



POLITICS & POLICY COLORADO GENERAL ASSEMBLY
STUDENT & SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Funding, school ratings, workforce: Education issues we're watching in 2022

By Jason Gonzales and Erica Meltzer | Jan 7, 2022, 7:17pm MST



Colorado lawmakers return Wednesday for the start of the 2022 legislative session. | Aaron Ontiveroz / The Denver Post

Colorado lawmakers return Wednesday for the start of the 2022 legislative session with hopes to tackle long-standing education challenges as well as new problems driven by the pandemic.

Money for both K-12 and higher education will be major topics, as usual, with advocates saying it's past time for the state to make up for years of low funding. There's also the potential for big investments in job training and changes to how the state shares money with districts.

The state's polarizing accountability system and how to move forward with school ratings during the pandemic will also be up for debate, as will a push to expand rights for public sector workers.

Overshadowing all of this are the ongoing challenges facing schools: teacher and bus driver shortages, mental health crises, and lasting impacts of COVID on student learning. Lawmakers think they have ideas to help, while education advocates are wary of new programs and unfunded mandates.

Here's a look at the top education issues lawmakers may address this year.

Accountability

Last year, Colorado lawmakers significantly scaled back standardized tests and suspended the accountability system that rates schools based on test scores.

This year, Colorado students can expect to take the full suite of standardized tests, but school districts don't want to see the accountability system resume immediately. They say that last year's test data isn't a reliable basis for drawing conclusions.

School districts and teachers unions prefer a transition period before schools get their normal ratings again — though what exactly that would look like isn't clear — and they have support from key Democratic lawmakers.

Advocates for this "bridge" back to accountability say they're working with reform supporters on an acceptable compromise, but supporters of the accountability system worry that changes will make it harder to get a full picture of how the pandemic affected student learning.

Funding

Education advocates are generally optimistic about increasing school funding this year. But expect debates about how much money the state should sock away for future years and how much it should spend now.

Schools are flush with federal aid money, much of it still unspent, but advocates say the state needs to increase its support so that schools don't fall off a fiscal cliff.

Meanwhile, lawmakers are also considering changes to how Colorado shares money with school districts. A special committee on school finance could recommend increasing funding for special education students and changing how it defines at-risk students, a designation that brings extra money for school districts. Conservatives will push for funding changes to be tied to better student outcomes

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Join Chalkbeat on Tuesday, Jan. 11 from noon-1:30 MT for our annual discussion of key education topics likely to surface during the upcoming legislative session. [RSVP for the virtual event](#) so we're able to provide the webinar information and can hear your ideas for questions.

This year, we'll discuss possible changes to K-12 funding, efforts to expand college access, the rollout of universal preschool, mental health supports, and more. [We hope to see you there.](#)

There's also a proposal for the state to provide matching funds for local property tax increases in districts with low assessed value, an effort to reduce some of the disparities between rich and poor districts, though it's controversial even among committee members.

But don't expect a major rewrite of the funding formula. It's proved too politically touchy in the past, and the special committee has deferred some of the thornier questions until after the session.

Collective bargaining

A coalition of labor groups are expected to push to expand collective bargaining rights for public employees, including teachers and higher education workers unions.

Colorado Education Association President Amie Baca-Oehlert said shoring up educator rights is a top priority, and teachers have higher salaries and are happier in their jobs in districts with unions.

But the Colorado Association of School Executives, which represents superintendents, has major concerns and wants the bill to exclude educator unions. They see the legislation as violating local control and don't think the state has the authority to dictate whether school districts recognize employee unions.

Preschool

Colorado is moving ahead with plans for universal preschool, a key plank in Gov. Jared Polis' education platform. Lawmakers last year established a new state department of early childhood education to oversee the rollout of a program funded by voter-approved taxes on nicotine products. This year, lawmakers need to act on a series of recommendations about how the program will actually work. Those include making sure preschool reaches children who need it most, that families have lots of options, and that the application process is easy.

"We want to ensure the new department is ready to administer early childhood in the fall of 2023," said state Sen. Janet Buckner, the Aurora Democrat leading the effort.

Workforce training

Even before the pandemic, Colorado leaders wanted more of the state's population to earn a college degree or credential, given the increase in jobs requiring college training, but college enrollment has declined during the pandemic.

Thanks to the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Colorado has about \$3.8 billion to help recover from the coronavirus pandemic. Now lawmakers need to figure out how to spend that money, including on helping residents connect to job training. That effort will be guided by recommendations from the 1330 Commission, created by last year's Higher Education Student Success legislation.

How lawmakers earmark the money could lift Colorado residents most in need of jobs and open up college to many more people.

It would also represent a big investment in postsecondary education, especially given that Polis' proposed 1% increase in higher education funding doesn't keep pace with inflation.

Pandemic recovery

The omicron surge straining K-12 schools and colleges defies an easy legislative fix, particularly to remedy teachers absences and lack of substitutes.

More money would help address student mental health needs and alleviate stressful classroom environments, but won't find more counselors.

House Education Committee Chair Barbara McLachlan, a Durango Democrat and former teacher, is working on legislation to bring more school workers back from retirement and to expand a program that pairs new principals with experienced mentors. Long term, improving school leadership will improve teacher retention, she said.

State Rep. Colin Larson, a Littleton Republican, hopes a bill to offer grants for innovative transportation plans could alleviate the growing bus driver shortage.

With student performance on standardized math tests falling during the pandemic, Larson wants to promote better math instruction.

Republicans will seek ways to get money to parents to address educational needs, an effort that Democrats will almost certainly oppose as opening a back door to vouchers.

"The parents know," said state Sen. Paul Lundeen, a Monument Republican. "They know what their child's experience has been and what their child's needs are."

Senate Education Committee Chair Rachel Zenzinger, meanwhile, wants schools with chronic low test scores to have the option of converting to community schools, with wraparound services that help students and families with needs outside the classroom.

Bret Miles, who heads up the Colorado Association of School Executives, is begging the legislature not to place more burdens on school right now.

“Can we not do 80 bills to try to fix education this year?” he asked. “Educators are tired. I want legislators to hear that every time they turn around.”

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