



NOW IS THE TIME TO INVEST IN COLORADO'S FUTURE

2023 COLORADO STATE OF EDUCATION REPORT

This report was compiled by the Colorado Education Association, the labor union and voice of 39,000 public educators in Colorado. We are teachers, counselors, social workers, nurses, bus drivers, food service workers, paraprofessionals, mechanics, security guards, custodians, maintenance workers, office professionals, and everyone who makes up the diverse and vital fabric of our public school system.



THE STATE OF EDUCATION

OUR REALITY & OUR VISION

Decades of neglect have left our education system—our students, and our educators—in dire straits. The solutions are within our reach, and we can't wait any longer. Are Colorado's leaders up to the task?

Since 2010, Colorado's public education system has been systematically underfunded. Colorado's unique tax code, in tandem with choices made by our state's leadership, has resulted in a school system that is operating at a more than decade-long deficit of \$10 billion dollars.

Though last year's state budget had a \$2 billion surplus, none of that funding could be spent on Colorado's education system, due to TABOR restrictions. **As a direct result of this financial neglect, Colorado's education system is in a state of crisis.**

In this report we'll illustrate the ways in which Colorado's systemic disinvestment affects every part of our educators' and students' lives. This critical analysis centers the sentiments and experiences of our 39,000 member educators across Colorado. None of the problems addressed here are new: educator pay is still too low, their workload is overwhelming, and educators still feel unsafe and disrespected in their schools. But these long-standing systemic issues have been compounded and exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19 on all of our communities.

Despite all of these challenges and barriers, our educators are dedicated and passionate—they show up each day to provide every student with the learning experience they deserve.

In our concluding section, "The Solutions" (on page 14), we delve into our vision for a new paradigm for Colorado. Built on the principles of investment, respect, and safety, this vision requires legislative and organizing actions to become a reality. Our State of Education report should be thought of as a map, with descriptive contours of our current environment, and a path to follow towards the education system we all deserve.

No matter our color, genders, background or zip code, every Coloradan wants our students and our educators to have well-funded schools that uphold the principles of respect and safety. Each and every one of us has an integral role to play in re-imagining and rebuilding the schools our students, educators and communities deserve.

We must demand that our schools have the resources to meet every child's needs with well-trained and supported educators, for a sustainable, equitable, and thriving education system. When we unite together as educators, as parents, as lawmakers, and as community members, we can and we will make these needed changes a reality.



Amie Baca-Oehlert

President of the Colorado Education Association

This report is based on publicly available data, news articles, cited research, and proprietary surveys of CEA members conducted in fall 2022.

PROGRESS & MILESTONES

Since our inception in 1875, CEA has fought for the very best for our educators and students. While we focus on the many components of our education system that need to be remedied, it's equally important to celebrate the significant progress that's been initiated by our educators and championed by our legislative leadership.

Some notable recent successes include:

- The 2022 School Finance Act reduced the Budget Stabilization Factor from \$572 million to \$321 million for the 2022-23 school year, a massive reduction from the \$1.18 billion BS factor set in 2020.
- Passage of The 2022 PERA bill which ensures that the education professionals retirement system is repaid in full.
- Passage of Privacy Protections for Educators which protects educators from doxing by members of the public.
- Consistent yearly increases in the statewide average per pupil spending to its current high of \$7,748.
- Timely response and support for our educators and students during COVID, including (but not limited to) a pause on Statewide Assessments.
- An Accountability Audit to review the process by which education professionals and students are measured.
- Addition of Community Schools as an option for Innovation.



THE STATE OF

INVESTMENT

According to most metrics, the state of Colorado’s economy is strong, and has been so for years. In fact, it’s currently cited as the 8th most robust state economy in the nation.*

This economic abundance, however, stands in contrast to the education system’s deficit. The paradox isn’t an accident: Colorado has balanced the state budget on the backs of our education system.

This lack of investment in our public education system has deleterious downstream effects and is the direct and indirect source of the vast majority of its current woes, from the educator shortage to declining student outcomes.

For example, a 2021 report by Northwestern University economists on the relationship between funding and student achievement showed that more funding means consistently better outcomes for students –not just higher test scores and higher graduation rates, but also higher wages as adults.

