

A KEYSTONE POLICY CENTER REPORT

K-12 Education in Colorado

Modest progress, major challenges

The state of Colorado's public schools, from early literacy to college and career readiness
November 2026

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Executive summary

As Colorado prepares to swear in a new governor, and as students face a world being reshaped by artificial intelligence, rising living costs and new questions about the value of college, it is a good moment to take stock of the state's K-12 system. Even as the skills students need are changing, reading, writing and math remain the foundation for nearly everything else, from judging what AI tools produce to succeeding in college, job training and a rapidly changing economy. State tests remain the most consistent public measure of whether students are building that foundation and how the state is supporting different student groups in learning these skills.

Our extensive analysis shows that the picture in Colorado on these measures is mixed. Results are improving in some grades and subjects, and high school graduation rates are the highest in more than a decade. But most students are not yet meeting grade-level expectations, many students are not prepared for what comes after high school, and outcomes differ sharply across student groups and communities. This report draws on 2026 state test results released by CDE in August 2026, NAEP 2024 results, and federal school finance data along with enrollment data from CDE for the 2025-26 school year.

Key findings

- **Most students are not meeting grade-level expectations, and recovery from the pandemic is uneven.** In 2026, 44.7% of students in grades 3-8 met expectations in English language arts and 37.3% in math. Math has climbed back above its pre-pandemic level, though that level was low, while literacy is still below 2019 proficiency levels. High school math is the clearest weakness: only 31.6% of 11th graders met the SAT math benchmark in 2026, down from 36.4% in 2021.

- **Gaps by income and race are large and are not closing.** Only 26.5% of low-income students met grade-level expectations in literacy, compared with 58.8% of students who are not low-income. In math the rates were 19.4% and 51.4%. Both gaps are wider than in 2019. Fewer than one in five Black and Latino 11th graders met the SAT math benchmark. Still, demographics do not determine results: several high-poverty districts and schools far outperform others serving similar students.

- **Colorado's measures of success send mixed signals.** The state's high school graduation rate reached 85.6% in 2025, the highest in more than a decade, and about two-thirds of schools earn the state's top rating for school performance, yet only about 60% of 11th graders meet the SAT literacy benchmark and about one-third meet the math benchmark.

Colorado can build on its strengths and on the lessons of schools, districts and states that have improved outcomes for all students. Keystone recommends four priorities for the state, summarized below. Section 7 sets out each recommendation in more detail.

Recommendations for policymakers

- **Set clear, higher expectations, and align the high school diploma with readiness.** Colorado should define clearly and consistently what students should know and be able to do before leaving K-12, and make sure grade-level standards, annual assessments, postsecondary readiness measures and high school graduation requirements all point to the same goal.

- **Make school ratings meaningful.** School ratings should clearly communicate two things: whether students are improving and whether they are reaching the outcomes the state expects. When two-thirds of schools earn the state's top rating while most students are below grade level, the rating misrepresents how schools are doing, making it less useful as a tool for stakeholders.
- **Focus on persistent areas of weak performance.** Colorado should concentrate attention and resources where performance has stayed weak: high school math, middle school literacy, science, and outcomes for historically underserved students.
- **Learn systematically from what works, in Colorado and elsewhere.** Colorado should build a more deliberate way to identify and learn from schools and districts that achieve strong or improving results compared with similar peers, including those serving different populations, regions and communities, with particular attention to places that get strong results for underserved students.

1. Introduction

Why take stock now

Democrat Phil Weiser will be sworn in as Colorado's governor in January, and his administration will inherit a school system in transition. Enrollment is declining, the student population is changing, budgets are tight and the skills students need after high school are shifting quickly. Before the state sets new priorities, it is worth asking a basic question: how well is Colorado's K-12 system preparing students for what comes next?

This report draws on state and national data to answer that question. It looks at who Colorado's schools serve, how students are performing, how results vary across communities, whether the state's measures of success tell a consistent story, and the conditions that shape results. It closes with lessons from places that have improved and recommendations for policymakers.

What this report measures

This report focuses primarily on academic outcomes. Test scores do not capture everything schools do or everything students need to thrive, but strong academic preparation is central to students' future opportunities, and state and national assessments provide the most consistent public information for comparing performance across years, student groups, schools, districts and states. These results should be viewed as one measure only. A fuller picture would require analysis of other measures, many of which don't exist in a comprehensive or reliable form.

The report uses two lenses to consider academic performance. **Proficiency** shows whether students have met defined expectations for what they should know and be able to do at a point in time. In this report, proficiency means the percentage of students who "met" or "exceeded" grade-level expectations on Colorado's state assessment. **Growth** shows how much academic progress students make from one year to the next compared with students statewide who had similar prior scores. A school can produce strong growth while many of its students remain below grade level, and high proficiency can partly reflect where students started. Both are needed to understand performance.

Outcomes in Colorado's schools and districts differ widely by income and race. These differences reflect differences in opportunities, experiences, resources and the effectiveness of the systems serving students, not differences in student potential. To keep the report readable, the main text shows representative data, such as reading results for low-income students and math results by race and ethnicity. More granular results appear in the appendix.

2. Who Colorado serves

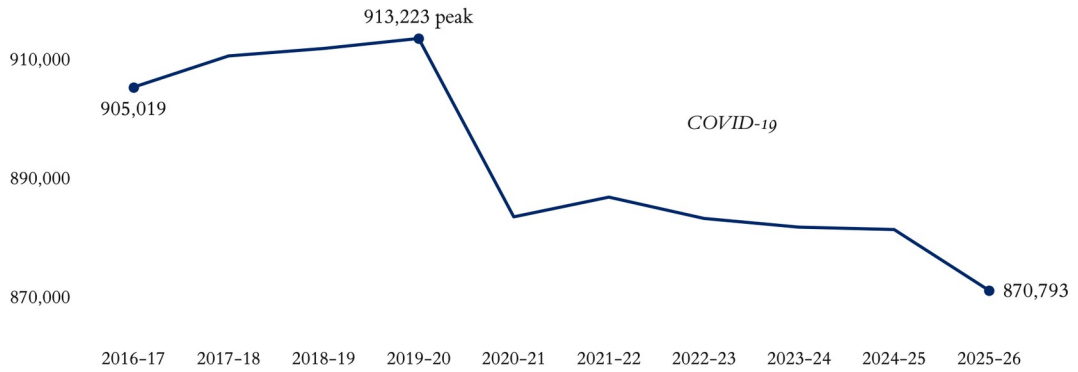
Understanding student outcomes begins with the context of Colorado's public education system: who its students are, and where they learn. Section 6 looks at resources, teachers and time in school.

Fewer students, changing needs

Enrollment is declining. Colorado public school enrollment has fallen since its peak in 2019-20. The drop was steepest during COVID-19 but has continued since. The decline mostly reflects falling birth rates and a smaller school-age population rather than families leaving public schools, although private school enrollment and homeschooling have grown (homeschooling by about 25% from 2019 to 2024, from a small base). Enrollment figures come from CDE's October count.

Enrollment has fallen by more than 42,000 students since 2019-20

Colorado PK-12 public school enrollment, October count



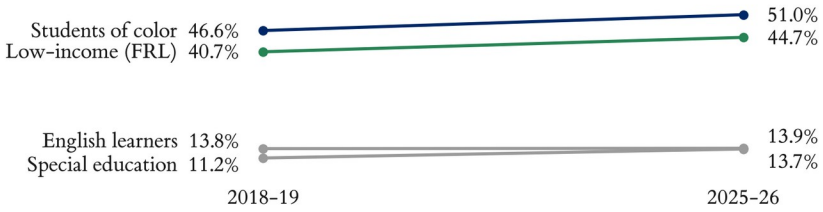
Source: Colorado Department of Education, Pupil Membership (October Count).

