



Policy Brief #1  
August 2025

## Discipline in Colorado School Districts (2011–2017)

Nationally representative civil rights data reveal a persistent poverty gradient in school discipline across Colorado districts.

### Key messages

Disciplinary disparities are not random but closely aligned with socioeconomic disadvantage. Districts serving larger proportions of children in poverty face disproportionately high rates of both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. These patterns underscore the urgent need for policies to address neighborhood structural inequality rather than relying solely on punitive disciplinary responses.

- Out-of-school suspension (OSS) and in-school suspension (ISS) rates are strongly tied to district-level child poverty. Each 1 percentage-point increase in child poverty predicts about +0.20 OSS and +0.18 ISS per 100 students.
- This poverty gradient is stable from 2011 through 2017, with year-to-year changes much smaller than differences between high- and low-poverty districts.
- Hot spots of high discipline rates are concentrated along the southern Front Range corridor (e.g., Harrison 2, Pueblo 60, Colorado Springs 11) and in certain small rural districts, where rates spike due to small denominators.
- Large districts contribute the greatest absolute numbers of suspensions, but high-poverty districts carry a disproportionate burden relative to student enrollment.
- Policy interventions that reduce poverty or provide targeted supports in high-poverty districts could meaningfully reduce suspension events statewide.

### Background and context

School discipline practices are a critical measure of equity in education. Suspensions and expulsions are strongly linked to adverse academic and developmental outcomes, including higher dropout risk, lower graduation rates, and greater involvement with the juvenile justice system. Equally important is the **legal significance of discipline enforcement**. Colorado law requires that districts implement fair, clearly communicated conduct policies and that discipline practices allow for discretion and supportive alternatives. Yet, this legal mandate is often a **neglected component in both research and practice**, leaving gaps in how discipline outcomes and processes are evaluated. Without attention to the legal framework, inequities in

enforcement remain unchecked, and students in disadvantaged districts continue to face disproportionate burdens.

## Details of the research

This analysis used historic records from **Colorado's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)** to examine how disciplinary patterns have varied across districts and over time.

Summary of the research questions addressed here:

- RQ1: What is the overall burden of exclusionary discipline in Colorado districts between 2011 and 2017?
- RQ2: How do suspension and expulsion rates vary with district-level child poverty?
- RQ3: Which districts and regions exhibit persistently elevated or extreme rates of discipline?

### RQ1: What is the overall burden of exclusionary discipline in Colorado districts?

Between 2011 and 2017, discipline rates were consistently elevated in certain districts, with statewide patterns shaped by a strong poverty gradient (see Table 1 which provides counts and rates per 100 students for selected school districts).

- Median OSS rate across target districts was 3.6 in 2011, rising to 4.9 in 2015, before returning to 3.6 in 2017.
- ISS rates were generally lower but showed upticks in several districts in 2015–2017.
- Denver Public Schools had the largest raw counts (e.g., 5,368 OSS in 2013, 4,464 ISS in 2017), though its rates declined over time.

