



DATE: Mar 17, 2026

Dear Members of the Joint Budget Committee,

Thank you for your continued work during what we recognize is a very challenging budget year for the State of Colorado. The Department understands the difficult fiscal environment facing the state and appreciates the complexity of the decisions before the Committee. We recognize that reductions are necessary and that the Committee must make difficult trade-offs in order to balance the state budget.

In that context, the Department has worked closely with the State Board of Education to identify a small number of targeted comebacks for the Committee's consideration. While the reductions adopted during figure setting affect many important programs, the Board and the Department believe there are a few areas where maintaining investment would have the greatest impact on Colorado students.

The State Board of Education reviewed potential comebacks and prioritized them using the following criteria:

- **Alignment with legislative priorities**, particularly those that the State Board has recently identified as central to improving outcomes for students.
- **Proximity to students during the regular school day**, prioritizing programs that most directly support students and educators in classroom learning environments before moving outward to broader system supports.
- **Long-term investment**, considering whether continued funding would generate sustained improvements for students and schools over time.

Using this framework, the Board identified the enclosed items as the Department's priority comebacks. While all of the programs affected by the Committee's actions play an important role in supporting students and educators, the current fiscal climate requires difficult decisions and thoughtful prioritization. The Department and the Board believe these requests represent areas where maintaining funding would provide the greatest impact for students across the state.

Additionally, we understand that the Committee is considering two options related to the state's social studies assessment. The State Board of Education has consistently voted to remove this assessment. The Board's position reflects several considerations: the

assessment is not required under federal law, it is administered on a sampling basis and therefore cannot be used to measure student growth, and it is not administered to all students statewide.

Thank you for your continued partnership and for your careful consideration of these requests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dr. Susana Córdova". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "D" and "C".

Dr. Susana Córdova
Commissioner of Education

CDE

Comeback #1: BEST Indirect Cost Adjustments

Department: Department of Education

Request Title: JBC Staff-Initiated Indirect Cost Adjustments

	Original Request FY2026-27	JBC Action FY2026-27	Comeback Request FY2026-27
Total Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
General Fund	\$0	\$0	\$0
Cash Fund (Public School Capital Construction Assistance Fund)	\$0	\$420,540	\$0
Reappropriated Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
Federal Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
FTE	0	0	0

Summary of JBC Action:

The JBC voted to add \$420,540 from the Public School Capital Construction Assistance Cash Fund into the Department’s Indirect Cost Pool.

Summary of Comeback Request:

CDE respectfully requests that the JBC eliminate the inclusion of the Public School Capital Construction Assistance Cash Fund into the Department’s Indirect Cost Pool allocation.

Analysis:

Recent legislative changes have capped overall revenue into the Public School Capital Construction Assistance Fund, which negatively impacts the program's ability to award grants to districts for capital construction projects.

Including this cash fund in the Department's indirect cost pool would further limit the program's ability to award cash grants for these critical projects statewide and could jeopardize the safety of educators and students.

The total project cost (or total need) represented in this 2026-2027 BEST grant application cycle is just under \$900 million, with BEST requests at \$535 million. The current cash grant appropriation is \$107 million (including a \$51 million reduction per the cap). The cost for these projects continues to rise as inflation drives construction costs higher and puts even more pressure on Colorado public schools. 75% of total projects funded go to rural and small rural districts who lack capacity to raise funds locally.

Nine projects this cycle, ranging from roof replacement to fire alarm replacement and upgrades to safety and security upgrades, could be awarded using the funding that is being proposed for the Department's indirect cost pool.

CDE

Comeback #2: Reduce Counselor Corps Grant

Department: Department of Education

Request Title: R-2 Reduce Counselor Corps Grant

	Original Request FY2026-27	JBC Action FY2026-27	Comeback Request FY2026-27
Total Funds	\$0	-\$1,000,0000	\$0
General Fund	\$0	\$0	\$0
State Education Cash Fund	\$0	-\$1,000,000	\$0
Reappropriated Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
Federal Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
FTE	0	0	0

Summary of JBC Action:

The JBC voted to reduce the School Counselor Corps Grant by \$1.0M in SEF, from \$12.0M to 11.0M.

Summary of Comeback Request:

The Department of Education requests that the JBC approve the \$12.0M request in full to continue serving the students of Colorado.