Students' needs are growing. Compared with 2018-19, Colorado's public schools now serve higher shares of low-income students, students of color, and students receiving special education services. Latino students now make up more than a third of enrollment (36.4% in 2025-26) and, in 39 districts, are over half of the student population. The change reaches well beyond the cities, and where students with higher needs live is shifting over time. For example, in Cherry Creek, the share of low-income students rose from 29% in 2015-16 to 38% in 2025-26, and students of color grew from 46% to 56% of enrollment. In Falcon District 49 near Colorado Springs, the low-income share rose from 35% to 42%, and students of color grew from 40% to 51%. The share of English learners in Colorado has been relatively flat.

Student mental health has also shifted. In the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, the share of high school students reporting persistent sadness or hopelessness rose from 35% in 2019 to 40% in 2021, then fell to 26% in 2023 and 22% in 2025. The share who seriously considered suicide fell from 17% in 2021 to about one in ten in 2025. These shifts matter for interpreting outcomes and make it especially important to track how historically underserved groups are performing.

Schools now serve more students with higher needs

Share of Colorado PK-12 enrollment, 2018-19 and 2025-26



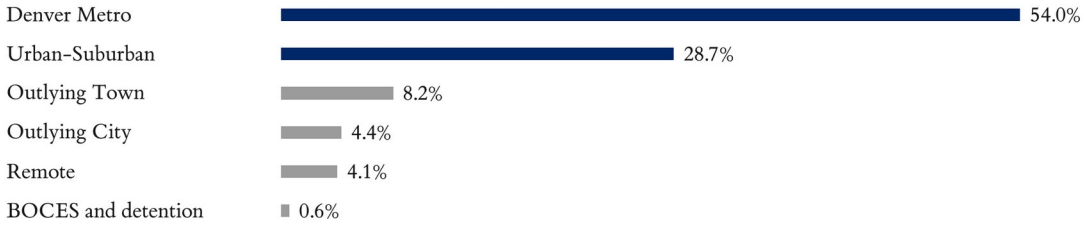
English learners include NEP, LEP and FEP monitor years 1 and 2. Students of color = all groups other than white.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, Student October Count.

Where students learn

Most Colorado students attend a handful of large districts. Denver-metro and urban-suburban districts serve 82.7% of Colorado students but make up only 17% of districts. The ten largest districts enroll 463,426 students, or 53.2% of the statewide total. At the same time, the greatest number of Colorado's districts are small and rural, and policies designed for large systems often do not translate well to them. Of Colorado's 178 districts, 111 enroll fewer than 1,000 students.

Nearly 83% of students attend Denver-metro or urban-suburban districts

Share of statewide PK-12 enrollment by CDE district setting, 2022-23



BOCES and detention combines CDE's two non-geographic categories. Latest published setting breakout.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, Pupil Membership by District Setting.

Families have unusual freedom to choose. Colorado students may enroll in any public school in the state that has an available seat, regardless of where they live. Nearly 40% of students attend a school other than the one their district assigns them, including about 13% who enroll in a different district. This culture of choice shapes both student outcomes and how policy plays out at the state and local level. Colorado was one of the first states to let families choose their schools: a 1990 law made it the second state to require open enrollment within districts, the Charter Schools Act followed in 1993, and the Innovation Schools Act followed in 2008.

Many schools operate with significant autonomy. About 15% of Colorado students (more than 135,000) attend charter schools, which are public schools governed by independent nonprofit boards and held accountable by their authorizers (either the local school district or the Charter School Institute, the statewide authorizer). Another 6% attend innovation schools, district-run schools with waivers from key district policies and practices. Any statewide strategy has to work across these different governance models.

3. How Colorado students are performing

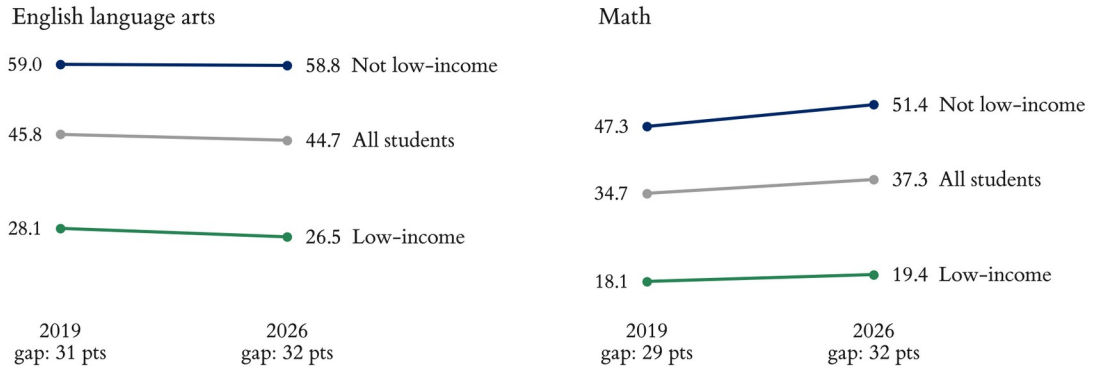
Each year, Colorado students in grades 3-8 take the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) in English language arts and math, which assess mastery of grade-level standards. High school students take the PSAT in grades 9 and 10 and the SAT in grade 11, also in both subjects. Results have improved incrementally in recent years, but proficiency remains persistently too low, has not fully recovered from the pandemic in many cases, and differs widely across student groups.

Grades 3-8: Gains in some grades, persistent gaps

Fewer than half of Colorado students read at grade level, and only about one in four low-income students do. In 2026, 44.7% of students in grades 3-8 met expectations in literacy, below the pre-pandemic 45.8%. Among low-income students the rate was 26.5%, compared with 58.8% of their non-low-income peers. Students who are not low-income are more than twice as likely to meet grade-level expectations, and the gap of roughly 32 percentage points between low-income and non-low-income students is slightly wider than before the pandemic, despite targeted state and local efforts. Similar patterns hold for Black and Latino students compared with white students (see appendix).

The income gap is slightly wider than before the pandemic

Share of students in grades 3-8 meeting CMAS expectations, 2019 and 2026



Low-income = eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; CDE notes 2026 FRL data are less precise than in past years. Math by income is weighted across grades.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, CMAS results.

Results also vary by grade. Fourth- and fifth-grade literacy rose in 2026, a hopeful sign for early-literacy work, though third-grade results slipped. Scores fell in every middle school grade, with sixth-grade proficiency dropping from 44.2% to 41.6%. Sustaining reading support beyond the early grades is a growing priority. Colorado's READ Act, passed in 2012, focuses state literacy efforts on kindergarten through 3rd grade.

Math has improved more, but proficiency remains low. Fewer than four in ten students in grades 3-8 meet grade-level expectations in math, and fewer than one in five low-income students do. More information on math performance is provided in the appendix.

Science is weaker still. In 2026, 36.1% of 5th graders, 35.4% of 8th graders and 24.8% of 11th graders met expectations on CMAS science, and the 5th-grade rate fell almost three points from 2025.