### RQ2: How do suspension and expulsion rates vary with poverty?

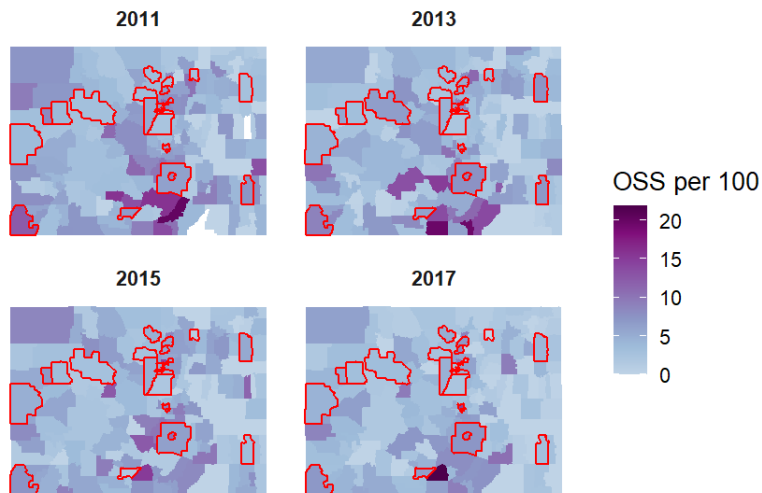
- OSS: Each 1-point increase in child poverty predicted about +0.20 OSS per 100 students ( $R^2 \approx 0.39$ ). Moving from 10% to 20% poverty predicts  $\sim +2$  OSS per 100.
- ISS: Each 1-point increase in poverty predicted +0.18 ISS per 100 students ( $R^2 \approx 0.24$ ). A 10-point rise corresponds to +1.75 ISS per 100.
- Year effects were modest compared to the poverty gradient. For example, 2013 was consistently lower across districts, while 2015 and 2017 rebounded to higher rates..

### RQ3: Which districts and regions exhibit persistently high discipline?

- Mapping (Figures 1–2, 4-panel maps for OSS and ISS) reveals persistent concentrations in the southern Front Range (El Paso and Pueblo counties) and certain rural systems in Weld County.

## Out-of-School Suspension Rate (per 100), Colorado Districts

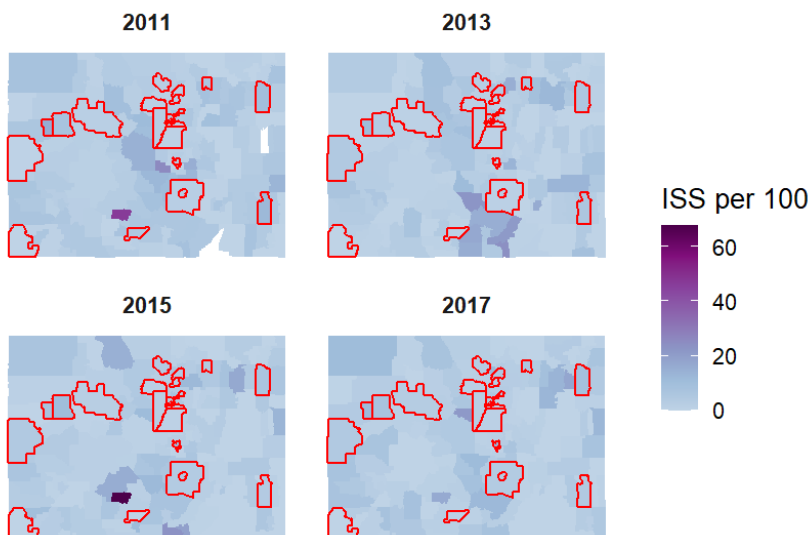
Targets outlined in red



**Figure 1. Out-of-School Suspensions across Colorado by year**

## In-School Suspension Rate (per 100), Colorado Districts

Targets outlined in red



**Figure 2. In-School Suspensions across Colorado by year**

### Highest Rates and Counts (2011–2017):

- **Highest OSS rate:** Harrison 2, 2011 (15.29 per 100).
- **Highest ISS rate:** Weld RE-7, 2013 (15.36 per 100).
- **Largest OSS counts:** Denver Public Schools, 2013 (5,368).
- **Largest ISS counts:** Denver Public Schools, 2017 (4,464).

- **Highest expulsion counts:** Jefferson County R-1, 2011 (663).
- **Highest referral counts:** Jefferson County R-1, 2011 (1,620).

**Small districts** (e.g., De Beque, Weldon Valley) posted extreme rates due to small denominators, underscoring the volatility of rates in systems with <1,000 students.

## Implications of the research

This analysis confirms that socioeconomic disadvantage is closely linked to exclusionary school discipline. Poverty, rather than year-to-year changes, is the strongest predictor of disciplinary actions. The findings indicate that reducing child poverty or investing in high-poverty districts could significantly lower suspensions across the state.