*Source: The Distribution of School Spending Impacts

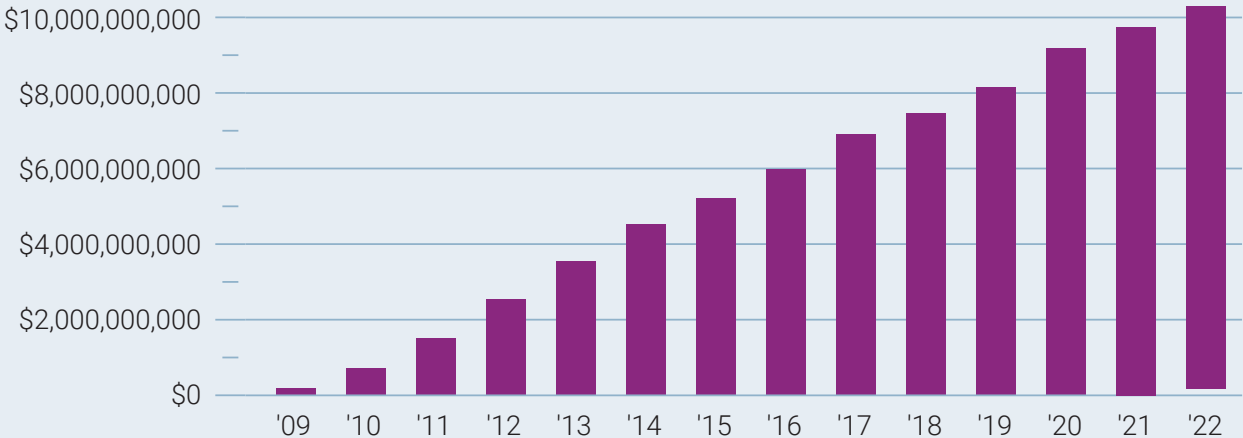
\$10,007,609,464

TOTAL **LOST REVENUE** AS OF 2023

Source: Colorado School Finance Project



CUMULATIVE BUDGET STABILIZATION FACTOR AMOUNT FROM 2010 TO 2023



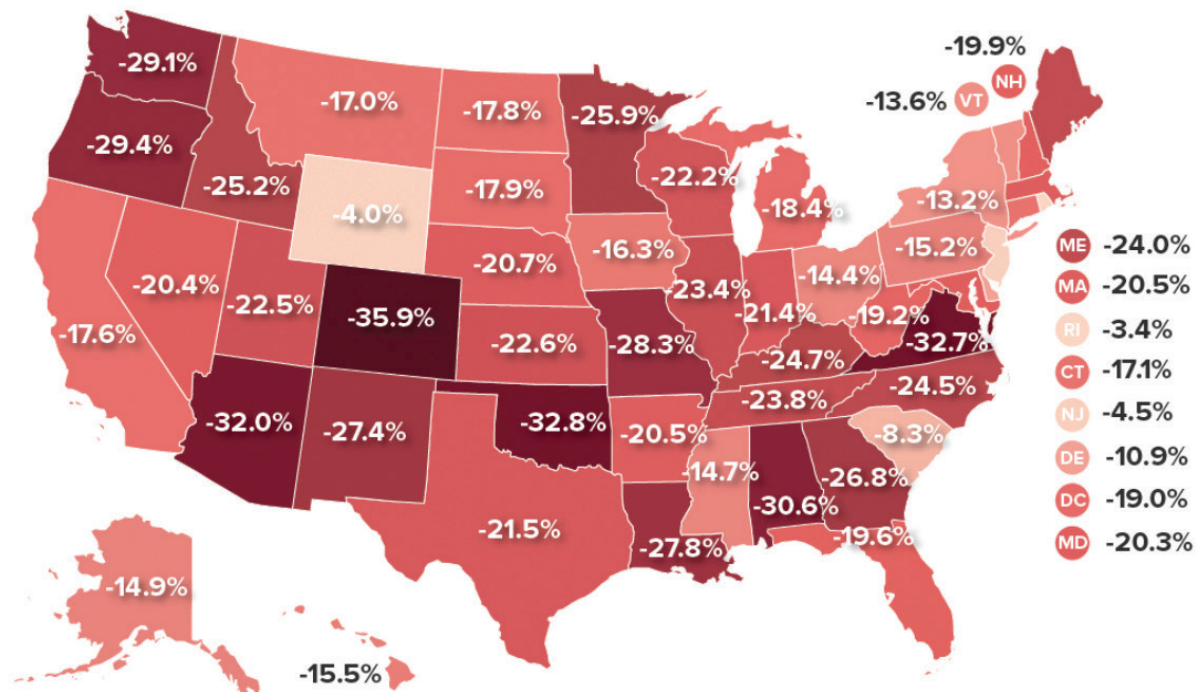
Source: Colorado School Finance Project

35.9% LESS

Colorado educators make 35.9% less compared to comparably educated professionals in Colorado according to the Economic Policy Institute.

63% of our educators said adequate pay and benefits was the most important factor to feel valued and respected as an educator.

The lack of competitive pay exacerbates the educator shortage issue further as it leads to fewer applicants, less retention of veteran teachers, more workload for current staff, an inability to afford housing in the communities where an educator works, and devastated morale.



5



RANKED #49/51

IN TEACHER PAY ACROSS THE COUNTRY

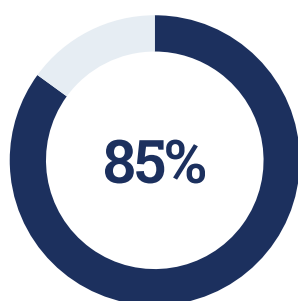
Source: National Education Association (NEA)

EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

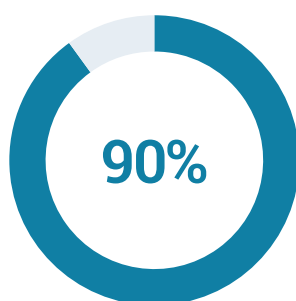
Educators are uniquely dedicated professionals. It's not uncommon for our educators to say they were "called" to their profession. Educators are driven to inspire and support their students to be their very best.

Unfortunately, due to outside forces (most notably a lack of funding), our public schools no longer have enough resources to properly support our educators. This has led to our current shortage of educators, and more concerning, fewer students studying to become educators.

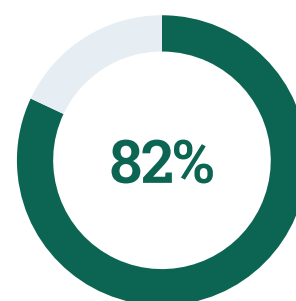
By every measure, schools are dangerously and unsustainably understaffed.



Say teacher/licensed educator shortage is significantly or somewhat worse than previous school years.