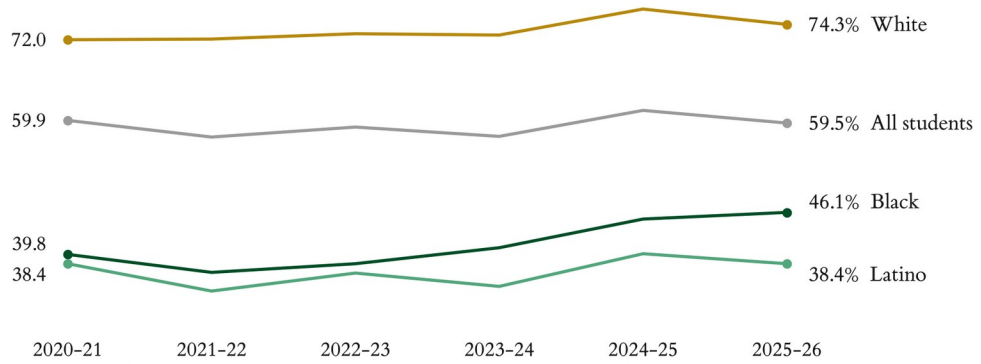
High school: literacy holds steady, math lags

This report focuses on 11th grade, the year students take the SAT, because it serves as a benchmark for high school graduation and college readiness and has been administered consistently over time. The College Board's college and career readiness benchmarks are 480 in reading and writing and 530 in math; this report shows the percentage of students meeting these benchmarks. Results for the 9th- and 10th-grade PSAT are in the appendix.

Reading and writing are a relative strength, but results have stalled, and gaps remain large. About 60% of 11th graders met the SAT literacy benchmark in 2026, similar to in 2021. The rate was 38% for Latino students and 46% for Black students, compared with 74% for white students.

Literacy readiness has been flat, with wide gaps by race and ethnicity

Share of 11th graders meeting the SAT evidence-based reading and writing benchmark

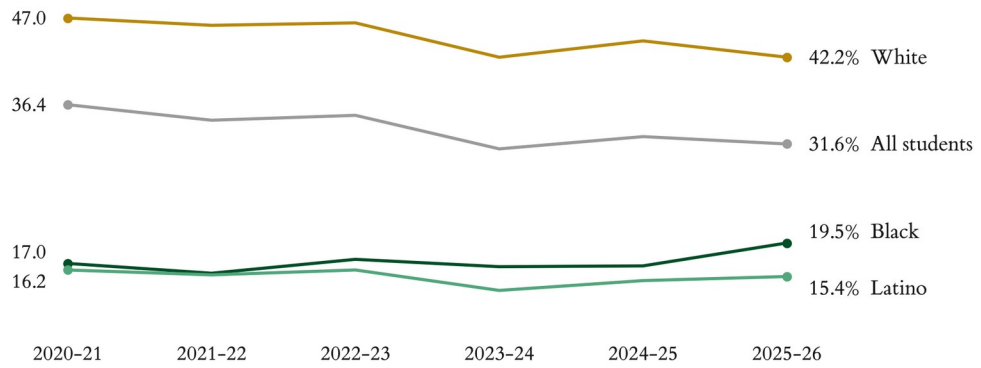


The SAT moved to a digital format in spring 2024; CDE cautions against direct comparisons across that change.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 11th-grade SAT results.

High school math is one of Colorado's clearest academic challenges. Only 31.6% of 11th graders met the SAT math benchmark in 2026, down from 36.4% in 2021, and performance declined across the tested high school grades. Fewer than one in five Black and Latino students met the benchmark.

Fewer than one in three 11th graders meets the math benchmark

Share of 11th graders meeting the SAT math benchmark



The SAT moved to a digital format in spring 2024; CDE cautions against direct comparisons across that change.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 11th-grade SAT results.

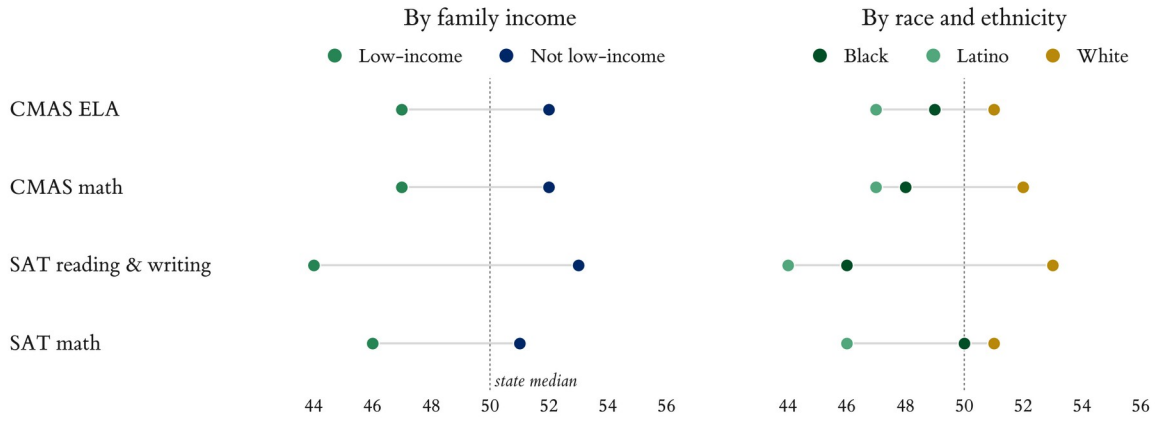
Growth: Not fast enough to close gaps

Proficiency is the ultimate goal for all students, but growth shows how much progress students make in a year and is especially useful for gauging the contribution of schools and teachers (see "Why the signals diverge" in Section 4). Colorado measures growth with the median growth percentile (MGP), which compares a student's progress with that of students statewide who had similar prior scores. The MGP is the middle student growth percentile for a group of students. An MGP of 60 means the typical student grew as much as or more than 60% of their academic peers. By design, the statewide MGP is about 50.

Low-income, Black and Latino students are growing more slowly. On nearly every assessment, they show lower median growth than their peers. That means these students are unlikely to be closing gaps and may be falling further behind.

Low-income, Black and Latino students are growing more slowly than their peers

Median growth percentile, 2025-26. By design, the typical student statewide is at 50.



Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT growth results.

The Colorado Department of Education has also begun reporting on-track growth, the share of students growing fast enough to reach or maintain grade-level proficiency within a set time. If proficiency is the goal, this is a more useful measure than MGP, because students who start behind need faster-than-typical growth to catch up. Results for 2025-26 were not available at the time of writing, and CDE has delayed their inclusion in the School Performance Framework.

Colorado compared to other states

Because each state sets its own proficiency benchmarks, the best way to compare Colorado with other states is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as the nation's report card, which is given to a sample of students in grades 4, 8 and 12.

