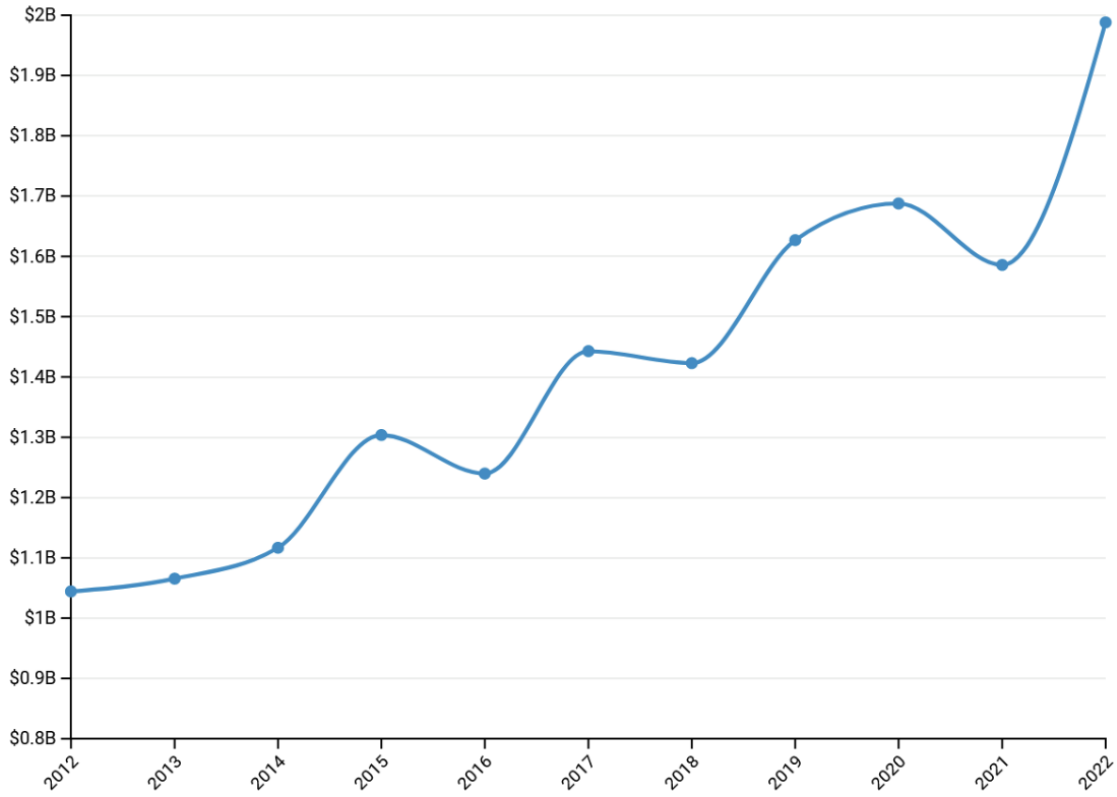
K-12 public education revenue comes from four main funding sources: Local, State, Federal and Other. Local revenue comes from property tax, specific ownership tax and other funds produced within a school district for public education. This category includes mill levy overrides and mills for bonded indebtedness. State revenue includes all funds collected by the state government that are then appropriated to school districts, including per-pupil funding, program funding, and other state grants and projects. Federal revenue is any money distributed to the school district from the federal government, whether directly or through an intervening agency like the CDE.

Federal dollars typically come with specific regulations around how the money can be spent. Federal funding, for example, is used to support educational services for students with disabilities and English Language Learners and to fund programs at districts and schools that have a high proportion or number of low-income students.

Table 2: How are Colorado schools funded?

Year	Total Local Revenue	Total State Revenue	Total Federal Revenue	Total Revenue
2012	4,190,215,876	3,781,004,418	734,007,945	8,917,828,826
2017	5,283,532,203	4,613,494,263	716,543,044	13,514,632,942
2020	6,812,755,611	5,570,184,092	836,348,647	14,542,903,447
2021	6,722,182,886	5,066,174,367	1,613,731,063	15,407,933,946
2022	7,167,522,225	5,723,232,686	1,538,509,240	16,355,954,806

Figure 5: History of total revenue in Colorado Springs (including other sources)



Overall funding has risen in Colorado, contrary to popular notions of chronic underfunding. In the 10 years between 2012 and 2022, the state of Colorado has consistently increased the per-pupil funding through the school funding formula.

Figure 6: Major revenue sources for K–12 public education as shares of total revenue in Colorado Springs (excluding other sources)