Say educator support staff shortage is significantly or somewhat worse than previous school years.



Say sub shortage is significantly or somewhat worse than previous school years.

"We don't have enough aides to support our special needs behavior students. We often lose support staff in the middle of the year. Subs do not fill most of the time. We are then asked to come in if it isn't an emergency. We have had to cancel every team planning day for the last year and a half because of lack of subs. **I have had a class of 29 first graders for the first 54 days of school because we couldn't get another teacher.**"

"**In my nearly 20 years, I have never seen it worse.** I have to work on days off, because no sub took my position. I cannot even go to doctors appointments because I cannot get subs. I have to wait for a day off. Behaviors are also at a critical point because other support staff is often not available to assist highly impacted classrooms, including my own. To tell the truth, I am starting plan for an early retirement and be done with teaching altogether."

"We are constantly asked to sub during our planning time. As a first year teacher, and working through a licensing program, our schools are not supposed to be asking us. This has put me behind in both lesson planning, and school work. **We are asked for more every week and teachers are already burned out or looking for work elsewhere.**"

Be part of the solution, see page 14.

THE STATE OF

EDUCATOR RESPECT

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

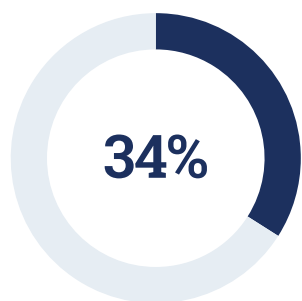
Respecting our educators as professional experts in our field means more than just paying a living wage. It means centering our voices and expertise in legislation that affects our work. Too often laws and standards are enacted without any input from seasoned educators as to how these "innovations" might hinder or harm our students.