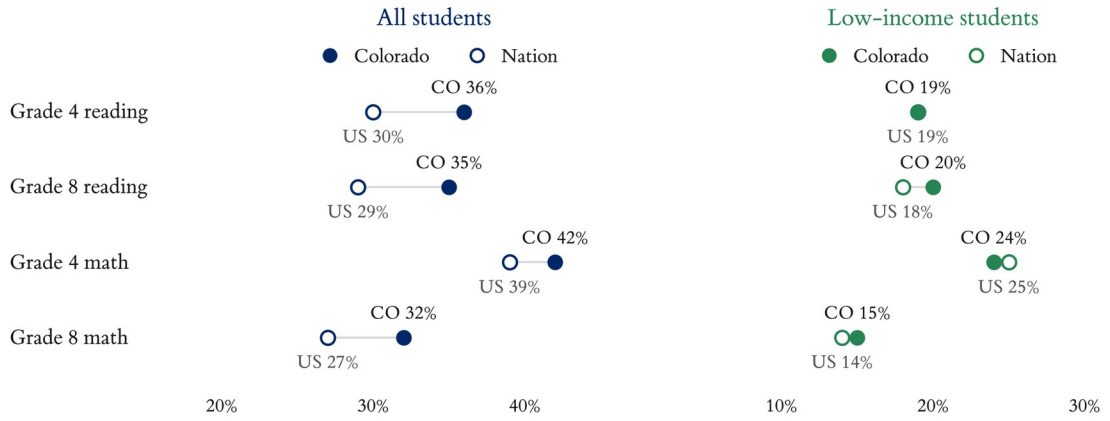
Colorado's ranking has fallen. On the 2024 NAEP (the most recent available results), Colorado tied for 13th in 4th-grade math (with six other states), down from a tie for 6th in 2013, and was tied for 12th in 8th-grade math, down from a tie for 7th. Many states score within a point or two of one another and are often statistically tied, so several can share a rank and small changes in rank should be read with caution. But the direction is clear. Because NAEP scores track closely with income and states differ in their share of low-income students, subgroup comparisons also matter. Colorado

ranks 9th in 4th-grade math for students who are not economically disadvantaged, but 28th for low-income students, which suggests a wider gap between low-income students and their peers than in most states. Similar patterns hold across other grades and subjects.

For low-income students, Colorado's advantage disappears. NAEP's proficiency standard differs from Colorado's CMAS standard, but it offers a useful comparison. When federal researchers mapped 2022 state standards onto NAEP, Colorado's 4th-grade math bar matched NAEP Proficient, and its reading and 8th-grade math bars matched NAEP Basic. Between 32% and 42% of Colorado students score at or above NAEP Proficient, depending on the grade and subject, three to six points above the national rate but well short of where the state should be. Among low-income students, proficiency falls to between 15% and 24%, about the same as for low-income students nationally.

Colorado's edge over the nation disappears for low-income students

Share of students scoring at or above NAEP Proficient, 2024



Low-income = eligible for the National School Lunch Program. Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP 2024.

4. Same students, different results

Statewide averages hide wide variation among districts and schools. Looking at that variation helps identify what is working, where students lack access to quality schools, and how context shapes results. It also underscores that state policy must empower schools that serve a wide range of students and communities, not a single model. The scatterplots in Appendix C show every district and school with reportable results.

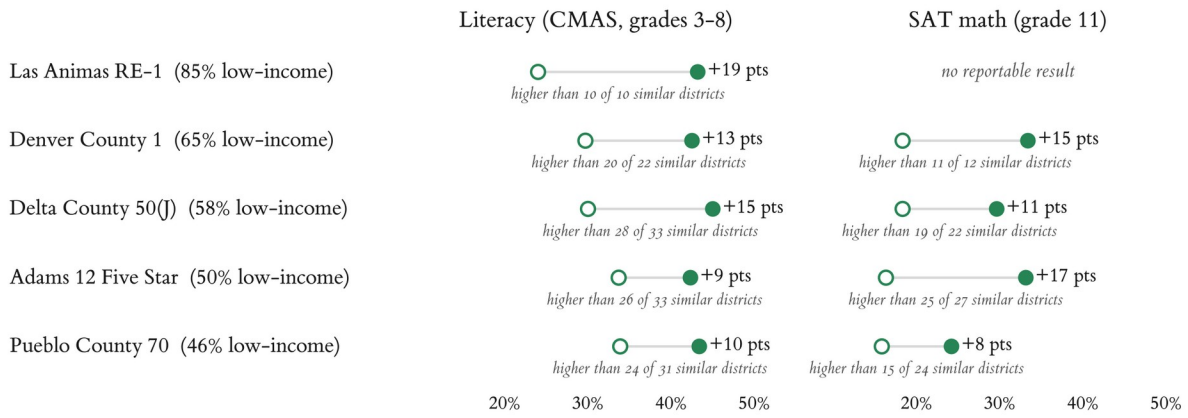
Variation across districts

Poverty predicts results, but not completely. District proficiency rates are correlated with the share of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), yet districts with similar demographics produce very different outcomes. Poverty explains about a third of the variation in district literacy results and in district SAT math results. At the school level it explains more, about three-fifths of the variation in literacy, but outcomes still spread widely within every poverty band. In schools where fewer than 20% of students are low-income, the typical school has about 67% of students meeting literacy expectations; in schools where more than 80% are low-income, the typical school has about 21% meeting expectations. But poverty and ZIP code are not destiny. Colorado's own data include many schools and districts, from Las Animas and Delta County to DSST, Pueblo's Minnequa Elementary and Aurora's Frontier K-8, where low-income students achieve far more than their demographics would predict (see Appendix C).

Bright spots. Among districts serving large shares of low-income students, several stand out and merit closer study. Each is compared with the median for districts with similar shares of low-income students:

Five districts far outperform districts serving similar students

Share meeting expectations, 2026: each district (filled dot) vs. the median for similar districts (open dot)



Similar districts are those within 5 percentage points of each district's low-income share. Las Animas has no reportable SAT result.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT results and 2025-26 pupil membership.

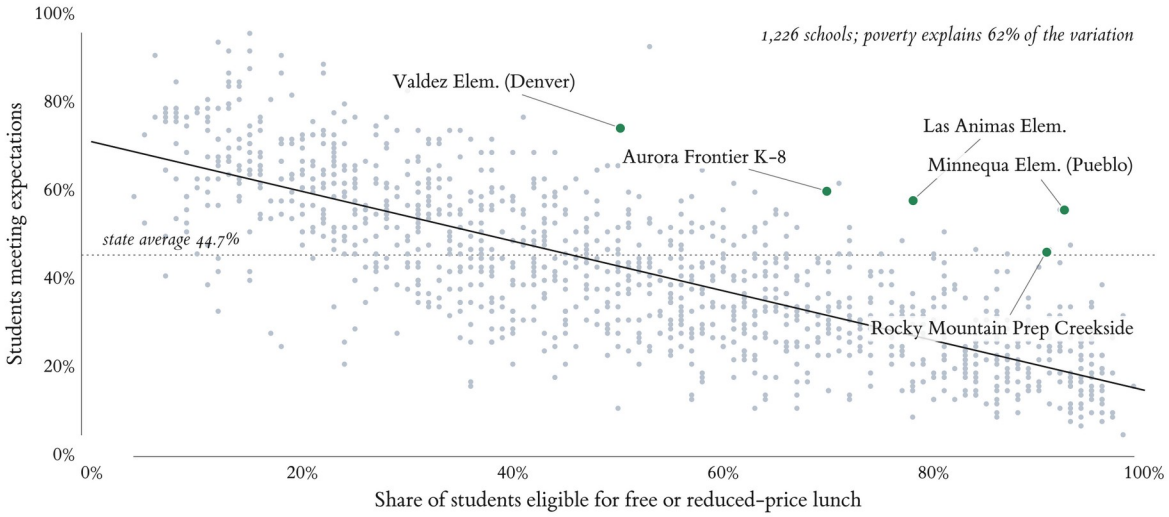
Variation within districts

Differences are often just as large among schools in the same district, which means students can have very different experiences within the same local system. School proficiency rates are also correlated

with demographics, but there are high- and low-performing schools across the demographic spectrum. The chart below shows this for schools serving grades 3-8. Each gray dot is one school; green dots mark a sample of schools that serve significant numbers of low-income students and exceeded expectations. A matching chart for high schools, along with district-level charts, is in the appendix.