Discipline disparities are not isolated but are rooted in structural issues. High-poverty districts experience both higher relative rates and greater absolute burdens, which contribute to inequities in educational achievement and justice involvement. Importantly, these disparities raise questions about the **unequal enforcement of legal mandates related to school discipline**. Federal and state laws require that disciplinary procedures be applied fairly and consistently across districts, yet the ongoing concentration of high suspension rates in disadvantaged communities suggests these mandates are not fully upheld.

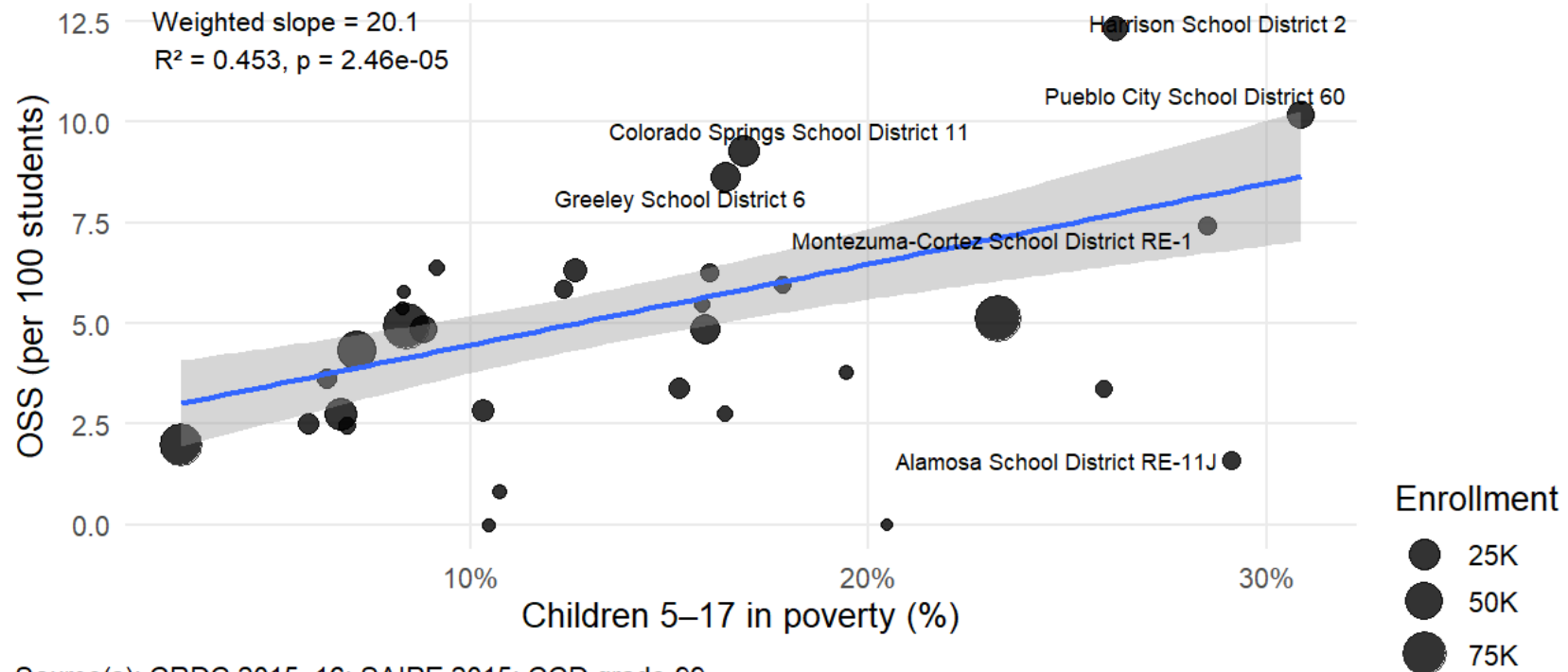
Ensuring that legal protections around discipline are enforced equally is therefore not only a matter of educational equity but also a civil rights issue. Without increased accountability and oversight, structural inequities in discipline will continue to undermine the legal promise of equal educational opportunity.