Analysis:

The School Counselor Corps Grant Program remains a vital investment in student success across Colorado. The program supports schools in expanding access to effective school-based counseling, helping students stay on track to graduate and prepare for postsecondary education and the workforce. Currently, the program supports counseling services at 177 school sites across 82 local education providers statewide.

Demand for the program continues to exceed available resources. In the most recent application cycle, 38 schools applied for funding but only 25 were able to receive awards due to limited funds. A \$1,000,000 reduction would further limit the number of schools able to expand counseling services and could restrict opportunities for future cohorts.

The [most recent published legislative report](#) highlights that the dropout rate for grantee schools (0.9%) remained below the state average (2.2%). In the yet to be published legislative report for cohort 9, who received funding from 2019-2023, grantee schools by the end of the four years decreased their dropout rates to less than or equal to 0.5%, though the state dropout rate increased to 2.1%. Grantee schools also increased both four-year graduation and six-year completion rates. Even though Cohort 9's six-year completion rate was below the state average before funding, by the final year of the grant, it increased to 91.4%, over eight percentage points higher than the state average. Early data analysis for cohort 10, which operated from 2020-2024, showed that grantee schools gained 2.5 percentage points in four-year graduation and improved postsecondary matriculation rates from 41.7% to 52.7%.

While a recently published evaluation of cohorts 7-10, spanning 2017-2024, found mixed results for some broad statewide metrics, the study did identify statistically significant positive impacts for students with disabilities and English language learners—two groups that often require additional academic and postsecondary guidance to succeed. Maintaining stable funding ensures grantee schools can continue supporting these students while the Department and stakeholders consider program improvements informed by the evaluation. The study authors listed limitations of the study ([page 30](#)), one of which was SB17-068 expanding the program so grant funds could serve elementary and middle schools, reducing the statistical power needed to uncover impacts for high schools. In the confirmatory analysis, 54% of the first cohort studied (cohort 7) funded high schools. In the remaining three cohorts studied, 18% or less of those cohorts were high schools. In the exploratory sample, only 20% of (32) schools included in the study were solely high schools. The remaining 80% were elementary, middle, and mixed level schools. Even with this limited sample size, the study showed that “funding increased the odds of 6-year completion and slightly stronger evidence of postsecondary matriculation for high school students.” The study also stated “In the exploratory analysis, there is evidence that attendance rates at SCCGP-funded schools are initially slightly lower, but the gap shrank throughout the grant cycle.”

Since grants are awarded in multi-year cohorts and funds support school staff positions, reductions to the program can create disruption for participating schools and reduce the number of future schools that can participate. Preserving current

funding levels will allow the program to continue providing critical counseling services to students across Colorado while maintaining program stability and allowing time to strengthen outcomes.

CDE

Comeback #3: School Health Professionals (aka Behavioral Healthcare Matching) Grant Program

Department: Department of Education

Request Title: JBC Staff-Initiated Reduction to SHPGP

	Original Request FY2026-27	JBC Action FY2026-27	Comeback Request FY2026-27
Total Funds	\$0	-\$3,000,000	\$0
General Fund	\$0	\$0	\$0
Cash Fund (MTCF)	\$0	-\$3,000,000	\$0
Reappropriated Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
Federal Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
FTE	0	-1.0	0

Summary of JBC Action:

The JBC voted to decrease the School Health Professionals Grant Program by \$3 million and 1.0 FTE in FY 2026-27.

Summary of Comeback Request:

CDE respectfully requests that the JBC restore the \$3.0 million and 1.0 FTE reduction to restore the full funding to the grant program.

Analysis:

The average grant award has been approximately \$250,000 over the past few cohorts. Consequently, a reduction of \$3 million would result in approximately 12 fewer grants awarded for school health professionals. This translates into approximately 32 fewer school health professionals that could be hired as part of this grant program.

This reduction would come at a time when schools are facing large outbreaks of infectious diseases in a post pandemic environment. For example, measles outbreaks

are becoming more common. This reduction would not only reduce staff within schools but would also reduce the department's ability to support districts and schools in their responses to any potential outbreaks as the administrative funds support schools statewide. For example:

- Broomfield High School, which is facing a significant measles issue, is a School Health Professional grantee (through the Boulder Valley School District). They have school health professional staff at the frontlines of the measles response funded via the grant.
- The CDE school nurses provide guidance and technical assistance to all school nurses across the state. In FY 2024-25, state nursing staff supported by this grant offered 47 live virtual events, and live participants totaled 4,627 for the year. Just this week (on March 4, 2026), 487 school health professionals attended the measles webinar that the school nurses led in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Public Health and the environment.
- School nurses provide guidance about many topics, including: addressing urgent, chronic, and emerging health needs; linking schools to state partner agencies; crisis intervention; and access to statutory resources. They serve as content experts for tiers 1, 2, and 3 school nurse interventions in schools. They also host a free virtual school nurse orientation each summer and have an average attendance of 135 school nurses.
- Content areas covered include infectious diseases and disease outbreaks, immunization compliance, support for students with asthma and other chronic conditions, and emergency response management.