Some high-poverty schools far outperform their peers in literacy

Share of students in grades 3-8 meeting CMAS English language arts expectations, by school, 2026



Each dot is a non-AEC school with reportable results. Low-income share is K-12 FRL eligibility, October 2025.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT results and 2025-26 pupil membership.

5. Mixed signals: How Colorado defines success

Colorado's standards, school ratings, high school graduation requirements and readiness measures should send a consistent message about whether students are prepared for life after high school. Today they often do not.

What a high school diploma means

A high school diploma is meant to signal readiness for what comes next, whether college or a career. In 2015 the State Board of Education adopted new Graduation Guidelines for high school that let students demonstrate competency through a menu of options, starting with students who entered 9th grade in 2017. The new requirements took full effect with the class of 2022. Crossing the high school graduation bar should mean a student is ready for college-level work or a good job without remediation or basic skills training. Colorado's minimum requirements for high school graduation fall short of that bar and give districts discretion over something that should demonstrate universal readiness.

On the SAT, students can demonstrate competency for high school graduation with a 470 in reading and writing and, through 2026-27, a 480 in math. That falls below the College Board's college readiness benchmarks of 480 and 530 (and below the benchmarks used throughout this report for proficiency). Those College Board cutoffs signal a 75% chance of earning at least a C in a first-semester college course, but the state has not shown how its lower high school graduation cut scores relate to success in college.

Districts can also offer locally scored options to demonstrate competency, such as district capstones and industry certificates. High school graduation requirement menu options, each with particular benchmarks, include the SAT, ACT, AP, IB, concurrent enrollment, industry certificates and district capstones. In effect, each district can set its own bar for high school graduation, which makes the state's Graduation Guidelines for high school close to meaningless as a common standard. Because the state does not report which options graduates use, or break that data out by student group, it is impossible to compare what a high school diploma means across schools, districts or groups of students. Publishing that data may show how rigorous each pathway is.

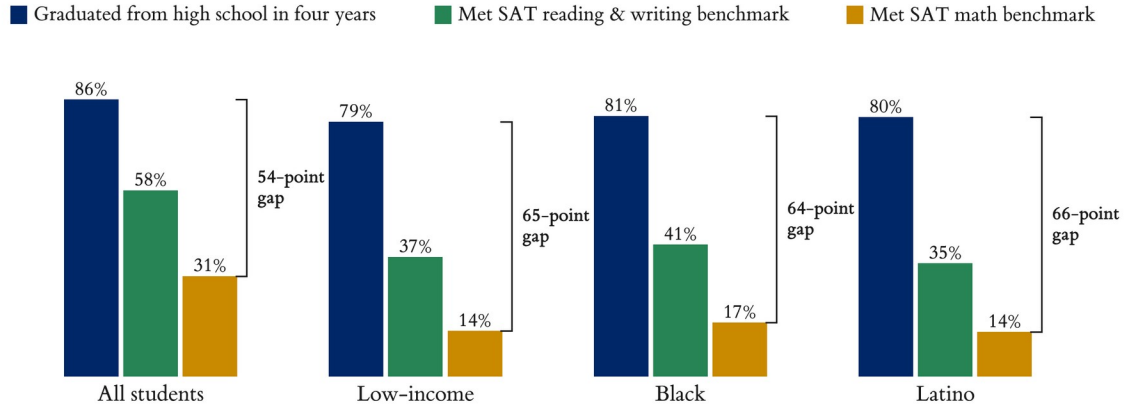
High school graduation rates are the highest in more than a decade. The four-year high school graduation rate reached 85.6% in 2025, almost five percentage points above the pre-pandemic level. Historically underserved groups have also made gains, though Black and Latino students' on-time high school graduation rates (80.6% and 80.2%) remain about five points below the statewide rate, and gaps are larger for some groups, such as migrant students (72.7%). Given the challenges with the guidelines, it is difficult to tell whether the rise reflects looser requirements or better support for students.

Work and college readiness have not kept pace. While 85.6% of students graduate on time, only about 60% of 11th graders meet the SAT literacy benchmark and about one-third meet the math benchmark. For low-income students the numbers are starker: 39.8% met the literacy benchmark and 15.5% met the math benchmark, compared with 71.6% and 41.5% of their peers. College-going has fallen even as high school graduation rates rose: 49.9% of the class of 2021 enrolled in college, down more than five points from the class of 2019, and only 35.2% of low-income graduates

enrolled, compared with 54.8% of their peers. The rate rose only slightly for the class of 2022, to 51.0%, still well below the 56% to 58% typical of 2010 to 2019. Together these trends suggest the bar for a high school diploma is not aligned with college-readiness benchmarks. Work readiness is even harder to judge. The main statewide measure has been industry-recognized credentials: 13,520 students earned at least one in-demand credential in 2024-25 through the Career Development Incentive Program, which the legislature repealed in 2025. Created in 2016, the program paid districts for each student who earned an approved industry credential or completed a qualifying internship, pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship or advanced computer science course; in 2024-25, 98 districts reported 32,188 qualifying completions. Colorado does not publicly report whether graduates who go straight into the workforce are prepared or how they fare, so the state sees work readiness mostly through college-readiness indicators.

Most students graduate. Far fewer meet SAT readiness benchmarks.

Class of 2025: four-year high school graduation rate vs. share meeting SAT benchmarks in 11th grade



Since the class of 2022, the high school graduation rate rose 3.3 points while the share meeting the SAT math benchmark fell 5.3 points.

SAT results are from each class's spring 11th-grade test (class of 2025 = spring 2024), the first digital SAT. Brackets show the gap between high school graduation and SAT math. High school graduation rates use CDE's economically disadvantaged designation; SAT uses FRL. Source: CDE.

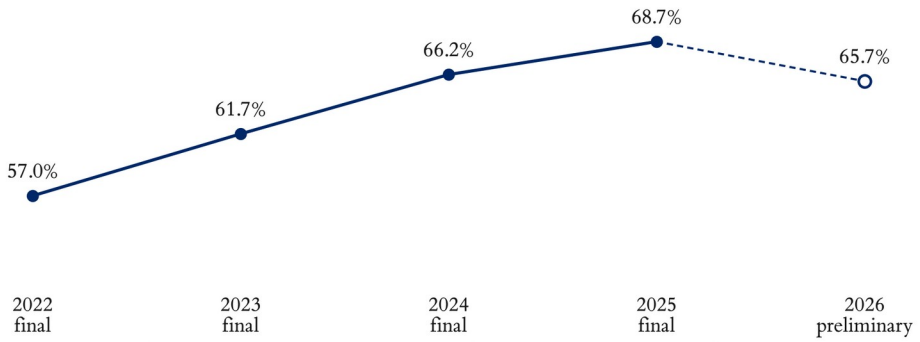
What a "green" school means

The School Performance Framework (SPF) is Colorado's main tool for rating school quality, and it is based largely on state test results. It drives school and district accountability, and many families use it to choose schools. Its strength is that it distills many measures into a single rating that can be compared across the state, but it also has significant limitations. Ratings run from Performance (green) through Improvement (yellow) and Priority Improvement (orange) to Turnaround (red), and Appendix D explains what they include.

Most schools earn the top rating. In the preliminary 2026 ratings, 65% of the state's rated public (including charter) schools (1,129 of 1,730) earned the highest rating, "Performance" (green), up from 54% in the 2022 preliminary ratings, even as proficiency has stayed relatively flat. HB25-1278 makes relatively modest changes to the framework beginning in the 2027-28 school year, and the state is still working through data challenges in defining its new postsecondary measure, so the design choices described below largely remain.

