

The Biggest Challenges for Western Slope School Districts

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Large challenges loom for school districts on the Western Slope as they work to finalize budgets for 2016-17. Economic conditions on the Western Slope lag behind the front-range, which creates inconsistencies when state-wide reports reflect on the states revenue and growth estimates.

School districts face enormous challenges hiring qualified staff. The first issue is recruitment. The second is noncompetitive salaries. Nearby states pay at higher levels and provide more support for training and staff development. Nearby states have also addressed declining facility conditions.

Declining facility conditions in Colorado reflect school buildings designed and built over 50 years ago. Budget cuts have impacted a school district's ability to maintain and/or improve buildings. Older school buildings lack both electrical and bandwidth systems to support today's technology needs. The older buildings also lack instructional rooms, labs and media/tech/libraries that support student learning. Outside weather conditions combined with improper ventilation systems negatively impact student learning. When it's cold outside, students wear coats and hats inside their classrooms to keep warm.

As a result of budget cuts, school districts have reduced class offerings, program offerings, and specialized programs and services. The reductions create fewer options for student success and being competitive with their fellow students across the state and throughout the country. Given Colorado's high focus on choice of program and delivery options for students, it is impossible for school districts to meet the needs of the students and the desires of parents and communities.

These challenges play out differently in each community depending upon district enrollment, changes in enrollment, physical size of the school district, geographic location and the capacity at the local level to add additional revenue through local overrides or bond elections. The potential for local solutions via local overrides or bond elections are ongoing discussions in many communities as they contemplate local elections in the fall to ask voters for a partial fix to their plights.