In particular, our education professionals must be included in decisions that affect accountability and assessment, so that these systems become tools for not just penalizing and pointing out deficits without providing supports and resources, but for championing and repeating schools' successes. Contrary to our current model, an effective accountability system would serve to provide a full picture of how our schools are serving students (based on a broad spectrum of indicators) so that timely support for students' and educators' needs can be provided.

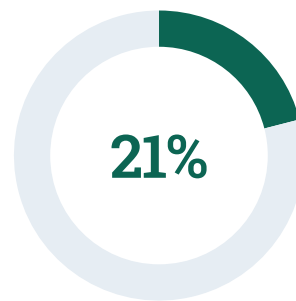
"It is deeply demoralizing. I work in a relatively well resourced neighborhood public school. However post pandemic there's a big push to try unproven, experimental methods of assessment, accountability, and curricula. **I feel like I'm being admin-ed to death.**"

POLITICIZATION OF OUR SCHOOLS

Through no fault of their own, our hardworking educators are, or have become, the target of a small minority of loud, disrespectful rhetoric from outside, politicized forces. Education professionals must be trusted to do what's best for our students without our motives being impugned, and our homes being doxxed by strangers. These aggressors, while in the minority, are having a deleterious effect on educators. According to one educator: "They are affecting the mental health of teachers and staff and making us feel unsafe in our profession."



Percentage of educators who feel valued by state elected officials.



Percentage of educators who are considering leaving the profession due to politically-motivated attacks on their curriculum or themselves.

"The professional roles of educators have been politicized without our consent. In our classrooms, we stand on a precipice, navigating always the vitriol...unlivable wages, poor benefits, long hours, and an overwhelm of tasks. We are tired, and teaching during the pandemic left us all in burned-out survival mode. Until we have wages we can survive on, manageable numbers of tasks, and our professional capacity restored and respected, this field will continue to bleed teachers."

"During the pandemic, teachers were hailed for what we did do in the classroom. The moment "learning loss" became a misnomer for pandemic learning, we were vilified. In addition, since the previous presidential administration and current political scene, I'm terribly scared that **school districts are now the hotbed of cultural arguments.** Libraries and school classrooms are coming under attack for the books they use, the conversations generated about marginalized groups, and the misinformation of topics such as SEL and CRT (critical race theory). **I'm done seeing and feeling the decline of support for my field and my students."**

"We have had to cater to the loudest voices that come with the biggest threats... largely an affluent and white parent community. Curriculum is challenged, health and safety protocols are attacked, teacher pay was reduced, and workloads about doubled."

Be part of the solution, see page 14.

THE STATE OF

EDUCATORS' SAFETY

Our schools—their successes and their challenges—are often a reflection of the issues our communities are wrestling with. This is especially obvious with our schools' ongoing struggle to ensure safety of all those who work and learn within them each day.

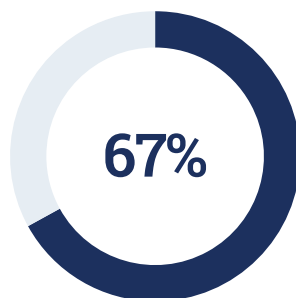
The three components that most readily affect the well-being of our students and education professionals are a lack of mental health supports, a dearth of LGBTQ+ acceptance and inclusion, and a preponderance of access to firearms.

MENTAL HEALTH

Colorado's schools are not equipped to be the sole provider of mental health support for students, though they often function as just that, particularly in our most under-resourced neighborhoods. In the majority of our schools, current mental health support is inadequate: if schools have counselors, their caseloads are way too large, and given the greater educator shortage, school psychologists and counselors often pull double-duty and are asked to do testing or other activities with students. And these mental health supports are not just needed by students, but for education professionals as well.

GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

It's time we listen to educators who are at the center of this issue, and live with its complexities and repercussions every day. **To that end, we asked Colorado educators if they would feel safer if educators at their school were allowed to carry a gun. The majority, 69%, said that not only would this not make them feel safe, it would have the effect of making them feel less safe.** This sentiment was echoed across all of our survey participants, regardless of where they're situated in Colorado. In contrast, educators would like their schools to prioritize mental health support.