About two-thirds of schools now earn the top rating

Share of schools rated "Performance" (green) on the School Performance Framework

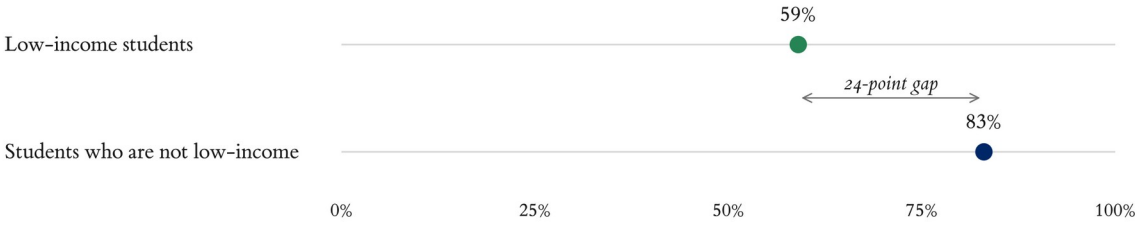


2022–2025 are final ratings; 2026 is preliminary (open dot). CDE's preliminary 2026 release reports 65% (1,129 of 1,730 schools).
Source: Colorado Department of Education, School Performance Framework ratings.

Low-income students are less likely to attend a green school. Even with ratings this generous, the gaps seen elsewhere in this report show up. Only 59% of low-income students attend a school rated green, compared with 83% of non-low-income students, a gap of 24 percentage points. The share of low-income students in a school is correlated with its rating, though there are outliers (see appendix).

Low-income students are less likely to attend a top-rated school

Share of students attending a school rated "Performance" (green), 2026 preliminary ratings



Low-income = eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 preliminary SPF ratings and enrollment.

Many green schools have most students below grade level. The share of schools receiving positive ratings is far higher than the share of students meeting expectations, creating a disconnect between ratings and actual student performance. In the 2026 preliminary ratings, 146 schools rated "Performance" have fewer than one in three students reading and writing at grade level, and similar patterns appear on other measures. Appendix C plots every school's rating against its literacy results.

Why the signals diverge

The gap between school ratings and proficiency stems from where the state sets the bar, both for the overall rating (a school needs only 53% of possible points to earn the top rating) and within each measure, and from several design choices in the SPF, explained in more detail in Appendix D:

- *Scale scores.* Achievement is measured by a school's mean scale score rather than the share of students who reach proficiency, so a school whose students cluster just below the standard can still earn substantial credit.

- *Growth weighting*. In elementary and middle schools, growth counts for 60% of the rating and achievement for 40%. In high schools, growth counts for 40%, achievement 30% and postsecondary readiness 30%. Schools can earn a high rating through strong growth even when most students remain below grade level.
- *Norm-referenced benchmarks*. Achievement ratings are set at percentiles of a baseline year's statewide results rather than at the proficiency standard: a school "meets" expectations at the 50th percentile and "exceeds" them at the 85th. Because statewide performance is below proficiency, a school can meet expectations with most of its students below grade level.

None of this diminishes the value of a single school quality rating. It does mean that Colorado's current tool, on its own, can overstate progress, and policymakers should not rely on it as their primary measure of how students are doing.

6. What shapes results: resources and talent

Outcomes also reflect the resources schools have, the people who teach in them and the time students spend in class. These conditions are an important part of the Colorado story and help explain, though not fully, the results in Sections 3 through 5.

Colorado spends less than the national average. In fiscal year 2024, Colorado's current spending was $15,908 per pupil, about $1,700 (9.7%) below the national average of $17,619, despite a cost of living higher than in many states. Housing is a major challenge for recruiting and keeping teachers and staff: it is expensive along the Front Range and in mountain resort towns, and in many remote rural communities there is simply not enough of it. Keystone's 2025 survey of more than 3,200 Colorado educators, Can't Live Where We Teach, found that most cannot afford to live in the communities where they work.

Funding also varies widely within the state. Small and remote districts often receive more per student because of higher fixed costs, while differences in student needs, regional costs, enrollment trends, and local mill levy overrides further shape the resources available in each community. Per-pupil spending figures are derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's annual school finance survey.

Recruiting and keeping strong teachers is a persistent challenge. It can be challenging to attract and retain experienced, licensed educators in every community. The average teacher salary reached $74,909 in 2025-26, but pay varies widely, and Colorado's average starting salary of $45,489 ranked 35th nationally in 2024-25. Adjusted for housing costs, Colorado's average teacher pay ranks near the bottom of the states. Statewide turnover was 15.7% entering 2025-26, meaning roughly one in six teaching positions changed hands. Although vacancies declined, 27.8% of openings were filled through long-term substitutes, retirees, alternative-licensure candidates and emergency authorizations, and rural districts relied on these mechanisms for more than half of their openings. Statewide data on teacher effectiveness is not systematically available, but research consistently finds that teachers are the most important in-school factor in student learning. Starting-salary figures and rankings are from the National Education Association and the Colorado Department of Education.

Many students have less time in school. Colorado's minimum school year of 160 days is among the shortest in the country, and most districts now have at least one school on a four-day week. Keystone's 2024 report Doing Less with Less found that teacher recruitment and retention, not student learning, drove most districts' decisions to make that switch. Yet the shift has not improved teacher retention, and on average, students in four-day districts made less academic growth than students in five-day districts.

7. Lessons and recommendations

What improving states have in common

Colorado's public education system has made progress but is far from one that works for every student. Other states show that substantial improvement is possible, including for students who have historically been underserved. Mississippi and Louisiana have made notable gains in elementary reading and math from low starting points. Mississippi's low-income fourth-graders now rank at or near the top nationally in reading, while Colorado's have lost ground since 2013. Louisiana was the only state whose 4th-grade reading scores were higher in 2024 than in 2019, and both Mississippi and Louisiana have among the highest child poverty rates in the country. Tennessee has had periods of significant improvement across multiple measures, and Massachusetts shows how a state can build and sustain strong performance over decades. Progress has not been uniform across grades, subjects or student groups, but these states show that statewide trajectories can change.

Coherence and persistence matter more than any single policy. These states pursued several mutually reinforcing changes over many years. Clear academic expectations were connected to instructional materials, professional learning, intervention, assessment and accountability. Teacher support was tied to what teachers were expected to do in their classrooms rather than offered as a separate initiative. Assessments were used not only to report results but to identify students and schools needing help. The common lesson is to build a coherent instructional system and sustain it long enough to change classroom practice.

Colorado should adapt, not import. Local control, geographic diversity, limited capacity in small and rural districts, and the existing policy environment all shape what will work here. The most relevant strategies are those that respond to weaknesses evident in Colorado's own data: sustained literacy support beyond the early grades; stronger instructional materials and teacher support to address uneven performance; and more intensive intervention for students whose growth is too slow to reach grade level. Large districts may be able to build their own capacity, while smaller and rural districts may need regional partnerships, shared specialists or state-supported coaching.

Local control and statewide coherence do not have to be at odds. The state can define expected outcomes, provide evidence-based tools and supports, and report results consistently without requiring every community to adopt the same model. Colorado's challenge is to choose a limited set of priorities, align policy and resources around them, and stay with them long enough to know whether they are working.

Recommendations for policymakers

Keystone recommends four priorities for the next administration, the legislature, the State Board of Education and district leaders.

