

# Rocky Mountain News

URL: [http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/government/article/0,2777,DRMN\\_23906\\_4165830,00.html](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/government/article/0,2777,DRMN_23906_4165830,00.html)

## **It comes down to money** Rich or poor, each district has own set of funding problems

By Laura Frank, Rocky Mountain News

October 17, 2005

This is the tale of two schools, but not the tale you might expect.

The first is in rural Elbert County, where the Elbert School District #200 consists of one building. It holds 300 students in preschool through 12th grade. The main part of the building dates to 1936.

Elbert is one of 70 districts statewide that couldn't afford to build a new school if it had to. Based on the value of property in the district, the money it could raise - even if voters approved a bond issue - wouldn't cover the cost of a new elementary.

Next door in Douglas County is one of two new elementaries that the growing county opened this year: Copper Mesa.

Everything in it is new: the desks, the technology lab, the elevator. The whole school is set up for wireless computers throughout.

On a recent day, second-graders were downloading images and creating graphics to illustrate their lesson comparing urban, suburban and rural communities.

At Elbert, the school is surrounded by a sea of fields.

Copper Mesa is surrounded by a field of half-million-dollar homes.

But don't get the idea that Copper Mesa is the land of plenty and Elbert is not. Students in both schools have performed above average on state tests. Both schools have students lining up from out of their districts to get in. And both are facing their own financial hurdles.

Yes, even at Copper Mesa.

The library shelves there sit largely empty. The average school library nationwide has 21 books per student. Copper Mesa has eight.

Outside, next to the shiny, new playground is a patch of dirt set aside for the portable trailers the school expects it will eventually need to house students.

And two weeks before school started, Principal Luan Ezra found herself begging for more money to hire more teachers. The school expected 325 students when it opened. Nearly 450 have registered.

"If we can go another year (without needing trailers for classrooms), that will be fabulous," said Ezra, who hopes to get textbooks before trailers. "Just because we're a new school doesn't mean we have everything we need."

### **Health and safety issues**

Some schools in Colorado haven't been able to make a major capital investment - such as build a new building or even add classrooms - in more than two decades.

Referendums C and D on the statewide ballot Nov. 1 would set aside \$147 million for schools in the most desperate conditions. In 2003, a Colorado state auditor report said 88 percent of districts statewide reported at least one major capital need in which students' health or safety was an issue.

To be sure, neither Elbert nor Copper Mesa would top that list.

The biggest issue facing Copper Mesa is space: how to handle the expected crowd of students.

You might think the biggest issue facing Elbert is what to do when it will eventually need to build a new school. But it's more immediate than that. The heater for one wing of the school is broken. It will cost \$2,500 to fix the 10-year-old unit or \$7,000 to replace it with a unit that would add air conditioning.

"We don't have \$7,000," said Superintendent Kelli Loflin, who doubles as the elementary principal. "So here we're going to have to spend \$2,500 on a unit we'll have to replace in probably two or three years."

Elbert could ask the state to help fund a new unit, but there are two problems with that.

First, the state would ask the local district to put up matching funds, funds that Elbert has been trying desperately to save for a "drastic emergency," Loflin said.

Second, the state already has told districts not to apply unless the need is absolutely critical, because only a fraction of the most serious needs get met, and this year's funds are already spoken for.

### **Shrunken pot**

Colorado had agreed to spend at least \$20 million a year on capital repairs and improvements for schools statewide after reaching a settlement in a lawsuit brought by poor districts. But state budget constraints prompted lawmakers to cut that part of the budget. This year, \$5 million was available.

Schools are left to compete with each other for this shrunken pot of money or to go to voters in their district asking for more money. But even if voters are willing, 40 percent of the 178 districts statewide couldn't raise the estimated \$6 million it would take to build a new elementary, according to a report by the Donnell-Kay Foundation called Colorado's Schoolhouses.

"If any schools in any of these districts should fail to last forever, there's no way to build a new one," report author Mary Wickersham recently told lawmakers who held a hearing on the issue.

Another 21 Colorado districts - with 200,000 students, or about a quarter of all pupils statewide - are in districts at or near their bonding capacity, Wickersham told the legislative committee on school finance.

She described the Falcon School District in El Paso County, where 35 percent of its students are in temporary trailer classrooms. Their overcrowded middle school cafeteria serves lunch to students in six shifts, starting at 10:15 a.m. Kids are three to a locker.

"They're at their bonding limit," Wickersham told lawmakers. "They can't raise any more. They're considering reducing transportation, eliminating full-day kindergarten and going to high school in shifts."

Individual school districts can raise money in two ways.

In districts where property values go up, a state formula automatically shifts the burden to commercial from residential property and mandates a drop in the property tax rate. A district can ask voters to override the change and let districts keep all or part of the money produced by keeping the property tax rate the same. Or, they can ask voters for permission to issue bonds, similar to taking out a mortgage.

But the amount of money districts across the state are able to raise varies drastically because it's directly related to the property wealth of the district.

According to Wickersham, the wealthiest district (Aspen, in Pitkin County) can raise \$219,000 per pupil, while the poorest (Sanford 6J in Conejos County) can raise \$1,100.

That creates another kind of disparity, Wickersham said. "What you see is the wealthiest districts have the lowest tax rates and the poorest have the highest."

Some of the smaller and poorer districts even have trouble putting together a request for help from the state, Wickersham said. And when they do make a request for assistance on capital needs, there's no guarantee help will be available.

About 40 percent of districts have never applied for a capital grant from the state. Nearly half of those are districts with little property wealth, which would have trouble raising much money from bonds to do any projects on their own.

## **A plea for help**

This year, one of the school districts making a request was Woodlin, in Washington County, east of Denver. The septic system was contaminating the water well. Rainwater made asbestos leak from ceiling tiles. A high-voltage electric transformer stood by the playground.

After some discussion, the state gave the district money from an emergency fund that is now empty because of state budget cuts.

"It was serendipitous," Wickersham said. But serendipity may not be there for other schools, such as Elbert or Copper Mesa.

"There's extraordinary need out there," said Vody Herrmann, director of school finance for the Colorado Department of Education. "I'm not sure people are aware. I think that's the biggest part of the story."

*[frankl@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:frankl@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-892-5091*

**Copyright 2004, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.**