The School Health Professional Grant Program are:

1. To increase the presence of school health professionals in schools to provide behavioral health care to students who have mental health, substance use or misuse, or other behavioral health needs;
2. To provide training and resources for school staff on the implementation of evidence-based programming on behavioral health education for all students;
3. To allow school health professionals to connect students with services that are provided by community-based organizations for treatment and counseling for students who need behavioral health care; and
4. To provide behavioral health-care services at recipient schools, including but not limited to screenings, counseling, therapy, referrals to community organizations, and training for students and staff on behavioral health issues.

As shown in the [most recent legislative report](#), these goals have been met by grantees. The grant has been successful at reducing ratios of students to health professionals in school and plays a crucial role in helping our students learn in a healthy environment. Though the authorizing legislation does not direct CDE to collect information about school health professionals retained after the grant so that is not available, CDE sees “sustainability” after the grant ends to be not only continued financial support for a given role, but also the referral systems and training of non-school health professionals staff that grantees were able to enact - they are building better mental health systems/providing better mental health supports across the school, as well as putting trained professionals in buildings. Since this is a matching grant program, to even become a grantee, applicants must demonstrate cash and/or in-kind matching funds. CDE respectfully requests that the Joint Budget Committee reconsider the \$3 million reduction to this important grant program.

CDE

Comeback #4: Eliminate Local Accountability Grant Program

Department: Department of Education

Request Title: R-3 Eliminate Local Accountability Grant Program

	Original Request FY2026-27	JBC Action FY2026-27	Comeback Request FY2026-27
Total Funds	-\$100,000	-\$499,300	-\$100,000
General Fund	-\$100,000	-\$499,300	-\$100,000
State Education	\$0	\$0	\$0
Reappropriated Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
Federal Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
FTE	0	-0.4	0

Summary of JBC Action:

The JBC voted to repeal the Local Accountability Grant Program at the end of FY2025-26.

Summary of Comeback Request:

The Department of Education requests the JBC delays the repeal until the end of FY2026-27 and funds the program at the requested level of \$399,300. This request includes a \$100,000 reduction initiated by the CDE.

Analysis:

The Local Accountability Systems Grant Program represents a modest but strategically important investment in strengthening Colorado’s education accountability system. Created through S.B. 19-204, the program allows districts, schools, and BOCES to pilot locally developed accountability and improvement systems that complement the state’s framework while advancing continuous improvement practices tailored to community needs.

Although small in scale, the program's reach extends well beyond the number of direct grantees. The current cohort includes eight grantees representing collaborative partnerships that involve approximately 21 districts and nine schools. Through this work, participating communities are developing locally meaningful indicators, improving their data systems, and building stronger connections between accountability measures and local priorities for student success.

Importantly, the program has already contributed to statewide policy development. Lessons learned from Local Accountability Systems grantees informed recent discussions and stakeholder engagement related to improvements to Colorado's accountability framework, including the work that led to H.B. 25-1278. These pilots provide the state with practical insight into how accountability measures function in diverse local contexts, insight that is difficult to obtain without structured opportunities for districts to test new approaches.

While participation in the second cohort is smaller than the first, this reflects the program's intentionally targeted and experimental nature rather than a lack of value. The program was designed to support innovation and learning at the local level, not to operate as a universal grant program. For a relatively small annual investment, the state gains valuable insight into how districts use accountability data, develop locally meaningful measures of student success, and align improvement strategies with community priorities.

Finally, eliminating the program now would prevent the state from fully realizing the value of ongoing work. Current grantees are in the second year of a three-year cycle and are actively implementing and refining their systems. Allowing the program to continue through the completion of this work ensures the state can capture lessons learned and inform future accountability improvements.

Given the program's modest cost, its contribution to statewide accountability discussions, and the ongoing work of current grantees, maintaining funding represents a balanced approach that preserves innovation while allowing Colorado to continue learning from local accountability efforts.