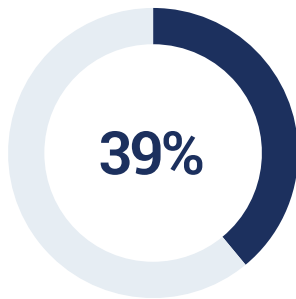


of educators are “very” or
“somewhat worried” about a
mass shooting at their school.

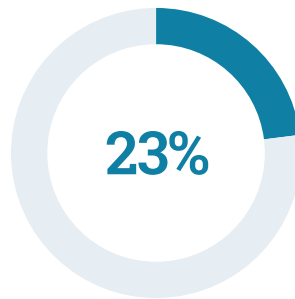
“We actually experienced a whole school evacuation last February. I have to say the district was well prepared and did an excellent job in implementing all evacuation procedures. That said, the incident brought home the fact that we are not safe anywhere at any time! **We can practice all the safety drills day in and day out, but ultimately they will not matter if there is a shooter with an automatic weapon.**”

“To make things safer **we need several school psychologists to help the students deal with the trauma that comes with a dozen once in a lifetime events happening in the last 2 years.**”

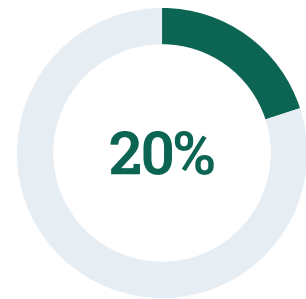
Here is what educators believe would alleviate gun violence incidence within schools:



increased funding and
resources for mental health
counseling in schools
AND communities



change school
discipline policies



make buildings more
secure by installing better
locks, metal detectors,
buzz-in systems

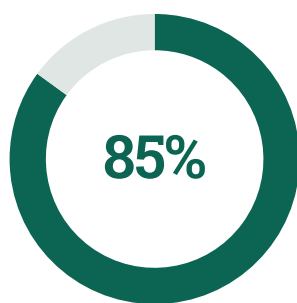
"Until policies and people (not just teachers) are in place to address behaviors erupting from schools with a high frequency of students who experience trauma, the classroom will not be emotionally and physically safe enough for all students to learn. **This should take priority above testing because without mental health supports, many students are not ready to learn in the classroom.**"

"Students who need mental health support...**aren't getting the services they need** because we either can't fill the spot (school psychologist) or the people with those jobs are pulled to sub, putting out fires in other spots in the building, or just generally doing five other jobs."

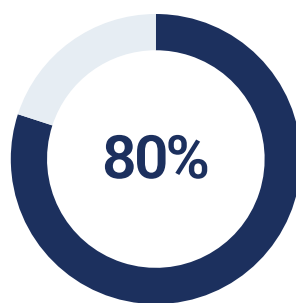


PROACTIVE INCLUSION FOR LGBTQ+ EDUCATORS & STUDENTS

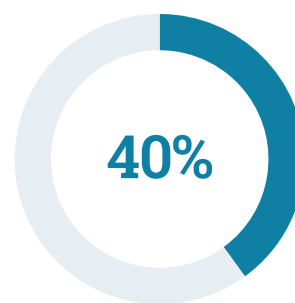
Proactive inclusion of all genders, ethnicities, sexualities and lifestyles is critical to the mental health and happiness of our students and educators. In 2022, CEA surveyed Colorado educators to get a better grasp on the education landscape for LGBTQ+ educators and students. The report found that the majority of LGBTQ+ educators work in school environments where they feel neither safe nor supported. Some examples:



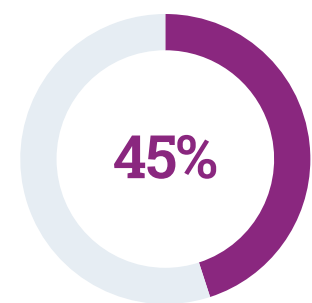
of LGBTQ+ respondents are not openly "out" to their school communities.



of our LGBTQ+ educators reported working in a school without gender-inclusive restrooms for students.



of respondents had witnessed or heard about students being discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.



of respondents who are in a school that engages in equity work reported that LGBTQ+ voices and issues are either not included in that equity work or are only included to a small extent.