## Recommendations

- **Address the Poverty Gradient:** Education and social policy should prioritize poverty reduction and resource allocation to high-poverty districts, recognizing its central role in driving suspension disparities.
- **Support Alternatives to Suspension:** Expand restorative practices, mental health supports, and culturally responsive disciplinary approaches in high-burden districts.
- **Regional Focus:** Target interventions in persistent hot spots (e.g., Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Harrison 2) with tailored supports.
- **Enforce Legal Mandates Equally:** Strengthen oversight to ensure compliance with Colorado law, which requires that districts adopt fair and clearly communicated discipline codes and ensure that discipline allows for discretion and supportive alternatives.

## Out-of-School Suspensions by Percent of Children in Poverty (2015–16)

Colorado school districts (size = enrollment, weighted fit)



Source(s): CRDC 2015–16; SAIPE 2015; CCD grade-99

**Figure 3. Out-of-School Suspensions per 100 Students**



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## References and further reading

- Sanders, J., Joseph-McCatty, A., Massey, M., Swiatek, E., Csiernik, B., & Igor, E. (2024). Exposure to adversity and trauma among students who experience school discipline: A scoping review. *Review of Educational Research*, 94(5), 699-742.
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## About us

The **I**nvestigating **S**patial **S**tructures in **U**rban **E**nvironments (ISSUE) Lab at The Ohio State University conducts cutting-edge research at the intersection of public health, law, and social work, with a focus on violence-related harm and structural inequality. Using advanced statistical and geospatial methods, we translate research into policy, practice, and prevention strategies to protect vulnerable populations and promote equity.

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## Methodology

This study analyzed CRDC discipline data for Colorado districts in 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017. Data were collapsed to district-level totals, with unduplicated counts across race/sex/disability subgroups. Denominators were taken from CCD enrollment; poverty estimates from SAIPE were merged to district boundaries (2015–2016). Weighted OLS models estimated the association between poverty and discipline rates, with year fixed effects. Spatial analyses mapped rates across districts. All analyses accounted for small-district volatility and provided both raw and adjusted estimates where appropriate.



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**Table 1. Historical Data on School Discipline in Colorado Target Districts (2011 – 2017)**

District	Year	Enrollment	Counts					Rates (per 100 students)				
			ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Arrests	Referrals	Rate: ISS	Rate: OSS	Rate: Expulsions	Rate: Arrests	Rate: Referrals
Alamosa School District No. Re-11J	2011	2,098	116	142	21	2	17	5.53	6.77	1.00	0.10	0.81
	2013	2,046	22	126	8	0	42	1.08	6.16	0.39	0.00	2.05
	2015	2,237	0	36	6	0	0	0.00	1.61	0.27	0.00	0.00
	2017	2,336	25	148	6	0	6	1.07	6.34	0.26	0.00	0.26
Boulder Valley School District No. Re2	2011	29,780	550	1,015	2	4	77	1.85	3.41	0.01	0.01	0.26
	2013	30,546	403	725	0	2	129	1.32	2.37	0.00	0.01	0.42
	2015	31,247	559	857	0	0	88	1.79	2.74	0.00	0.00	0.28
	2017	31,282	561	839	2	0	55	1.79	2.68	0.01	0.00	0.18
Cherry Creek School District No. 5 in the county of Arapah	2011	52,655	1,115	1,159	281	0	32	2.12	2.20	0.53	0.00	0.06
	2013	54,228	115	2,152	82	20	732	0.21	3.97	0.15	0.04	1.35
	2015	54,730	637	2,383	90	18	273	1.16	4.35	0.16	0.03	0.50
	2017	55,699	684	2,542	80	13	162	1.23	4.56	0.14	0.02	0.29
Colorado Springs School District No. 11 in the county of E	2011	29,543	1,025	1,974	241	0	0	3.47	6.68	0.82	0.00	0.00
	2013	28,448	196	1,775	240	0	0	0.69	6.24	0.84	0.00	0.00