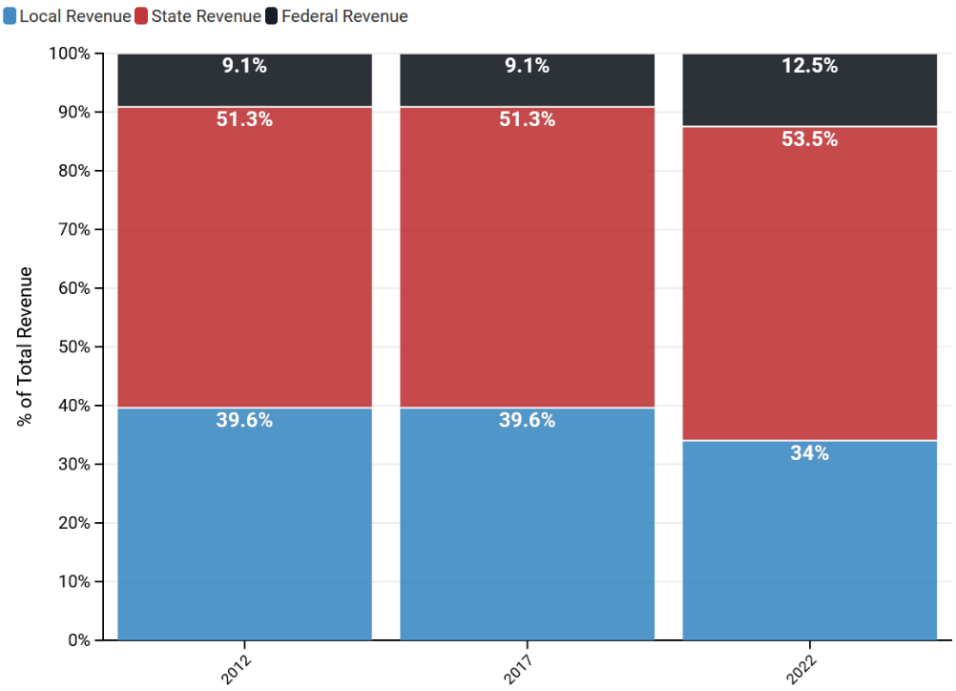


Figure 7: Per-pupil funding from COVID-19 relief funds by stimulus package

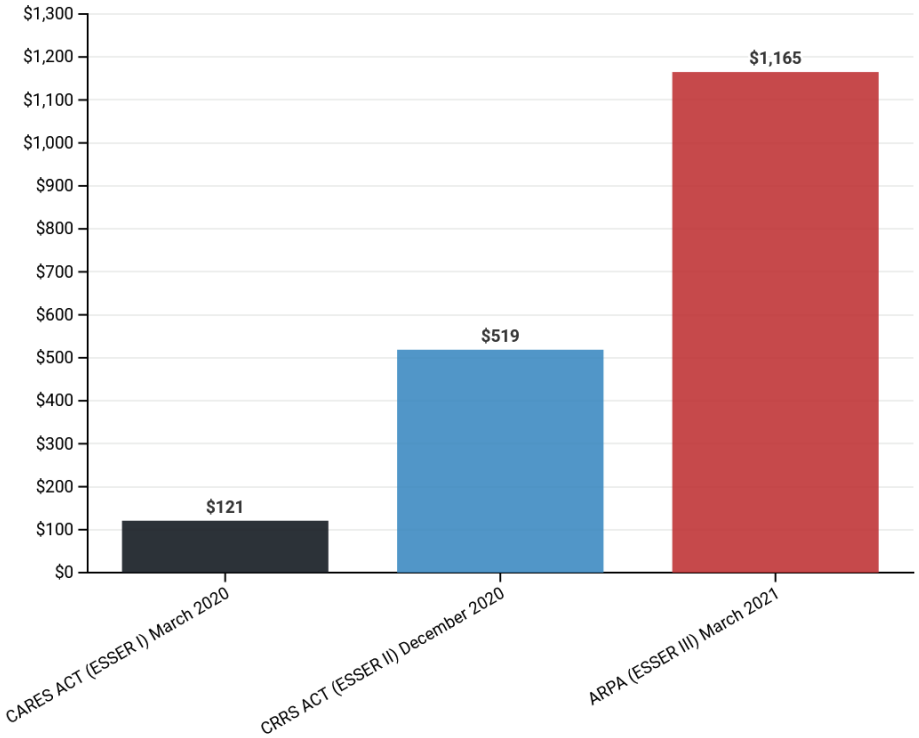


Table 3: 2023 revenue by Colorado Springs area school district

District Name	Number of Students	Local Revenue	State Revenue	Federal Revenue
Academy D20	26,607	$155,029,875	$167,551,588	$23,907,993
Falcon D49	25,616	$50,513,009	$222,737,181	$28,930,196
Colorado Springs D11	22,729	$192,983,034	$162,825,201	$48,265,757
Harrison D2	12,606	$46,484,768	$116,879,388	$30,100,207
Widefield D3	9,612	$37,686,379	$69,909,295	$15,197,686
Fountain D8	8,201	$7,596,762	$73,013,783	$48,228,148
Lewis-Palmer D38	6,648	$37,423,846	$39,983,418	$6,239,763
Cheyenne Mountain D12	3,723	$31,147,270	$20,096,575	$4,112,151
Manitou Springs D14	1,317	$9,291,654	$9,583,673	$1,926,173
Ellicott D22	982	$2,045,441	$9,533,561	$1,908,571
Peyton 23 JT	620	$2,481,727	$5,060,824	$1,024,758
Calhan RJ-1	424	$1,872,721	$3,585,810	$801,930
Miami/Yoder 60 JT	340	$1,626,869	$3,322,314	$732,959
Hanover D28	289	$2,156,479	$3,558,523	$622,790
Edison 54 JT	94	$340,837	$2,677,595	$212,949
TOTAL	**119,808**	**$578,680,671**	**$910,318,729**	**$212,212,031**

There are significant variations in the collection of local, state, and federal funds by school districts. The rural districts receive the lowest share of local funding, presumably due to less robust property tax growth. Interestingly, even within the urban core of Colorado Springs, there is a dramatic difference between District 11 and Harrison School District 2.

District 11, with 22,729 students, has nearly double the enrollment as D2, which has 12,606 students. That means District 11 has 80% more students than District 2. At the same time, District 11 collects 315% more in local revenue from property taxes—District 2's $46.5 million to District 11's $193 million.

Local revenue

For most traditional school districts, property tax revenue from "total program" mills makes up the largest source of local funding. This revenue goes toward a school district's total program

funding as set forth in the School Finance Act. The specific ownership tax, which is a tax levied on motor vehicles, makes up a small portion of local revenue and is also included as part of the total program funding.

State law allows school districts to collect additional local revenue from voter-approved mill levy overrides and bond redemption mills. Such revenue is not considered in the school finance formula and thus is above and beyond a district's total program funding. The amount of education revenue generated from property taxes varies widely across the state due to differing levels of total program mills and property wealth.

HB21-1164 largely addresses these inequities in total program mill levies by requiring school districts to reset the mills. The average increase in mills under HB21-1164 is 4.2 mills. There are 17 school districts (all rural) that will see steeper increases of 10 to 18 mills, which will be phased in over time as the bill limits the tax increase to no more than 1 mill per year. 125 of 178 districts will end up at 27 mills, up from only 39 districts currently.

Local revenue has remained remarkably consistent over the last 10 years; federal revenue had been declining as a share of total revenue until 2021 when COVID-19 relief funds helped offset lower state revenue.