CDE

Comeback #5: RFI Roll Forward funding

Department: Department of Education

Request Title: RFI - Online Programs

	Original Request FY2026-27	JBC Action FY2026-27	Comeback Request FY2026-27
Total Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
General Fund	\$0	\$0	\$0
Cash Fund	\$0	\$0	\$0
Reappropriated Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
Federal Funds	\$0	\$0	\$0
FTE	0	0	0

Summary of JBC Action:

The Joint Budget Committee requested that the Department submit a report by November 1, 2026, regarding enrollment trends in single-district and multi-district online schools. The report should evaluate the academic performance of students in these programs, outline current or proposed measures to strengthen oversight of online school quality, and include a fiscal analysis comparing state payments to districts for online education against the actual costs incurred by districts. The Department is also asked to provide options and recommendations to address any significant funding disparities identified through the analysis.

Summary of Comeback Request:

The Department requests roll-forward authority for existing FY 2025-26 funds within the Department of Education, Administration and Centrally-Appropriated Line Items and School District Operations line items to support the analysis required by the Committee’s request for information. Authority to roll forward up to \$125,000 would allow the Department to retain and utilize funds that would otherwise revert in order to conduct the research, data analysis, and stakeholder engagement necessary to respond fully to the Committee’s request.

Analysis:

The Committee's request for information presents an opportunity to conduct a deeper analysis of online education in Colorado, including student outcomes, financial structures, and oversight frameworks. The Department assumes this includes single-district online schools and programs, multi-district online schools, and Colorado Empowered Learning. Responding to the request will require analytical work and engagement beyond the Department's current capacity. The Department anticipates that the work necessary to respond to the Committee's request will fall into three primary areas: (1) programmatic analysis of student outcomes and performance in online education settings, (2) financial analysis comparing state funding levels with district costs for delivering online education, and (3) stakeholder engagement to inform potential recommendations regarding oversight structures and policy considerations.

- **Programmatic Analysis** - The first component of the work involves evaluating the academic performance and outcomes of students participating in single-district and multi-district online education programs. This analysis would include examining student-level data related to participation in state assessments, accountability metrics and plan types, student mobility and persistence, and postsecondary outcomes such as matriculation to four-year institutions or other postsecondary pathways. Conducting this analysis will require significant student-level research and data analysis to better understand the experiences and outcomes of students participating in online learning environments across the state.
- **Financial Analysis** - The second component of the work involves examining the relationship between the state funding provided for online students and the costs incurred by districts to deliver online education. The Department does not currently collect detailed cost information related to district-level online program operations, so responding to the Committee's request will require developing a process to request and gather this information from districts and program providers. Once collected, the Department would analyze the information to better understand how funding structures interact with the costs associated with different online education delivery models.
- **Oversight and Stakeholder Engagement** - The third component of the work involves developing options and recommendations regarding oversight structures for online education programs. While the Department has significant expertise in the implementation and administration of these programs, the State Board of Education plays an important role in establishing policies related to accountability and oversight. The Department believes that engaging stakeholders—including school districts, BOCES, online program providers, and other partners—will help ensure that any recommendations reflect the operational realities of online education while supporting high-quality

outcomes for students. The requested funding would support the staff capacity and engagement activities necessary to conduct this work and develop well-informed recommendations for the Committee.

Other Considerations

There are also a few additional areas of clarification that the Committee may wish to consider:

- The Department does not currently have statutory authority to require school districts or online providers to submit the type of financial information. As a result, absent additional statutory direction, participation in any request for this information would be voluntary. Depending on the level of participation, the information available for analysis may be limited. Developing the data collection process and conducting the associated analysis will require additional staff time and resources.
- Colorado River BOCES, which currently holds the designation for Colorado Empowered Learning and Colorado Digital Solutions, does not have statutory authority to require participating school districts to provide certain types of student-level enrollment data (such as student identification numbers). Neither does the Department. As a result, absent additional statutory direction, participation in any request for this information would be voluntary. Depending on the level of participation, the information available for analysis may be limited.
- The current designation of Colorado River BOCES to administer the CEL program expires in 2027, with the statutorily required re-designation process scheduled to begin in late 2026. The new, five-year designation would end in 2032. As the General Assembly considers potential changes to the program, it may wish to authorize the Department to extend the existing designation for a limited period of time rather than initiating the process for a new five-year designation.