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Editorial: It'll take a modern day Robin Hood to fix Colorado's school finances



Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

A student walks between the original building and a metal addition at Sierra Grande K-12 on Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2018. Though the addition is relatively new to the original 1950s construction, engineers have said that it is insufficient and will need to be replaced if a new school is built.

By **THE DENVER POST EDITORIAL BOARD** |

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Colorado's schools are not funded equitably. Denver Post reporters illustrated the disparity last Sunday by heading to rural southern Colorado, where one school district receives \$5,000 less per student than a district an hour's drive away.

The reporting laid bare Colorado's school funding debacle and then outlined one promising proposal this legislative session that could fix the problem.

Primero School District in Las Animas County enjoys one of the highest property-tax bases in the state (an assessed value of almost \$350 million thanks to oil and gas operations), yet the state pays for 44 percent of the district's per-pupil costs.

Nearby Sierra Grande School District in Costilla County has a much lower property-tax base (an assessed value of \$127 million), yet the state only pays for 31 percent of the district's per-pupil cost.

The result is a double-whammy: Property owners in the wealthier district pay comparatively less in property taxes but get more state funding.

Colorado's school finance formula is intended to provide for exactly the opposite; it's intended to use state dollars to ensure that less affluent areas receive a greater share of state resources. How did it get so backward?

It has to do with the complicated interplay of Colorado's constitutional amendments dealing with taxes. Suffice it to say, however, that property taxes in wealthy districts have been ratcheting down for years: Primero School District taxpayers pay almost 15 mills to raise \$113 million for the district, while Sierra Grande School District property owners pay 32 mills to raise \$2 million for the district.

So, shouldn't the state be backfilling Sierra Grande more?

Well, some of the mills being raised in Primero are outside of the calculus of the state finance formula. Those dollars are protected revenue known as a "mill levy override" so the state can't consider that revenue when it is calculating how much it owes the district.

The Denver Post found that a hypothetical homeowner with a house worth \$348,900 is paying \$148 in school taxes in Primero and would pay \$806 on a house with the same value in Sierra Grande.

But our hearts hurt more for the students than the taxpayers in Sierra Grande because the end result is that per pupil the district has \$13,490 to spend, compared to more than \$18,000 in Primero.

Rep. Bob Rankin has an idea for how to fix it. One that is fair and smart, but is not going to be popular in districts that enjoy artificially low property tax rates and artificially high state contributions.

It'll take political will from everyone in the General Assembly this year to finally fix this injustice.

Lawmakers have tried before, but those efforts have been tied to statewide tax increase so money isn't taken from prospering districts to give to the poor, but rather new revenue is used to bring the poorer districts up to a level playing field.

Voters in Colorado have rejected those plans twice now.

It's time to consider a solution that redistributes state dollars to the places that need it the most — rob from the rich to give to the poor. If Rankin pulls this off, he'll be a modern-day Robin Hood.

The bravery to do such a thing might come from the Joint Budget Committee where Rankin, a Republican, is working with his five colleagues on a proposal.

“It's clear there is a huge problem with how we do school finance in our state,” Rep. Dominick Moreno, D-Commerce City, told The Post. “I think the JBC should absolutely take the lead on trying to get us out of this mess.”

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