Recent Bonds & Mill Levy Overrides: Anecdotes on Public School Investments and Returns in Colorado Springs

Anecdote 1: Mill Levy Override in Colorado Springs School District 11 (2017)

In 2017, 57.32% of participating voters in Colorado Springs School District 11 voted to increase property taxes within the school district by $42 million annually. The stated purpose was:

- Attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and support staff, not to include administrators, by offering salaries and benefits that are competitive with other school districts;
- Extending the life of existing schools by repairing, maintaining, and modernizing aging buildings;
- Expanding technology access to more students by upgrading and replacing outdated computers and equipment;
- Improving student safety and security by adding a school resource officer at every middle school;
- Supporting student success by providing more school counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers; and
- Reducing long-term interest costs by paying off existing debt sooner;

More spending did not yield a better outcome. Since 2017, enrollment in Colorado Springs School District 11 has decreased by 5,182, or 18.6%. In the time since the passage of the mill levy override, with the district having spent an additional $210,000,000 in the last five years to serve a far fewer number of students, Colorado

Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) results declined, with 35.7% of third graders proficient in math and only 29.8% proficient in reading.

Anecdote 2: A Bond Issue in Harrison School District 2 (2018)

A similar scenario played out in Harrison School District 2 in 2018.

In 2018, 59.26% of voters in Harrison School District 2 who participated in the election voted in favor of allowing the school district to increase its debt by $180 million, raise district taxes by no more than $16.2 million annually, and increase the district's debt and spending limit accordingly. The stated purpose was to provide improvements and renovations to all existing schools and facilities; and improve security, safety, technology, and ADA compliance at all schools and for all students.

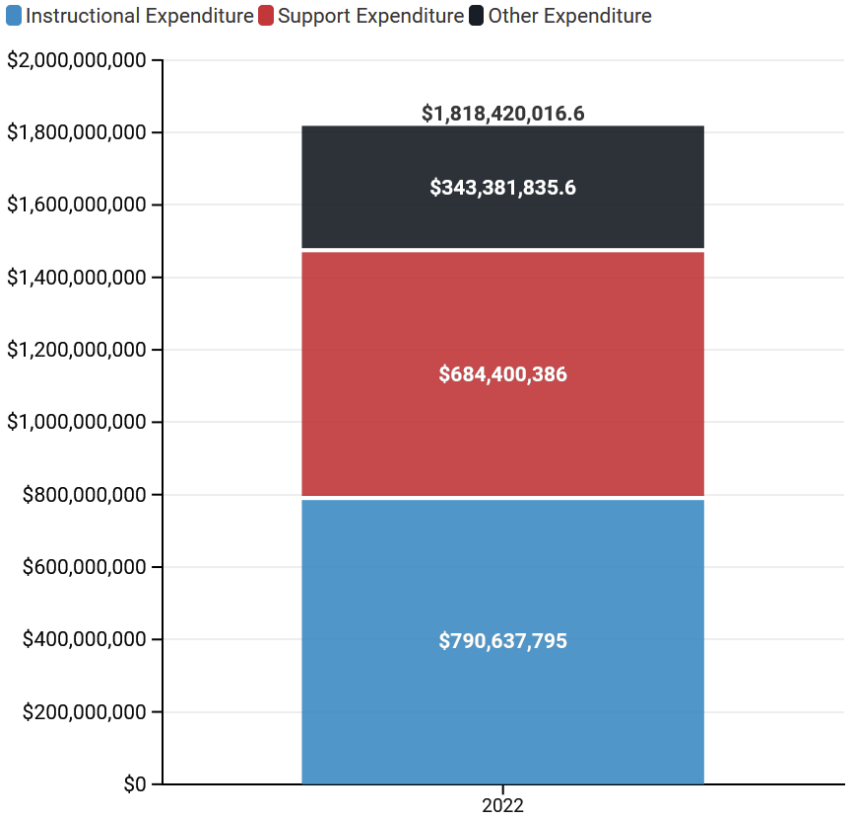
Importantly, the bond measure specified all schools, which included district-authorized charter schools. This is significant because, historically, charter schools have been denied a share of new revenue into the district through bonds and mill levy override measures.

Since 2018, enrollment in District 2 has increased by a modest 835, or 7%. While $180 million was spent improving school facilities, there has been no corresponding improvement in student outcomes. In fact, on the 2023 Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS)—Colorado's standards-based state summative assessment—the grade level proficiency rate for third grade students is 34.2% in math and 33.1% in reading.

Part 3: Expenditures

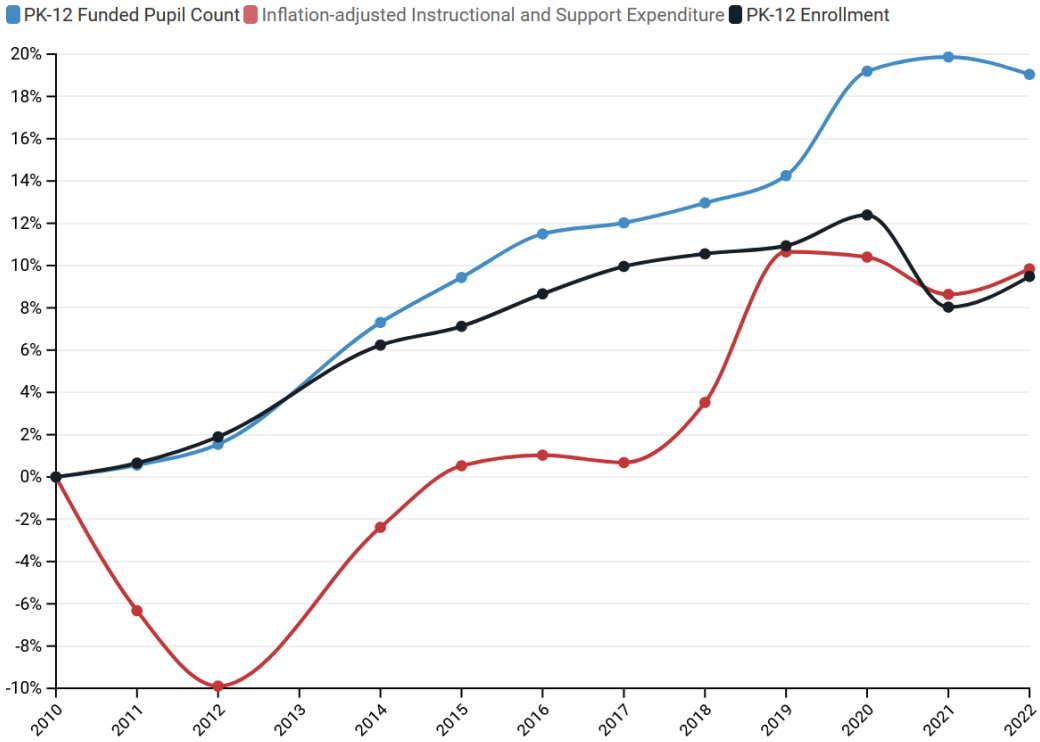
As a general rule, public education expenditures fall into the following categories: Instructional Services (staff salaries and benefits, supplies and materials, purchased services, capital outlays, and 'other'); and Support Services (district and school administration, operations and maintenance, pupil transportation, food services) and Other.