DENVER 1	2015	27,937	3,368	2,595	173	0	68	12.06	9.29	0.62	0.00	0.24
	2017	27,427	3,844	3,834	119	0	10	14.02	13.98	0.43	0.00	0.04
	2011	362	8	27	0	0	6	2.21	7.46	0.00	0.00	1.66
	2013	387	2	23	0	0	0	0.52	5.94	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2015	397	4	41	0	0	4	1.01	10.33	0.00	0.00	1.01
	2017	389	21	22	0	0	3	5.40	5.66	0.00	0.00	0.77
De Beque Joint District No. 49 of the counties of Mesa and	2011	125	8	4	0	0	0	6.40	3.20	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2013	146	0	0	4	0	0	0.00	0.00	2.74	0.00	0.00
	2015	149	0	8	0	0	0	0.00	5.37	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2017	165	7	7	0	0	1	4.24	4.24	0.00	0.00	0.61
Douglas County School District No. Re 1	2011	63,114	485	1,517	125	0	226	0.77	2.40	0.20	0.00	0.36
	2013	66,230	555	1,370	46	0	212	0.84	2.07	0.07	0.00	0.32
	2015	66,896	503	1,320	104	4	134	0.75	1.97	0.16	0.01	0.20
	2017	67,597	885	1,533	57	1	94	1.31	2.27	0.08	0.00	0.14
Eagle County School District No. Re 50	2011	6,344	132	194	12	2	18	2.08	3.06	0.19	0.03	0.28
	2013	6,520	69	425	14	6	22	1.06	6.52	0.21	0.09	0.34
	2015	6,804	161	193	6	0	4	2.37	2.84	0.09	0.00	0.06
	2017	6,931	234	234	13	0	2	3.38	3.38	0.19	0.00	0.03
Garfield School District No. Re-2	2011	4,717	372	185	33	0	40	7.89	3.92	0.70	0.00	0.85
	2013	4,818	198	155	28	0	31	4.11	3.22	0.58	0.00	0.64
	2015	4,847	522	165	12	0	10	10.77	3.40	0.25	0.00	0.21
	2017	4,813	367	154	6	0	48	7.63	3.20	0.12	0.00	1.00
Greeley School District No. 6 in the county of Weld and Sta	2011	19,840	1,026	1,634	14	0	10	5.17	8.24	0.07	0.00	0.05
	2013	20,461	948	1,668	8	0	0	4.63	8.15	0.04	0.00	0.00
	2015	21,587	1,090	1,864	8	29	4	5.05	8.63	0.04	0.13	0.02