In order for our students and educators to thrive, it's critical that pro-active inclusion policies are enacted. According to GLSEN's National School Climate Survey, students with inclusive curriculum have better academic and mental health outcomes, and are less likely to miss school.

"Homophobic coded language and microaggressions are common. It feels like **LGBTQ issues are only ever discussed at a surface level**, there's no attempt to really make it a part of the curriculum." —LGBTQ+ Educator

"I am one of the very few LGBT+ staff members in my district. **I would feel extremely uncomfortable if I mentioned [my] male partner in my classroom.**" —LGBTQ+ Educator

"I am misgendered ALL the time. **I don't think my admin is well-equipped to be allies.**" —LGBTQ+ Educator

Be part of the solution, see page 14.

THE SOLUTIONS

Our public education system is at a crisis point with persistent lack of funding, educator burnout, and shortages. But there is no reason to resign ourselves to this status quo, particularly when the cost is our students' futures. We owe it to them, and our dedicated education professionals, to get this right.

The solutions below are educator-designed and educator-driven. These policy solutions are rooted in our commitment as educators from across the state and across every identity, to ensuring safe and welcoming schools where each and every student can thrive, have the freedom to be themselves, and become successful citizens in our diverse and interconnected world. CEA is committed to dismantling inequitable and racist structures and systems of oppression, to ensure that we don't leave our most vulnerable students behind.

INVESTMENT

90% of CEA members identify an increase in and stabilization of school funding as their priority. We call on elected officials at every level to prioritize the resources our students and educators need by taking the steps necessary to fully fund education in Colorado.

INVESTMENT SOLUTIONS THAT EDUCATORS SUPPORT:

- A fully funded education system that will provide stable and sufficient revenue for districts to meet state standards and educate all students including English learners, students living in poverty, and special needs students
- Ensuring the long-term solvency of PERA without increasing the burden on employees or retirees
- Modernizing Colorado's tax system to ensure wealthy individuals and corporations pay their fair share
- Providing affordable access to post-secondary educational and workforce opportunities for all Colorado high school graduates
- Ensuring educators are paid a living wage

WHAT A FULLY FUNDED EDUCATION SYSTEM WOULD MEAN TO EDUCATORS:

- "Creating a learning environment that meets not just the educational needs of our students, but also social emotional needs.** It means teachers feel as though they have appropriate resources and supports to provide educational experiences and opportunities that prepare all students for a variety of futures."
- "More mental health support to meet all students needs; more paras to help with workload, instruction, and class management; equal resources such as technology, materials, and facilities for all schools; and better pay so educators do not have to work separate jobs to meet their financial needs."**
- "Keeping quality teachers, especially those who are new to the field.** It would mean hiring the support staff in special education, gifted and talented, counseling and mental health teams, arts and music teachers at all levels, extra curricular activities to expand awareness in arts, science, math and history necessary to create well-rounded young people capable of critical thought."

RESPECT

We stand up for educators having a voice in decisions that affect them and will fight to protect and expand labor and workers rights in Colorado. We call on elected officials to commit to building an accountability system that is designed by educators, free from bias, and utilizes existing, nationally-validated assessments that have more immediate, actionable data to inform student learning.

RESPECT SOLUTIONS THAT EDUCATORS SUPPORT:

- Building an accountability system that includes multiple indicators of school quality and student success, such as graduation rates, students' access to resources and supports including advanced coursework, fully qualified teachers, specialized instructional personnel, libraries, modern instructional materials and facilities, health and wellness programs, high-quality early education programs, and arts and athletic programs

- Strengthening the ability of education employees to bargain collectively, including a statewide collective bargaining law for all public school employees

- Emphasizing an evaluation system that supports and helps develop educators rather than a system focused on penalizing educators

- Recruiting and retaining a diverse educator force for an increasingly more diverse student population

- High quality educator designed evaluation systems that provide the tools educators need to tailor instruction, enhance their practice, and advance student learning

- Providing adequate supports to early career educators to ensure student and educator success and retain quality educators

- Providing adequate time, professional autonomy, resources, and training for all educators to meet the needs of their students and focus on classroom instruction and pedagogy

- Reduce class sizes in all grades as well as reducing the ratios of students assigned to the following school employees: counselors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, special education providers, and other public school employees who are assigned a specific case load of students

- Ensuring educators have a voice in policy decisions that affect them





NAS EDUCATORS
DESERVE A VOICE
NAS STUDENTS
DESERVE TEACHERS
WHO CAN STAY
WE ALL DESERVE BETTER.
RECOGNIZE NAS UNITED.