Figure 8: Total annual public education expenditures in Colorado Springs



In 2022, Instructional Services accounted for 44.5% of total spending, while support services comprised 37.6% and 'other' spending accounted for the remaining 17.9%. The Colorado Department of Education's definition of 'other expenditures' is "amounts paid for all expenditures other than Instruction, Support Services, and Community Services."

Figure 9: Growth in enrollment, funded pupil counts, and classroom expenditure since 2007 across 15 Colorado Springs area school districts



Instruction and support spending has not kept pace with the funded pupil count in the Colorado Springs area since 2010, but it has slightly outpaced enrollment. Across the state, classroom expenditure growth has far surpassed both funded pupil and enrollment growth since 2010.

Table 4: History of total expenditures by district

District Name	2012	2017	2022
Colorado Springs D11	$294,822,446	$330,969,489	$399,979,087
Academy D20	$259,527,602	$269,865,362	$375,420,171
Falcon 49	$120,297,114	$204,482,252	$307,521,737
Harrison D2	$102,962,393	$129,086,539	$268,095,680
Harrison D2	$102,962,393	$129,086,539	$268,095,680
Fountain D8	$76,840,989	$103,100,279	$139,538,396
Widefield D3	$73,041,601	$86,119,304	$129,031,977
Lewis-Palmer D38	$96,950,978	$64,704,449	$82,804,386

Cheyenne Mountain D12	$56,130,692	$69,675,753	$51,290,825
Manitou Springs D14	$14,516,809	$16,904,126	$20,069,121
Ellicott D22	$10,852,586	$10,667,250	$13,930,904
Peyton 23 JT	$8,867,518	$7,206,591	$9,113,482
Calhan RJ-1	$4,797,740	$5,571,116	$6,624,833
Calhan RJ-1	$4,797,740	$5,571,116	$6,624,833
Hanover D28	$3,553,481	$4,232,560	$5,973,409

Figure 10: Instruction and support expenditures per pupil by district

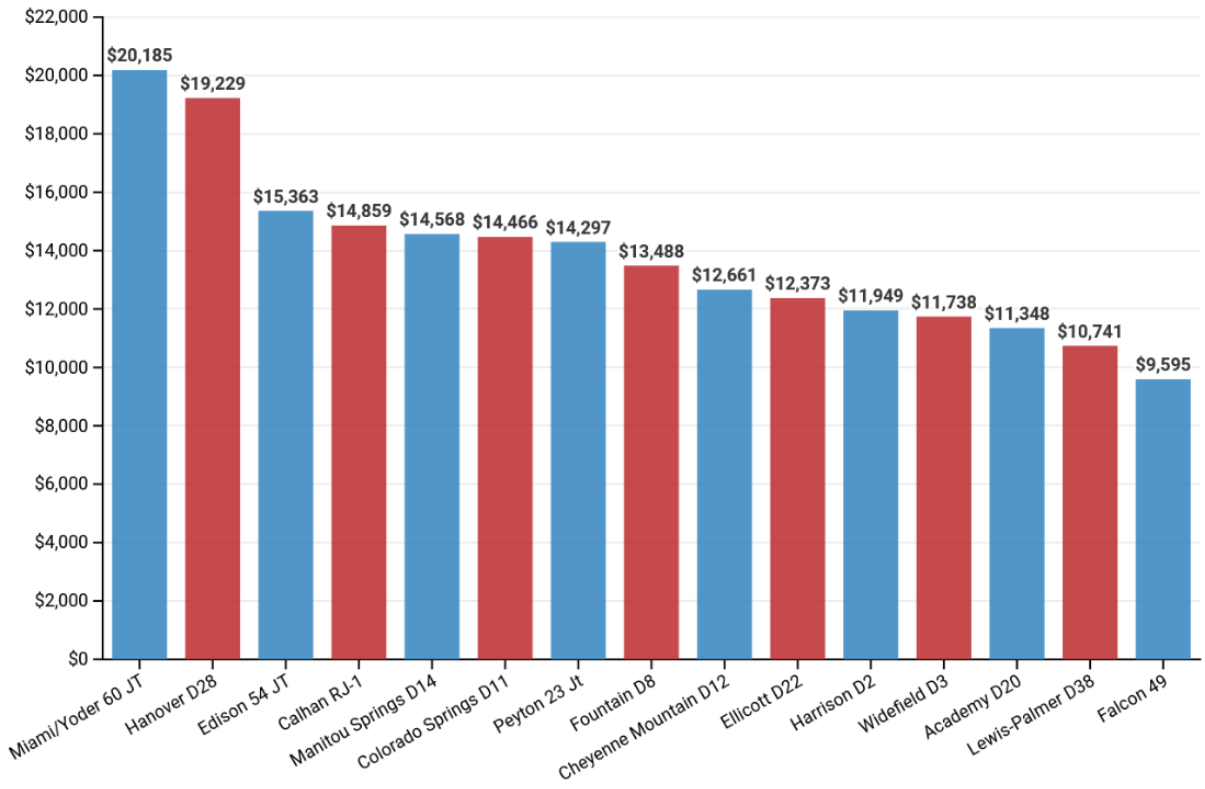


Figure 11: Instruction, support, and total expenditure per pupil and growth between 2012 and 2022

