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FEATURED

## 'It's huge for us': More than a dozen Colorado districts approve school tax measures

Ann Schimke, Chalkbeat Colorado Nov 7, 2019 Updated 2 hrs ago



(Photo by Anthony Lanzilote, Chalkbeat Colorado)

Officials in the Poudre School District plan to bump salaries for first-year teachers by around \$4,000. Greeley-Evans District 6 leaders will rebuild a crumbling high school and expand a K-8 school that's wildly overcrowded. And Pueblo District 60 officials will rebuild two district high schools — both of

which have major foundation damage.

These are among the projects that will be funded by new property taxes approved by voters in 14 Colorado school districts Tuesday. Such successes, including in typically tax averse communities like Greeley and Pueblo, come as voters statewide rejected Proposition CC, a ballot initiative that would have earmarked more money for education and transportation.

While education leaders were disappointed by the failure of Proposition CC, which they say would have helped financially strapped schools, no one was particularly shocked. Two other statewide tax measures for education also have failed in recent years — Amendment 73 in 2018 and Amendment 66 in 2013.

Proposition CC asked voters to let the state keep all revenue from existing taxes instead of returning a portion to taxpayers as required under current law.

Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project, said many voters are confused about how state tax refunds work, a fact that allowed opponents of the ballot issue to “cast clouds of doubt” about the measure’s impact.

“Any time something’s confusing, I think people have a tendency to vote no or not vote,” she said.

Statewide, 19 of 31 local education tax measures passed Tuesday, according to a [list maintained by the Colorado School Finance Project](#). A dozen were bond measures, which pay for capital costs such as school construction or renovation. The other seven successful measures were for mill levy overrides, a type of property tax increase that provides schools with money for ongoing expenses such as teacher salaries.

The overall success rate for school tax measures this year was about 60%, a bit lower than in the previous two years. (Extremely close votes on a failing measure in Weld RE-5J and a winning measure in the Fowler district could change the final outcome slightly.)

A couple districts, including Eaton and Platte Valley in northern Colorado, passed both bonds and mill levy overrides. In addition, the 2,700-student Steamboat Springs district passed three tax measures: An \$80 million bond for a new pre-K-8 school and other projects, a tax levy to cover operations costs at the new school, and another levy to boost teacher salaries.

As is the case every year, a number of school tax measures failed Tuesday. Several were in rural districts, including Cheyenne County RE-5, Calhan, Strasburg and Bennett. But there were also a couple notable losses for larger districts, including in the 22,000-student Mesa County Valley District 51, based in Grand Junction, and the 7,000-student Lewis-Palmer district in El Paso County. Mesa County voters rejected a \$180 million bond to replace one high school and improve others, while Lewis-Palmer voters rejected a \$29 million bond to build a new elementary school.

Perhaps one of the biggest tax success stories Tuesday was in northern Colorado's Greeley-Evans district, which has not typically had an easy time getting local tax measures passed. This year, voters there approved a \$395 million bond package, the largest of any district in the state.

"It's huge for us," said district spokeswoman Theresa Myers. "We haven't had a bond issue since 2003, so the needs are real."

While a recent assessment by an outside company put the district's facility needs at \$1 billion, she said the bond will make a significant dent in the laundry list of problems that need addressing.

She said Greeley West High School, which is slated to be replaced under the bond, is in such bad shape that during the recent snowstorm chunks of its ceiling were falling down because of the leaking roof.

"It'll be a relief to get kids out of that building," she said.

The situation in two of Pueblo's four high schools is similarly dire.

District spokesman Dalton Sprouse said the walls in one "are cracking so much you can actually see daylight through them."

While the community doesn't easily approve tax increases, he said the campaign committee did a good job demonstrating the extent of the district's needs — a [12-part series](#) by the local newspaper, the Pueblo Chieftain, also helped.

Sprouse said the last time district voters approved a bond issue was 2002.

In the 30,000-student Poudre School District, based in Fort Collins, voters are usually amenable to school ballot issues, so voters' support Tuesday wasn't surprising. But the district's plans for the money — increasing teacher salaries, hiring counselors and social workers, and improving safety —

speaks to the priorities of many local and state education leaders right now.

District spokeswoman Madeline Noblett said at \$38,731, Poudre's starting teacher salaries have fallen behind those in neighboring districts, including Thompson and Greeley-Evans, both of which passed mill levy overrides to boost pay in the past two years. She said the district's goal — with details subject to upcoming union negotiations — is to make starting salaries comparable to those in the St. Vrain school district, where teachers start at \$43,500 a year.

*This story was originally published by [Chalkbeat](#), a nonprofit news organization covering public education. [Sign up for their newsletters here.](#)*