NAS EDUCATORS
DESERVE A VOICE
NAS STUDENTS
DESERVE TEACHERS
WHO CAN STAY
WE ALL DESERVE BETTER.
RECOGNIZE NAS UNITED.

NAS EDUCATORS
WORKING
CONDITIONS
ARE
OUR STUDENTS
LEARNING
CONDITIONS
WE ALL DESERVE BETTER.

SAFETY

We believe that a safe and effective school climate is necessary for promoting educational excellence in our public schools. We call on elected officials to join us in fighting for the health and safety of all students, families, and educators by prioritizing school infrastructure, ensuring accessible mental health and health care for students and educators, promoting policies that will provide access to safe and affordable housing for all educators and students, and focusing on mental health supports and gun safety regulations so that our schools remain safe places for learning.

SAFETY SOLUTIONS THAT EDUCATORS SUPPORT:

- Ending the school to prison pipeline and strengthening and expanding programs and policies that support and promote student, staff, and school safety including restorative practices programs
- Banning all weapons from school property, facilities, vehicles, and school activities regardless of where they are conducted, except when carried by law enforcement or trained School Resource Officers
- Advocating for gun reform and safety policies. To keep students safe—in our schools and in our communities—we must ban assault-style weapons, require waiting periods for all firearm sales, and raise the minimum age to purchase a gun to 21
- Including suicide prevention, alertness, intervention, and postvention programs in options for educator preparation programs, licensure, and renewal as well as professional development for all employees
- Training for educators and school staff in bullying prevention, school safety, cultural proficiency, positive behavioral supports, and appropriate classroom management
- Meeting the developmental needs of all students by increasing the presence of comprehensive elementary and secondary school counseling and other pupil services, including school psychologists, counselors and social workers and school-based student services
- Creating evidence based programs and training, including around suicide and bullying prevention, school safety, cultural proficiency, positive behavioral supports, and appropriate classroom management
- Ensuring all students receive the education they deserve with age-appropriate materials and curriculum, and that students of all races and genders have the freedom to learn without fear or intimidation

2023 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

The problems and barriers outlined in this report are large, systemic issues that will take extensive time and effort to solve. However, there are actions elected officials can take right now to make progress towards securing the future our educators and our students deserve.

CEA's legislative agenda is one that puts students first and addresses the challenges we, as educators are facing. We invite legislators to work with and listen to us when considering education-related legislation that supports student-centered learning, ensures professional excellence and makes economic investments in public education.

POLICIES WE ARE PRIORITIZING DURING THE 2023 LEGISLATIVE SESSION:

INVESTMENT

- Completely buy down the BS Factor to \$0, fully funding our schools to the amount required by the constitution
- Identify and implement long-term systemic solutions to sustainably and adequately fund our public schools
- Address housing supply and affordability so that educators can afford to live and work in their communities
- Address the Educator Shortage through policies that attract and retain high-quality public education employees

RESPECT

- Start a process to reimagine a holistic accountability system, with educators and experts in the field leading the effort to design a system that serves the students and educators of Colorado
- Pass the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact, allowing teachers to use an eligible license held in another state to get an equivalent license in Colorado, lowering the barriers and getting teachers back into the classroom more seamlessly
- Protect public sector workers when they speak up about working conditions

SAFETY

- Ensure that Governor Polis' proposed Office of School Safety is created with input from educators and prioritizes student and educator mental health supports and resources
- Pass stronger gun safety regulations to keep our schools and communities safe, including banning automatic assault rifles
- Maintain and increase state funding for school breakfast and lunch programs and other programs that assist families in raising healthy children