	Instruction Spending per Pupil (2022)	Growth (2012–2022)	Support Spending per Pupil (2022)	Growth (2012–2022)	Total Spending per Pupil (2022)	Growth (2012–2022)
Academy D20	$6,684	28.9%	$4,664	37.4%	$14,725	27.3%
Falcon 49	$4,790	20.9%	$4,805	48.9%	$10,940	29.9%
Colorado Springs D11	$7,578	36.2%	$6,888	89.0%	$15,916	52.0%
Harrison D2	$6,232	28.2%	$5,717	45.7%	$20,406	105.2%
Widefield D3	$6,473	40.9%	$5,265	62.1%	$14,025	64.7%
Fountain D8	$7,161	36.9%	$6,327	70.0%	$17,052	60.0%
Lewis-Palmer D38	$5,683	23.7%	$5,057	37.7%	$12,920	-24.5%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	$7,406	49.4%	$5,255	67.1%	$13,938	9.4%
Manitou Springs D14	$8,053	43.7%	$6,515	62.3%	$14,646	44.7%
Ellicott D22	$6,010	33.0%	$6,364	67.9%	$13,488	17.1%
Peyton 23 Jt	$7,921	80.5%	$6,376	75.9%	$15,376	12.4%
Calhan RJ-1	$7,111	37.8%	$7,749	106.4%	$14,874	60.8%
Miami/Yoder 60 JT	$9,427	74.9%	$10,758	137.4%	$20,900	93.9%
Hanover D28	$8,072	34.1%	$11,157	102.4%	$22,372	50.2%
Edison 54 JT	$7,769	24.8%	$7,594	43.9%	$15,887	34.9%
Total	**$6,400**	**28.0%**	**$5,540**	**56.8%**	**$14,721**	**37.4%**

As a result of the vastly different revenue amounts, different districts have to set their respective priorities and make consequential decisions regarding resource allocation. In every case, across all districts, the instruction and support categories make up the largest expenditures.

Figure 12: Expenditure growth by district between 2012 and 2022

	Instructional Spending Growth	Support Spending Growth	Total Spending Growth
Academy D20	28.9%	37.4%	27.3%
Falcon 49	20.9%	48.9%	29.9%
Colorado Springs D11	36.2%	89.0%	52.0%
Harrison D2	28.2%	45.7%	105.2%
Widefield D3	40.9%	62.1%	64.7%
Fountain D8	36.9%	70.0%	60.0%
Lewis-Palmer D38	23.7%	37.7%	-24.5%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	49.4%	67.1%	9.4%
Manitou Springs D14	43.7%	62.3%	44.7%
Ellicott D22	33.0%	67.9%	17.1%
Peyton 23 Jt	80.5%	75.9%	12.4%
Calhan RJ-1	37.8%	106.4%	60.8%
Miami/Yoder 60 JT	74.9%	137.4%	93.9%
Hanover D28	34.1%	102.4%	50.2%
Edison 54 JT	24.8%	43.9%	34.9%
Total	**28.0%**	**56.8%**	**37.4%**

Part 4: Student performance

Colorado's graduation rate is measured by how many students enter the ninth grade and progress through the 12th grade—completing all academic requirements—in either four or six years. However, while Colorado's four- and six-year high school graduation rates have risen over time, it must be noted that these academic standards are not well-aligned to either college readiness standards or workforce readiness standards.

Figure 13: Four- and six-year graduation rates in Colorado

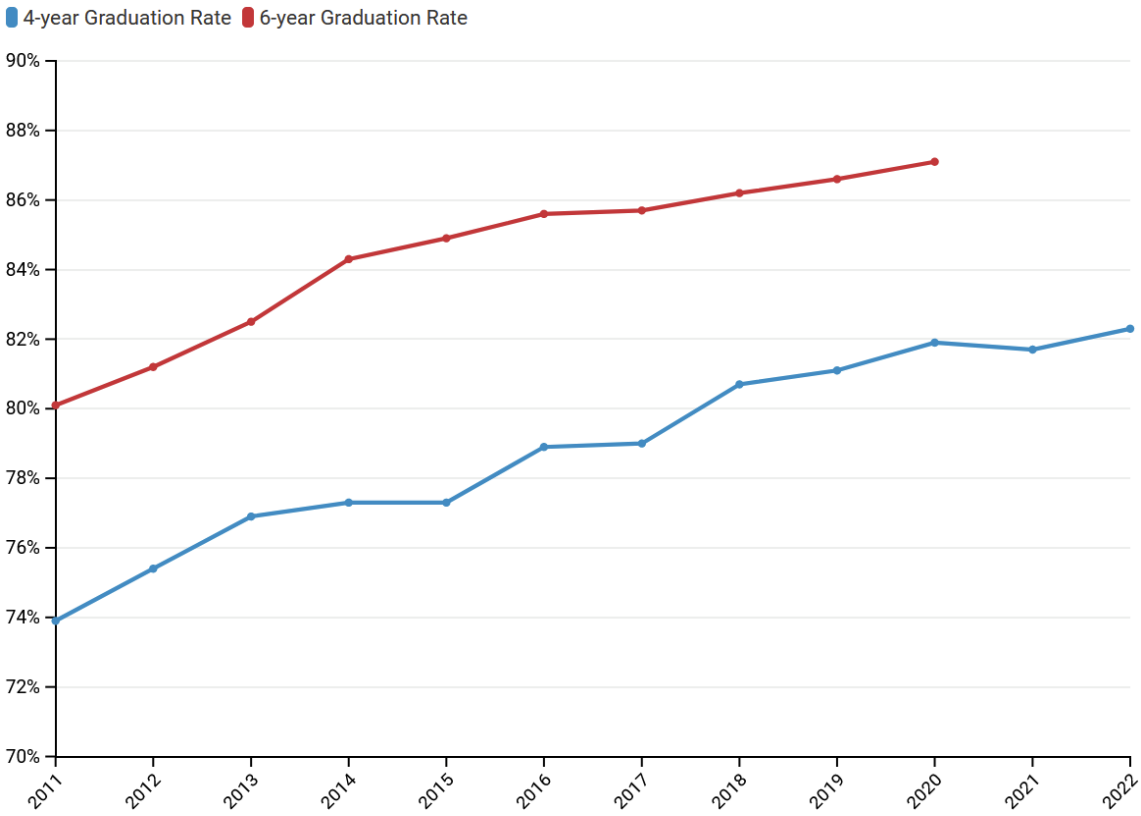
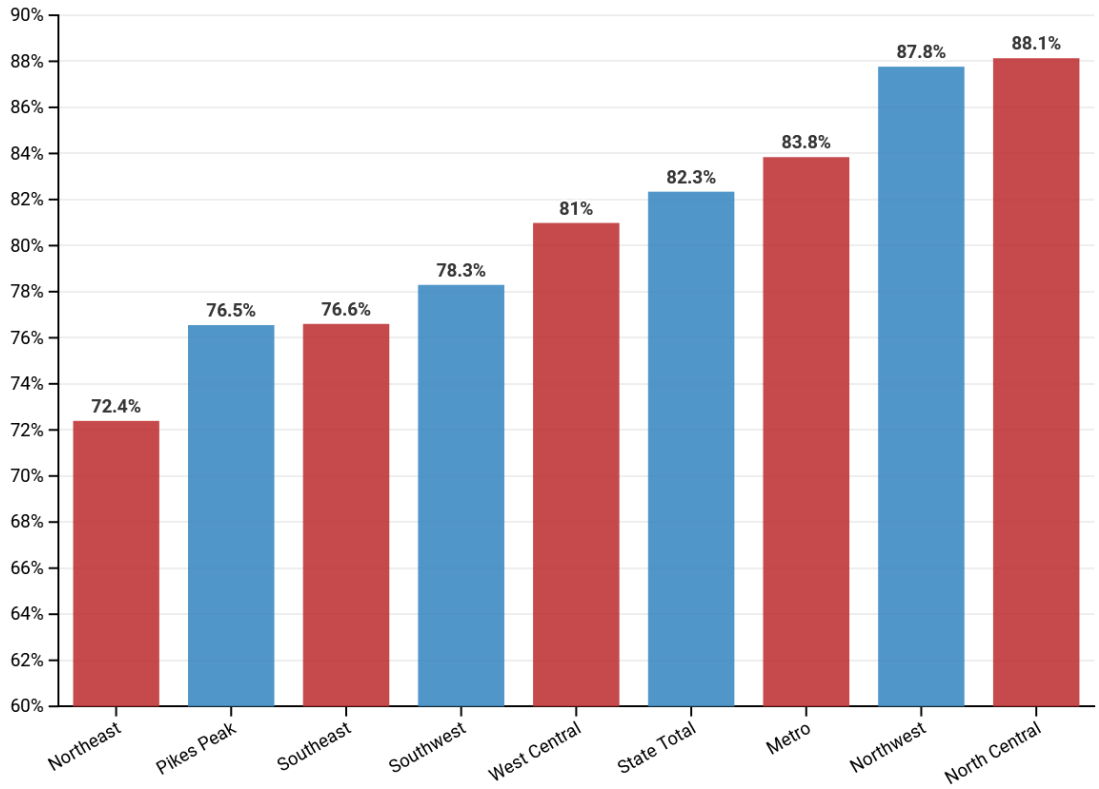