	2017	22,407	941	2,028	27	6	15	4.20	9.05	0.12	0.03	0.07
Harrison School District No. 2 in the county of El Paso an	2011	11,108	912	1,698	196	0	18	8.21	15.29	1.76	0.00	0.16
	2013	11,179	1,109	1,308	60	0	35	9.92	11.70	0.54	0.00	0.31
	2015	11,777	1,192	1,451	85	16	28	10.12	12.32	0.72	0.14	0.24
	2017	11,771	657	693	16	0	8	5.58	5.89	0.14	0.00	0.07
Jefferson County School District No. R-1	2011	85,793	2,229	4,546	663	0	1,620	2.60	5.30	0.77	0.00	1.89
	2013	86,011	1,874	3,831	162	0	913	2.18	4.45	0.19	0.00	1.06
	2015	86,731	2,156	4,272	166	0	1,068	2.49	4.93	0.19	0.00	1.23
	2017	86,146	2,117	4,027	128	30	917	2.46	4.67	0.15	0.03	1.06
Lamar School District No. Re-2	2011	1,667	203	122	2	0	35	12.18	7.32	0.12	0.00	2.10
	2013	1,664	103	118	6	0	47	6.19	7.09	0.36	0.00	2.82
	2015	1,578	67	53	6	0	27	4.25	3.36	0.38	0.00	1.71
	2017	1,566	76	49	2	12	18	4.85	3.13	0.13	0.77	1.15
Mesa County Valley School District No. 51	2011	21,925	90	792	10	27	529	0.41	3.61	0.05	0.12	2.41
	2013	21,906	1,042	979	92	0	288	4.76	4.47	0.42	0.00	1.31
	2015	21,904	1,048	1,063	66	0	132	4.78	4.85	0.30	0.00	0.60
	2017	22,084	1,038	985	32	0	109	4.70	4.46	0.14	0.00	0.49
Montezuma-Cortez School District No. Re-1	2011	2,830	0	350	40	0	16	0.00	12.37	1.41	0.00	0.57
	2013	2,837	0	255	25	0	89	0.00	8.99	0.88	0.00	3.14
	2015	2,782	0	207	10	0	0	0.00	7.44	0.36	0.00	0.00
	2017	2,784	0	198	17	0	0	0.00	7.11	0.61	0.00	0.00
Plateau Valley School District No. 50 in the county of Mesa	2011	489	8	12	4	0	2	1.64	2.45	0.82	0.00	0.41
	2013	450	4	12	0	0	0	0.89	2.67	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2015	452	6	17	0	0	0	1.33	3.76	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2017	451	7	14	0	0	0	1.55	3.10	0.00	0.00	0.00

Pueblo County School District 70	2011	8,971	202	558	78	0	120	2.25	6.22	0.87	0.00	1.34
	2013	9,257	122	708	48	0	26	1.32	7.65	0.52	0.00	0.28
	2015	9,582	390	607	42	0	0	4.07	6.33	0.44	0.00	0.00
	2017	9,861	409	720	44	0	0	4.15	7.30	0.45	0.00	0.00
Pueblo School District No. 60 in the county of Pueblo and	2011	17,902	657	1,521	24	0	4	3.67	8.50	0.13	0.00	0.02
	2013	18,012	497	1,617	23	0	12	2.76	8.98	0.13	0.00	0.07
	2015	17,678	922	1,797	14	2	0	5.22	10.17	0.08	0.01	0.00
	2017	16,934	617	1,447	11	0	4	3.64	8.54	0.06	0.00	0.02
School District No. 1 in the county of Denver and State of C	2011	80,890	3,979	5,341	103	0	569	4.92	6.60	0.13	0.00	0.70
	2013	86,046	3,230	5,368	111	0	518	3.75	6.24	0.13	0.00	0.60
	2015	90,235	3,700	4,637	98	34	660	4.10	5.14	0.11	0.04	0.73
	2017	91,822	4,464	2,660	55	15	719	4.86	2.90	0.06	0.02	0.78
School District No. Re-11 in the county of Weld and State of	2011	171	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2013	196	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2015	207	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2017	205	0	4	0	0	0	0.00	1.95	0.00	0.00	0.00
School District No. Re-12 in the county of Weld and State of	2011	91	0	2	0	0	0	0.00	2.20	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2013	88	4	4	0	0	0	4.55	4.55	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2015	87	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2017	88	0	1	0	0	0	0.00	1.14	0.00	0.00	0.00
School District No. Re-20 Weldon Valley	2011	212	13	6	0	0	8	6.13	2.83	0.00	0.00	3.77
	2013	221	15	8	0	2	0	6.79	3.62	0.00	0.90	0.00
	2015	247	11	2	2	2	2	4.45	0.81	0.81	0.81	0.81

