Fowler Elementary students cross Colorado 167 on their way to lunch at the Fowler High School cafeteria on Oct. 23, 2019. Fowler voted in favor of a bond measure that school district officials hope will increase their chances to receive BEST funding. (Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

EDUCATION

Colorado districts aren’t getting enough state money to maintain schools and attract teachers. So they’re turning to local taxpayers.

Voters approved requests to fund critical school infrastructure projects and teacher raises in six districts, but rejected them in others. Local dollars are becoming more crucial to fill gaps left by the state.

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Erica Breunlin
The newest part of Fowler Jr. & Sr. High School is actually pretty old—about 45 years old.

Like seven other rural districts in Colorado, Fowler School District set its sights on tapping the state’s BEST Grant program to help fix its three schools, but to do it, Fowler would first need a $4.9 million bond to provide the local match required by the state grant.

Fowler, a sprawling district east of Pueblo with close to 400 students, is one step closer to building that replacement school after its bond measure passed Tuesday.

“It’s exciting that our community was on board with the plans that we have in trying to keep Fowler schools performing at the levels that everybody expects us to,” Superintendent Alfie Lotrich said.

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Five other districts that pitched a BEST Grant–related bond to taxpayers this year succeeded: Eaton School District RE-2, North Conejos School District RE-1J, Yuma School District 1, Trinidad School District Number 1 and Lake County School District.

Weld RE-5J Johnstown–Milliken School District’s ballot measure asking for $139.9 million did not pass.

School districts statewide asked for 31 tax measures for various purposes ranging from replacing school bus fleets to rebuilding schools; 19 passed, according to the Colorado School Finance project.
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Asking voters to give teachers, staff a raise

Construction wasn’t the only thing on district agendas. Nine communities tackled what’s become a sore spot across much of Colorado: recruiting and retaining good teachers and support staff.

Districts approached voters with the idea of increasing the school mill levy, which would increase their property taxes, to cover the cost of hiring or boosting the pay of existing employees.


The wave of districts leaning on their local taxpayers reinforces that the state is not doing all it can to support K-12 education, said Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project.

“There’s a high need in the state,” Rainey said.

Colorado has a complex school finance calculus to determine how much each district gets per pupil. One component of that is the budget stabilization factor, which was established in 2009 as the state struggled to afford
required increases in K-12 spending during the Great Recession. Rather than boost funding to the degree the constitution required, the state developed the “negative factor” – also known as the budget stabilization factor – to tally how much money schools were losing out on each year.

Rainey said this school year, that means districts are working with about $572 million less in state funding than they need.

That impacts districts differently, she said, but it has an outsized impact on some districts across Colorado, typically smaller and rural districts whose per-pupil revenue amount is higher.

The only way districts can bring in an additional revenue stream is by turning to local voters, Rainey said.

BEST dollars to update, secure school facilities

The green light from taxpayers allows Fowler to move forward with its BEST grant application in February.

The district needs about $48 million from the grant program to complete projects, including the replacement of the junior and senior high school and critical safety and security upgrades at Fowler Elementary School.

Based on the grant program’s funding calculations, the district has to come up with 30% of the project costs, equal to about $12.5 million in local funding.

The most the district could legally ask taxpayers for is $4.9 million, based on the assessed values of the properties in the district, Lotrich said.
Alfie Lotrich is the Fowler School District Superintendent and the Elementary School Principal. Lotrich supported a local bond measure that he hopes will help the district secure a BEST Grant — enabling the district to build a new High/Junior school as well making improvements to the elementary school. (Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

That leaves a gap of $7.5 million, for which the district can seek a waiver from the BEST Program, which would give the district additional state dollars.

Some of the Fowler school buildings are reaching the end of their lifespan. Components of the junior and senior high school date back to the mid-1950s, mid-1960s and the 1970s. The high school gym, constructed in 1974, is the newest part of the school.

“Repairs on those have become more expensive, and the opportunity to be able to do this with BEST dollars isn’t necessarily guaranteed to be there forever,” Lotrich said.

Eaton School District RE-2 also secured taxpayer support in its fast-growing Northern Colorado community. Its $128.5 million bond measure passed, and some of the money will be used to meet the matching requirement of a BEST Grant awarded in May to make safety and security enhancements for its five schools, Superintendent Bridgette Muse said.
Eaton will cover 76% of the $1.9 million project, which calls for new single access points in vestibules designed to keep visitors from entering the school without first encountering staff, who will check their identification.

Another portion of the bond, separate from the BEST Grant, will address deferred maintenance projects at all the district’s schools, including fixing old furnaces and piping, Muse said.

“We don’t get enough per-pupil funding to also fund our maintenance,” Muse said, noting the district has a big buildup of deferred maintenance issues.

Nor does the district have a surplus of funds every year that would enable it to set money aside for major projects, like building a new school, the superintendent said.

The bond will also help Eaton construct a new high school for 800 students. Muse said the district averages 2–5% growth in the student population each year and that it has multiple schools already at capacity. It anticipates all of its schools will be at capacity within the next three years.

Eaton also passed a $1.5 million mill levy override, which will allow the district to hire staff focused on mental health and safety and add to its maintenance team. Dollars will also go toward teacher and staff raises as the district focuses on retaining employees amid a shortage of bus drivers, food service workers, paraprofessionals and aides.

It can be challenging to draw support staff to Eaton, Muse said. “They can get better pay elsewhere.”

It’s not as hard to attract teachers, she noted, though pay is also an issue.
“Most of our teachers,” Muse said, “are reporting that it’s difficult to make ends meet.”

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