Figure 14: Four-year high school graduation rates by region (2022)



In so far as high school graduation is a required step on most college and career pathways—be it higher education, technical training, directly into the workforce, or even enlisting in military service—**it is concerning that Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak Region lag significantly behind most other regions of the state. With a regional graduation rate of only 76.5%, there are social, economic, and even reputation implications that local education, business, and political leaders will have to confront.**

For example, one aspect of economic development and attracting new business to Colorado Springs is demonstrating an educated workforce. While it is true that Colorado is ranked among the most educated states in the country—as 38% of Coloradans have at least a bachelor's degree—according to the Colorado Department of Economic Development and International Trade, Colorado's 82% high school graduation rate lags the national average of 87%, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. What this means is that Colorado's talent pool is largely imported, rather than home grown, which is known as the Colorado Paradox.

Figure 15: Third-grade reading and math proficiency rates (CMAS 2023)

	Third-grade English	Third-grade Math	Eighth-grade English	Eighth-grade Math
Calhan RJ-1	45.5%	36.4%	39.4%	45.5%
Harrison D2	33.1%	34.2%	41.0%	24.3%
Widefield D3	36.7%	36.0%	45.3%	26.7%
Fountain D8	29.8%	30.6%	28.5%	15.1%
Colorado Springs D11	29.8%	35.7%	35.9%	24.4%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	58.5%	67.4%	60.7%	57.7%
Manitou Springs D14	46.9%	38.3%	47.4%	22.7%
Academy D20	50.1%	54.6%	62.9%	48.9%
Ellicott D22	25.0%	21.1%	39.7%	19.4%
Peyton 23 Jt	33.3%	40.0%	29.5%	35.6%
Hanover D28	16.7%	12.5%	suppressed	suppressed
Lewis-Palmer D38	51.6%	58.0%	58.0%	66.9%
Falcon 49	38.4%	41.3%	48.6%	28.1%
Edison 54 JT	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed
Miami/Yoder 60 JT	29.2%	29.2%	25.0%	12.5%
State Average	**39.9%**	**40.4%**	**42.4%**	**32.7%**
Springs-area Average	**39.0%**	**42.3%**	**48.0%**	**34.5%**

There is little correlation between changes in test scores in these 15 districts and the change in their spending. Spending per pupil has changed between -19.4% and 59.4% between 2016 and 2022 as seen in Table 5. Third and eighth grade CMAS scores have risen and fallen across the same timeframe without much regard to the change in spending.

Table 5: Student performance and per-pupil spending over time

District	2016–2023 Proficiency Rate Change (percentage points)				2016–2022 Spending per Pupil Change
	3rd-grade English	3rd-grade Math	8th-grade English	8th-grade Math	
Calhan RJ-1	1.5	-3.6	2.6	suppressed	39.0%
Harrison D2	-3.5	-3.2	8.9	8.1	19.5%
Widefield D3	-3.7	-8.5	14.2	-6.9	31.9%
Fountain D8	-9.6	-9.6	-16.8	-14.9	59.4%
Colorado Springs D11	-2.4	-1.7	11.5	13	50.2%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	5.6	14.8	-13.9	5.8	39.5%
Manitou Springs D14	15	-1.3	5.9	-16.9	21.3%
Academy D20	1.2	-2.6	13.9	27.7	-19.4%
Ellicott D22	-10.2	-30	-2.2	-9.4	35.0%
Peyton 23 JT	-27.6	-25.2	-28.7	2.9	19.3%
Hanover D28	-20.1	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed	35.2%
Lewis Palmer D38	-8.1	-5.6	-8.8	35.3	49.7%
Falcon 49	-1.8	0.3	27.7	7.8	2.2%
Edison 54 JT	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed	28.0%
Miami-Yoder 60 JT	2.3	1.2	-18.5	suppressed	-11.6%

Charter Schools

According to the Colorado Department of Education, a charter school is a public school that is tuition free and open to all students. It is a public school operated by a group of parents, teachers and/or community members. Charter schools operate under a charter (or contract) between the charter school and its authorizer, either a local school district or the Colorado Charter School Institute.

The Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI) is a state authorizer of charter schools. These charter schools are outside of the jurisdiction of local school districts but operate inside the geographic boundaries of local school districts. In Colorado Springs, there are eight such schools serving 3,880 students.

This semi-autonomous public-school structure allows for specialization, experimentation, and importantly, community engagement in the educational process. A charter school generally has more flexibility than traditional public schools regarding curriculum, fiscal management, and overall school operations.

Charter schools receive state funding based on Per Pupil Operating Revenue (PPR), which is a formula for each student enrolled, just like traditional public schools. Colorado Springs is home to 31 district-managed charter schools.

Table 6: 2022 Third- and eighth-grade students that met or exceeded expectations of math and reading proficiency in Colorado Springs–area charter schools

Colorado Springs Charter Schools	School Enrollment	3rd-grade English	3rd-grade Math	8th-grade English	8th-grade Math
TCA College Pathways	511	N/A	N/A	83.3%	52.4%
Pikes Peak School Expeditionary Learning	396	38.9%	52.8%	38.7%	19.4%
Grand Peak Academy	596	25.8%	27.3%	51.5%	27.3%
Atlas Preparatory High School	484	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Monument Charter Academy	704	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
The Classical Academy Middle School	420	N/A	N/A	75.5%	48.8%
The Classical Academy High School	547	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
CIVA Charter Academy	194	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
James Irwin Charter Elementary School	542	47.6%	60.3%	N/A	N/A

Colorado Springs Charter Schools	School Enrollment	3rd-grade English	3rd-grade Math	8th-grade English	8th-grade Math
James Irwin Charter High School	403	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
James Irwin Charter Middle School	451	N/A	N/A	49.1%	47.3%
The Classical Academy Charter	2,149	66.3%	71.1%	N/A	N/A
Globe Charter School	88	suppressed	suppressed	N/A	N/A
The Vanguard School (High)	321	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
New Summit Charter Academy	628	36.8%	44.7%	46.7%	16.7%
Power Technical Early College	368	N/A	N/A	44.7%	35.1%
Mountain View Academy	393	42.3%	38.5%	31.6%	suppressed
Roosevelt Charter Academy	420	21.3%	32.1%	N/A	N/A
Eastlake High School of Colorado Springs	101	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
The Vanguard School (Elementary)	1,058	51%	51%	N/A	N/A
Monument Charter Academy	704	18.3%	47.9%	N/A	N/A
Banning Lewis Ranch Academy	1,600	38.2%	43.9%	59.2%	33.3%
Liberty Tree Academy	689	40.7%	29.6%	63%	32.9%
Rocky Mountain Classical Academy	1,132	40.2%	32%	51.9%	15.6%
Atlas Preparatory Elementary School	267	suppressed	21.2%	N/A	N/A
Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning	289	35.5%	48.4%	75%	75%
Atlas Preparatory Middle School	484	N/A	N/A	32.4%	20.3%
The Vanguard School (Middle)	219	N/A	N/A	85.2%	65.4%

Colorado Springs Charter Schools	School Enrollment	3rd-grade English	3rd-grade Math	8th-grade English	8th-grade Math
James Madison Charter Academy School	103	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed	suppressed
Community Prep Charter School	172	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Colorado Military Academy	804	23.4%	44.7%	7.7%	suppressed
Thomas MacLaren School	927	59.6%	63.5%	53.3%	43.3%
Coperni 3	298	31.1%	37.5%	suppressed	37.5%
Colorado Springs Charter Academy	309	37.8%	24.3%	44.4%	29.65
Coperni 2	185	33.3%	47.6%	62.5%	50%
Colorado International Language Academy	311	36.1%	36.1%	N/A	N/A
Colorado Early Colleges Colorado Springs	642	N/A	N/A	37.5%	37.5%
Mountain Song Community School	404	24%	36%	suppressed	suppressed
Averages		**42.22%**	**47.03%**	**54.39%**	**38.32%**

In Colorado, district charter schools as a group consistently outperformed district operated schools on the state School Performance Framework. In 2022, 85% of students attending district charter schools earned a "performance" rating on the SPF, which is the highest of four proficiency levels. Only 66% of students attending district operated schools made that accomplishment.

Statewide in 2022, 37% of charter students met or exceeded grade level expectations in English Language Arts compared to 31% of third- through eighth graders in district-run schools, according to an analysis from the Keystone Policy Center. On the math test, 31% of students met or exceeded grade level expectations, compared to 27% in district-managed schools.

On the state test, CMAS, Colorado Springs area charter school students in grades three and eight outperformed their peers in district-managed schools on both literacy and math tests.

In Colorado Springs District 11, 35.9% of eighth graders in district-run schools met or exceeded grade level expectations in English Language Arts compared to 54.4% of the region's district and Colorado Charter School Institute charter students in the eighth grade. The same is true for the math assessment for third graders, wherein 47% of charter students met or exceeded grade level expectations, compared to 35.7% in district-managed schools.

Part 6: Income, Diversity, and Disparities

In March of 2023, authors Lance Bolton, PhD, and Patricia Diawara, PhD published a research paper entitled *The Other Colorado Springs: An Attainment and Equity Examination of the Complex 15 school District Landscape of Colorado Springs, Colorado.*[i] In it, they use demographic and academic performance data to illustrate the stark contrast between two types of school districts—the ones with low diversity have high income, and the ones with high diversity have low income.

Further, the impacts of this dynamic reach far beyond test scores. The authors show that "students attending our region's four high income school districts are doing well, bettering state averages for enrolling in college, and completing college. By contrast a similar number of students attending our region's four low-income districts are losing ground, graduating from high school at unacceptably low rates, enrolling in college at low rates, and completing college at dismal rates." This is illustrated in the following data.