Thompson School District R-2J	2017	234	15	0	0	0	0	6.41	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2011	15,655	389	562	72	80	65	2.48	3.59	0.46	0.51	0.42
	2013	16,210	463	599	34	60	200	2.86	3.70	0.21	0.37	1.23
	2015	16,043	712	776	45	10	167	4.44	4.84	0.28	0.06	1.04
	2017	16,278	564	824	38	2	128	3.46	5.06	0.23	0.01	0.79
Weld County Reorganized School District No. Re-1	2011	1,895	59	61	27	0	2	3.11	3.22	1.42	0.00	0.11
	2013	1,922	83	100	47	0	2	4.32	5.20	2.45	0.00	0.10
	2015	1,985	83	118	6	0	0	4.18	5.94	0.30	0.00	0.00
	2017	1,938	115	135	4	0	7	5.93	6.97	0.21	0.00	0.36
Weld County Reorganized School District No. Re-4	2011	4,582	146	130	22	6	17	3.19	2.84	0.48	0.13	0.37
	2013	4,821	47	123	12	0	21	0.97	2.55	0.25	0.00	0.44
	2015	5,524	82	139	4	6	21	1.48	2.52	0.07	0.11	0.38
	2017	6,300	122	156	2	0	25	1.94	2.48	0.03	0.00	0.40
Weld County Reorganized School District No. Re-8	2011	2,470	55	164	16	9	28	2.23	6.64	0.65	0.36	1.13
	2013	2,415	39	138	4	0	25	1.61	5.71	0.17	0.00	1.04
	2015	2,354	62	138	4	4	4	2.63	5.86	0.17	0.17	0.17
	2017	2,428	71	200	2	0	4	2.92	8.24	0.08	0.00	0.16
Weld County School District No. Re-2	2011	1,768	37	35	8	0	0	2.09	1.98	0.45	0.00	0.00
	2013	1,837	30	32	2	0	6	1.63	1.74	0.11	0.00	0.33
	2015	1,918	42	47	0	0	0	2.19	2.45	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2017	1,913	35	69	2	0	2	1.83	3.61	0.10	0.00	0.10
Weld County School District No. Re-5J	2011	3,271	122	115	4	0	0	3.73	3.52	0.12	0.00	0.00
	2013	3,548	275	133	8	0	0	7.75	3.75	0.23	0.00	0.00
	2015	3,787	251	137	0	0	4	6.63	3.62	0.00	0.00	0.11
	2017	3,891	469	1	2	0	0	12.05	0.03	0.05	0.00	0.00
	2011	1,086	22	0	0	0	0	2.03	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2013	1,094	168	123	6	0	0	15.36	11.24	0.55	0.00	0.00

Weld County School District No. Re-7	2015	1,110	43	71	6	0	19	3.87	6.40	0.54	0.00	1.71
	2017	1,095	34	19	0	0	0	3.11	1.74	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2011	795	15	18	2	0	10	1.89	2.26	0.25	0.00	1.26
Weld County School District No. Re-9	2013	765	0	20	0	0	17	0.00	2.61	0.00	0.00	2.22
	2015	829	4	23	0	2	16	0.48	2.77	0.00	0.24	1.93
	2017	912	2	11	0	0	0	0.22	1.21	0.00	0.00	0.00
Weld County School District RE-3J	2011	2,276	46	141	40	0	0	2.02	6.20	1.76	0.00	0.00
	2013	2,306	58	122	17	6	12	2.52	5.29	0.74	0.26	0.52
	2015	2,341	287	147	6	2	6	12.26	6.28	0.26	0.09	0.26
	2017	2,475	81	1	6	0	1	3.27	0.04	0.24	0.00	0.04
	2011	829	80	24	2	0	2	9.65	2.90	0.24	0.00	0.24
Yuma 1 School District	2013	813	48	60	2	0	0	5.90	7.38	0.25	0.00	0.00
	2015	821	56	45	4	0	0	6.82	5.48	0.49	0.00	0.00
	2017	831	74	34	0	0	0	8.90	4.09	0.00	0.00	0.00
School District No. Re-10 in the county of Weld and State of	2011	156	7	10	0	0	0	4.49	6.41	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2013	162	4	2	0	0	0	2.47	1.23	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2015	173	4	10	0	0	0	2.31	5.78	0.00	0.00	0.00
	2017	176	1	2	0	0	0	0.57	1.14	0.00	0.00	0.00