1. Set clear, higher expectations, and align the high school diploma with readiness

Colorado should define clearly and consistently what students should know and be able to do before leaving K-12, and make sure grade-level standards, annual assessments, postsecondary readiness measures and high school graduation requirements all point to the same goal. Rising high school graduation rates alongside much lower readiness raise questions about what a high school diploma

signals. Stronger alignment among standards, high school graduation competency options, readiness measures, and postsecondary transition data, built in partnership with higher education and employers, would give students, families and policymakers a clearer picture of whether graduates are prepared for what comes next.

2. Make school ratings meaningful

School ratings should clearly communicate two things: whether students are improving and whether they are reaching the outcomes the state expects. Growth is essential for understanding a school's contribution, especially when students start behind, but it should not obscure low proficiency or readiness. Ratings should make both visible, so families, educators, and policymakers understand what a rating means, recognize real improvement and see where stronger outcomes are still needed. The state should also raise the bar for its top "Performance" rating and consider adding a higher category for schools that far exceed expectations, like the "Accredited with Distinction" rating already used in the District Performance Framework. When about two-thirds of schools are rated green but fewer than half of students meet grade-level expectations, the rating no longer distinguishes schools that get most students to the state's expectations from those that do not.

3. Focus on persistent areas of weak performance

Colorado should concentrate attention and resources where performance has stayed weak: high school math, middle school literacy, science, and outcomes for historically underserved students. That means identifying the subjects, grades, and student groups making the least progress, setting clear improvement goals, and directing proven interventions to them. The state should also track whether students who start behind are growing fast enough to reach grade level, rather than settling for typical growth that leaves gaps unchanged.

4. Learn systematically from what works, in Colorado and elsewhere

Colorado should build a more deliberate way to identify and learn from schools and districts that achieve strong or improving results compared with similar peers, including those serving different populations, regions and communities, with particular attention to places that get strong results for underserved students. The goal is to understand the practices, conditions, and decisions behind their success and help others adapt them through peer networks, case studies, and targeted support. Colorado should study other states showing steady improvement, focusing on how they combined, sequenced, and sustained their strategies, and adapt what fits Colorado's local-control structure and varied district capacity. The bright spots in Section 4 are natural starting points for understanding what works in Colorado, and schools and districts across the country offer many more examples to learn from.

Looking ahead

Colorado's data tell a story of both modest progress and unfinished work. Students have made gains in several areas, high school graduation rates are rising, and schools and districts across the state show that stronger outcomes are possible under a wide range of conditions. Yet overall performance remains too low. Persistent gaps continue to limit opportunity. And the state's measures of achievement, school quality, high school graduation, and readiness do not always point in the same direction.

The next phase of improvement should start with a clear, shared definition of what Colorado expects students to know and be able to do, with accountability, instructional support, intervention, and high school graduation requirements all reinforcing it.

The variation in Colorado's results shows that current outcomes are not inevitable. Many more students can leave school prepared for what comes next.

Acknowledgments

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About the Keystone Policy Center

Keystone Policy Center is an independent, nonprofit organization founded in 1975 to drive actionable, shared solutions to contentious policy challenges.

keystone.org

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Appendix A: CMAS Data

The body of this report is focused on CMAS literacy results and associated trends as well as the performance of low-income students. This was selected as a representative data set, but the tables below provide more comprehensive CMAS data over time for reference.

2025 and 2026 CMAS Results by Grade

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations

Grade	*ELA 2025*	*ELA 2026*	*Math 2025*	*Math 2026*
Grade 3	42.0%	40.8%	41.2%	41.5%
Grade 4	42.0%	47.0%	36.5%	39.0%
Grade 5	48.0%	49.9%	39.1%	39.3%
Grade 6	44.2%	41.6%	31.4%	32.7%
Grade 7	48.8%	46.6%	31.8%	32.9%
Grade 8	43.9%	42.2%	34.7%	37.8%

2026 CMAS Results by Race and Ethnicity

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grades 3-8 aggregated

Race/ethnicity	*ELA*	*Math*
American Indian or Alaska Native	23.2%	17.4%
Asian	58.7%	57.1%
Black	29.8%	21.6%
Hispanic/Latino	26.7%	19.4%
White	57.5%	49.9%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	25.9%	17.1%
Two or More Races	53.2%	44.9%
Not Reported	35.3%	28.7%

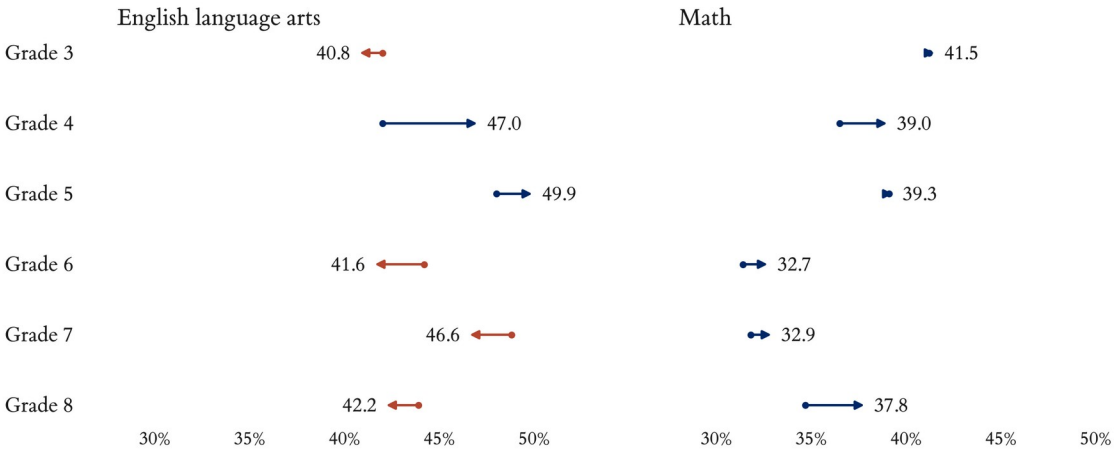
CMAS Mathematics Results Over Time

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grades 3-8 aggregated

Student group	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*	*2025*	*2026*
All students	34.7%	N/A	27.3%	31.5%	32.9%	34.2%	35.9%	37.3%

Math rose in every grade in 2026; middle school literacy fell

Share of students meeting CMAS expectations, change from 2025 to 2026



Arrows run from 2025 to 2026; rust marks a decline. Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2025 and 2026 CMAS state results.

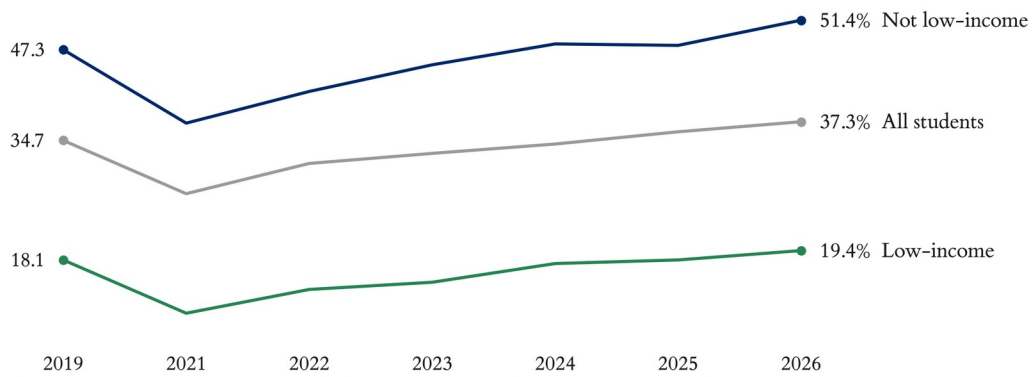
CMAS Mathematics Results by Income

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grades 3-8 aggregated

Student group	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*	*2025*	*2026*
Low-income (FRL)	18.1%	N/A	10.7%	14.0%	15.0%	17.6%	18.1%	19.4%
Not low-income	47.3%	N/A	37.1%	41.5%	45.2%	48.1%	47.9%	51.4%

Math is above its pre-pandemic level, but the income gap is slightly wider

Share of students in grades 3-8 meeting CMAS math expectations



No statewide CMAS in 2020. Low-income = eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; CDE notes 2026 FRL data are less precise than in past years.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, CMAS results.

