

New state website details Colorado schools' revenue, spending

By: **Debbie Kelley** (/author/Debbie+Kelley) • July 9, 2017 • Updated: July 10, 2017 at 7:23 am



Which local school district spends the most money per student? How about the least? Which district gets the most federal funding?

The answers can be found on a new website the Colorado Department of Education has launched.

The Colorado K-12 Financial Transparency website, <https://coloradok12financialtransparency.com/#> (<https://coloradok12financialtransparency.com/#/>), provides revenue and expenditure statistics for each of the state's 178 public school districts, most schools and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, or BOCES.

While some applaud the long-awaited financial picture, others say it's misleading.

Colorado lawmakers called for the site three years ago to foster greater financial transparency. In 2015, the Colorado Department of Education hired BrightBytes, a San Francisco education analytics company, to create the site.

Data presented is from fiscal year 2015-16, when the state educated 899,112 students in 1,857 public schools.

Of those, 227 were charter schools, which have more flexibility with governance, curriculum and finances and fall under less regulation than traditional public schools.

State Sen. Michael Merrifield, a Democrat from Colorado Springs who is part of a new legislative group that will study how the state pays for public education, said he's glad to see that charter schools - which operate independently from school districts - are included on the site.

"I'm hoping people will get a clear idea of how school financing is handled and how charter schools have a different situation that's advantageous to them," Merrifield said. "It's better for parents to make informed decisions, and it's better for taxpayers knowing how the money is being spent."

But data on the new website can be misleading, said Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project. The non-partisan, nonprofit organization provides research on school finance to local and state policy makers.

"The website tells a very limited amount of information," Rainey said.

Missing are the "broad parameters" that define Colorado's local-control public education system, she said.

Each school district is able to determine such makeup as class size, teacher compensation, whether a janitor is a school or district employee, how special education services are delivered and many other factors that impact budgeting, Rainey said.

"How a school district decides to offer its education configuration, the number of days, the hours in a day are not similar, even if a district has similar number of students," she said. "The size of a district is just one component of what a district must budget for, but it also has to take into consideration student demographics, recruitment of staff, program offerings, the geographical characteristics to serve students. . The raw numbers don't reflect those situations."

The website also does not provide additional money districts and schools receive through private grants, donations and fundraisers, Rainey said.

"Someone not knowing the nuances of district decisions and governance could make assumptions that are less than accurate," she said.

As the website shows, the amount a school district spends per pupil varies greatly, from \$15,208 in Cripple Creek-Victor School District RE-2 in 2015-16 to \$7,952 per student in Falcon School District 49.

Statewide, districts spent on average \$9,944 per student in 2015-16, for a total of \$8.94 billion. With state education budget cuts and revenue restrictions under such laws as the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights, that's about the same amount as in 2010, with numbers adjusted for inflation.

The wide range of per-pupil spending reflects property tax increases and grant dollars, Rainey said, in addition to how districts account for employees - some at the district level and some at the school level.

Schools are funded primarily by state tax dollars and property taxes from residents and businesses within their boundaries.

The state's per-pupil funding, which typically is less than how much districts spend per pupil, is based on a complex formula that attempts to equal the playing field with considerations that include district size, local cost of living, percentages of at-risk and low-income students, and other factors.

Smaller, rural districts often are more heavily dependent on state funding, while the pot is usually more evenly split between state and local funding in metropolitan districts.

Federal funding generally runs in the single digits, with the exception of districts such as Fountain-Fort Carson D-8, which receives 36 percent of its funding from the federal government because it operates schools on Fort Carson.

School districts supplied the financial data for the website, which will be updated annually.

"There are those that say the more information the better," Merrifield said. "Hopefully, people will be able to understand it."