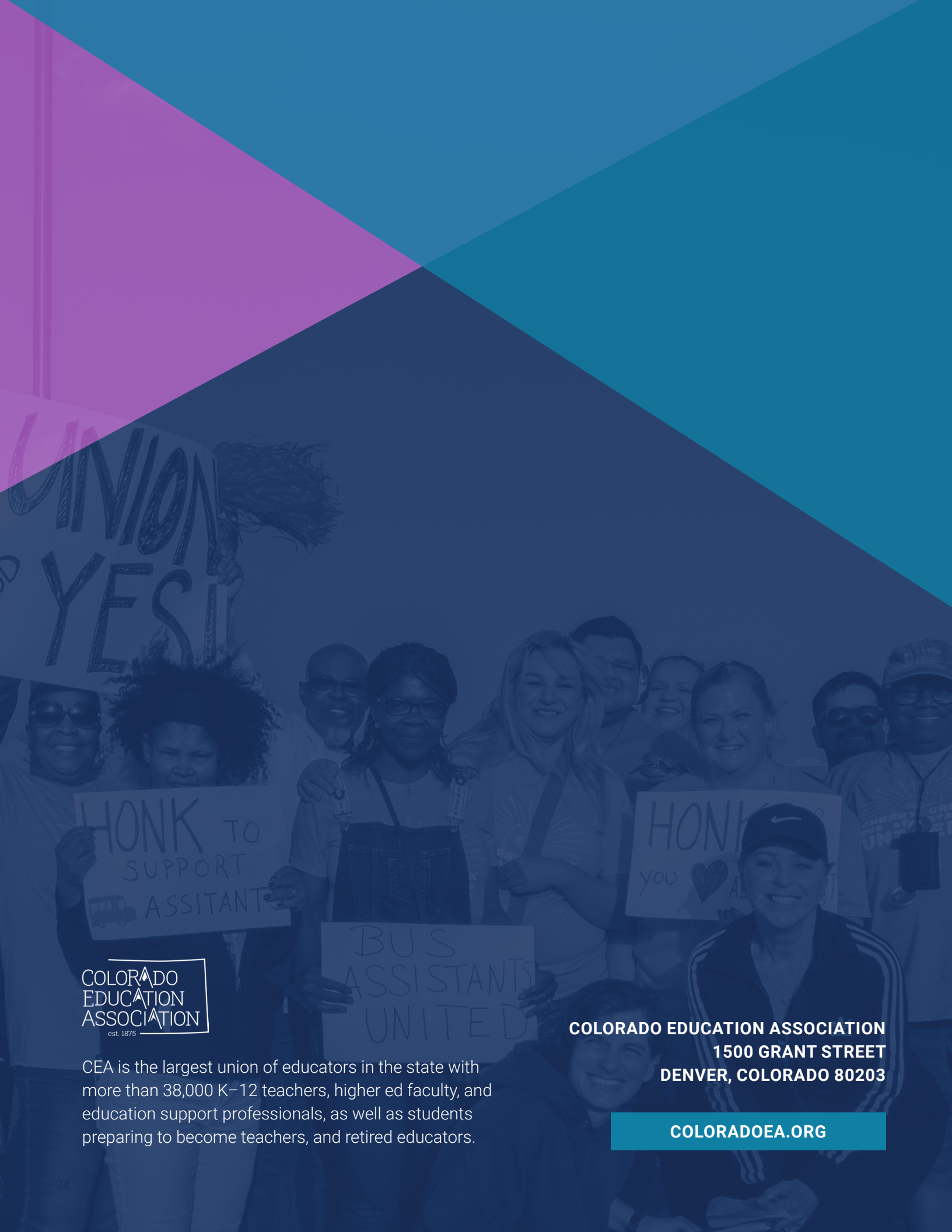
CEA's full 2023 legislative priorities can be found and monitored at www.coloradoea.org





No matter our color, genders, background or zip code, every Coloradan wants our students and our educators to have well-funded schools that uphold the principles of respect and safety.

We must demand that our schools have the resources to meet every child's needs with well-trained and supported educators, for a sustainable, equitable, and thriving education system. When we unite together as educators, as parents, as lawmakers, and as community members, we can and we will make these needed changes a reality.



CEA is the largest union of educators in the state with more than 38,000 K–12 teachers, higher ed faculty, and education support professionals, as well as students preparing to become teachers, and retired educators.

COLORADO EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
1500 GRANT STREET
DENVER, COLORADO 80203

[COLORADOEA.ORG](https://coloradoea.org)