Economically disadvantaged students are commonly identified as those who participate in the National School Lunch Program, which provides free and reduced-price lunches (FRL) to students from low-income families, defined as those earning below 185% of the federal poverty line (currently $55,500 for a family of four).

It is a crude proxy but provides important insights into the differences and disparities that exist between less affluent student groups and their more affluent peers.

In the Colorado Springs area, as the following data reveal, the contrast is stark.

Table 7: Percent minority and percent of free or reduced lunch (FRL) eligibility for high-income/low diversity (HILD) districts and low-income/high diversity (LIHD) districts (2022–2023 data)

District Type	Districts	% Minority	% FRL Eligibility
High-income/low diversity (HILD)	Academy D20, Cheyenne Mountain D12, Lewis-Palmer D38, Manitou Springs D14	29.2%	11.6%
Low-income/high diversity (LIHD)	Colorado Springs D11, Fountain D8, Harrison D2, Widefield D3	58.5%	53.2%

Table 8: 2021 High school graduation rates disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender

District Type	High School	Hispanic		Black		White	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
High-income/low diversity **(HILD)**	Academy D20	94.7%	88.4%	94.3%	92.9%	96.4%	91.8%
	Manitou Springs D14	88.9%	100%	N/A	N/A	100%	95.5%
	Lewis-Palmer D38	93.9%	96.3%	66.7%	100%	98.1%	92.9%
	Cheyenne Mountain D12	96.7%	96.0%	100%	100%	94.8%	97.8%
Low-income/high diversity **(LIHD)**	Harrison D2	88.4%	76.3%	84.4%	71.4%	83.6%	62.5%
	Widefield D3	83.3%	70.8%	93.9%	79.5%	86.7%	67.1%
	Fountain D8	83.6%	87.8%	100%	84.8%	92.3%	81.3%
	COS D11	69.6%	55.3%	68.7%	56.4%	78.9%	67.7%

Table 9: Class of 2022 high school four-year graduation rates

District	Total 9th Grade Enrollment (Class of 2022)	Total High School Graduates (Class of 2022)	Class of 2022 High School Graduation Rate
High-income/low diversity **(HILD)**	**3,272**	**3,067**	**93.7%**
Academy D20	2,197	2,058	93.7%
Cheyenne Mountain D12	347	330	95.1%
Lewis-Palmer D38	613	576	94.0%
Manitou Springs D14	115	103	89.6%
Low-income/high diversity **(LIHD)**	**3,525**	**2,649**	**75.1%**
Colorado Springs D11	1,811	1,284	70.9%

Fountain D8	435	390	89.7%
Harrison D2	721	577	80.0%
Widefield D3	558	398	71.3%

These complex challenges require localized and customized solutions, and Colorado Springs stakeholders have been collaborative and creative in addressing these disparities.

One example is the Promise Scholarship program, which provides free college tuition and academic support coaches at Pikes Peak Community College to every qualifying high school graduate in Harrison School District 2.

Another example is universal preschool. There is a coalition of partners—local and state early childhood advocates, agencies, and funders working to ensure every 3- and 4-year-old in Colorado Springs has access to a quality and affordable preschool opportunity.

Conclusion

In many ways, Colorado Springs' ecosystem is like statewide data trends: increased spending on education and overall student performance low and stagnant despite the increased spending. There are also pronounced academic achievement gaps between low-income students and their more affluent peers.

As education spending steadily increases and student performance remains low—only 40% of the state's third grade students proficient in reading—there are opportunities for Colorado Springs to be proactive, strategic, and successful in reversing this damaging trajectory.

Since Colorado Springs is a highly attractive hub for certain industries—aerospace, military, advanced manufacturing, technology, tourism, and others—there is an opportunity to design and implement more industry aligned, career connected educational pathways. This could be the impetus for modernizing or even reimagining K-12 education and better nourishing the experience with excellent career opportunities while also solving for projected workforce shortage.

Colorado Springs area districts should continue to build on the number of rigorous, diverse, and family friendly charter schools. Charter schools are a value-add to the city's educational ecosystem and should be expanded to accommodate demand from families.

Colorado Springs School District 11 is particularly well positioned to support and scale student-centered solutions. Currently, several charter schools operating within the district are not authorized by the district. Rather, they are authorized by the Charter School Institute. As a result, these schools do not receive the additional local mill levy override dollars the district operated schools receive. This is a financial disadvantage to CSI schools, because they receive less in per pupil funding by partnering with the state authorizer instead of the local school district. If District 11 embraced charter schools into the solution set, it would attract more high performing charter schools that could help arrest and reverse the persistently declining enrollment.

Further, by creating and supporting what many call a "cradle to career" pathway of education, training, and support, Colorado Springs will deliver on both the moral and economic imperative to provide every student an excellent, career-connected educational experience. Programs like universal preschool on one end, plus postsecondary scholarships and supporting students who work hard to earn them—these are sound policies and programs that help overcome the shortcomings in the current system that too often fails too many students.

Data Sources and Methodology

This study analyzes financial, professional, and student data in the 15 public school districts identified in the introduction of the report. All the report's revenue and expenditure data are provided by the Colorado Department of Education's (CDE's) annual "School District Revenues and Expenditures" reports. The most recent available data are from FY2022.[ii]

Per-pupil figures are developed entirely according to "funded pupil counts" defined by the financial dataset. Student headcounts, which are distinct from funded pupil counts, are available from FY2000 through FY2023 in CDE's "Pupil Membership" data.[iii]

Inflation adjustments, where they occur, are developed according to the U.S. Government's CPI-U series for the Denver MSA published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).[iv]

The report uses graduation-rate data from CDE's "Graduation Statistics" page[v] and CMAS (standardized test) performance data at the state, district, and school levels from CDE's "CMAS Data and Results" spreadsheets.[vi]

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[i] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Jp6SNvBeIeu8NUlRpYwbxRfdxMOMLDfy/edit
[ii] https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/revexp
[iii] https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/pupilcurrent
[iv] https://www.bls.gov/cpi/
[v] https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/gradratecurrent
[vi] https://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/cmas-dataandresults