Appendix B: PSAT and SAT Data

The body of this report is focused on 11th grade SAT results, with a focus on math performance and the performance of low-income students. This was selected as a representative data set, but the tables below provide more comprehensive PSAT and SAT data over time for reference.

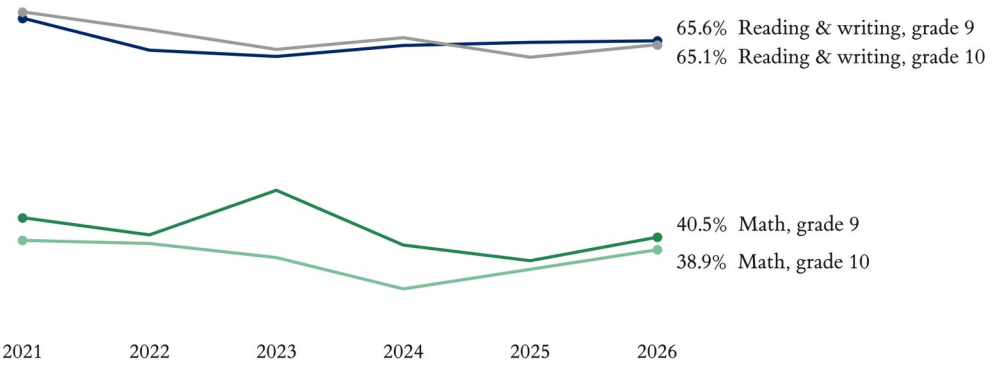
PSAT Proficiency Over Time

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grades 9 and 10 shown separately

Assessment and grade	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*	*2025*	*2026*
Reading and writing, grade 9	68.5%	64.4%	63.6%	65.0%	65.4%	65.6%
Reading and writing, grade 10	69.3%	67.0%	64.5%	66.0%	63.5%	65.1%
Math, grade 9	43.0%	40.8%	46.5%	39.5%	37.5%	40.5%
Math, grade 10	40.1%	39.7%	37.9%	33.9%	36.4%	38.9%

PSAT results are below 2021 levels in both subjects

Share of 9th and 10th graders meeting or exceeding PSAT expectations



The PSAT moved to a digital format in spring 2024; CDE cautions against direct comparisons across that change.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, PSAT results.

2026 SAT Results by Race and Ethnicity

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grade 11

Race/ethnicity	*Reading and writing*	*Math*
American Indian or Alaska Native	39.0%	15.8%
Asian	71.1%	56.6%
Black	46.1%	19.5%
Hispanic/Latino	38.5%	15.4%
White	74.4%	42.3%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	39.2%	18.2%
Two or More Races	68.6%	37.2%
Not Reported	24.3%	N/A

SAT Reading and Writing Results Over Time

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grade 11

Student group	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*	*2025*	*2026*
All students	60.0%	57.5%	58.9%	57.6%	61.5%	59.6%

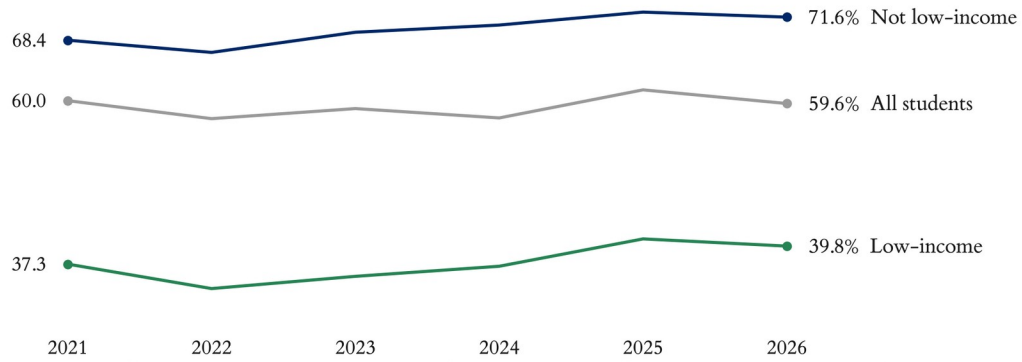
SAT Reading and Writing Results by Income

Statewide percent meeting or exceeding expectations; grade 11

Student group	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*	*2025*	*2026*
Low-income (FRL)	37.3%	33.9%	35.6%	37.0%	40.8%	39.8%
Not low-income	68.4%	66.7%	69.5%	70.5%	72.3%	71.6%

SAT literacy is flat overall, with a gap of more than 30 points by income

Share of 11th graders meeting the SAT evidence-based reading and writing benchmark



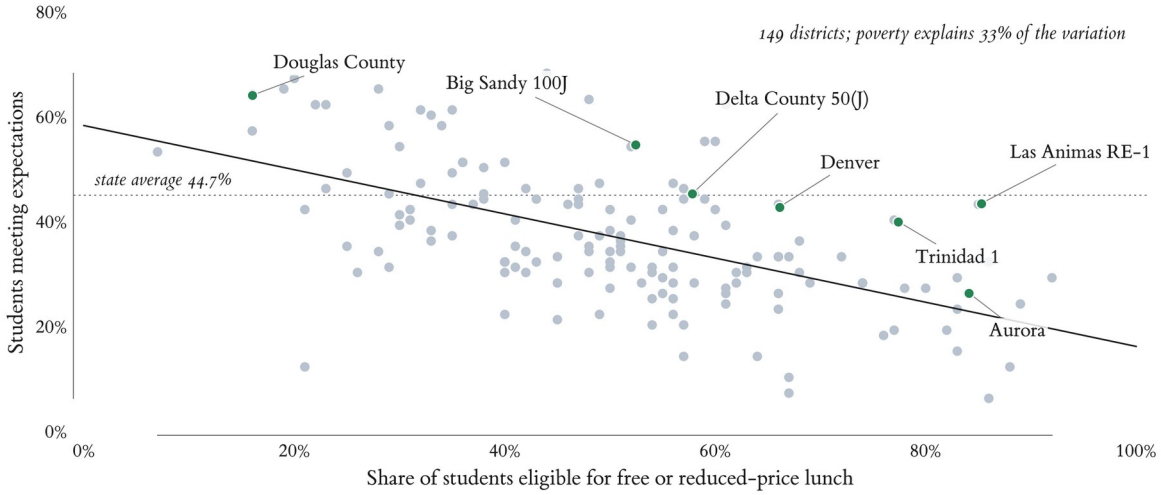
The SAT moved to a digital format in spring 2024; CDE cautions against direct comparisons across that change. Low-income = FRL eligible.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 11th-grade SAT results.

Appendix C: School and District Level Performance

The charts below show the distribution of school and district performance across a range of measures, including the relationship between student demographics and performance as well as the relationship between proficiency and SPF performance. The data visuals below show the detailed distributions that informed the analysis.

Districts with similar poverty levels get very different literacy results

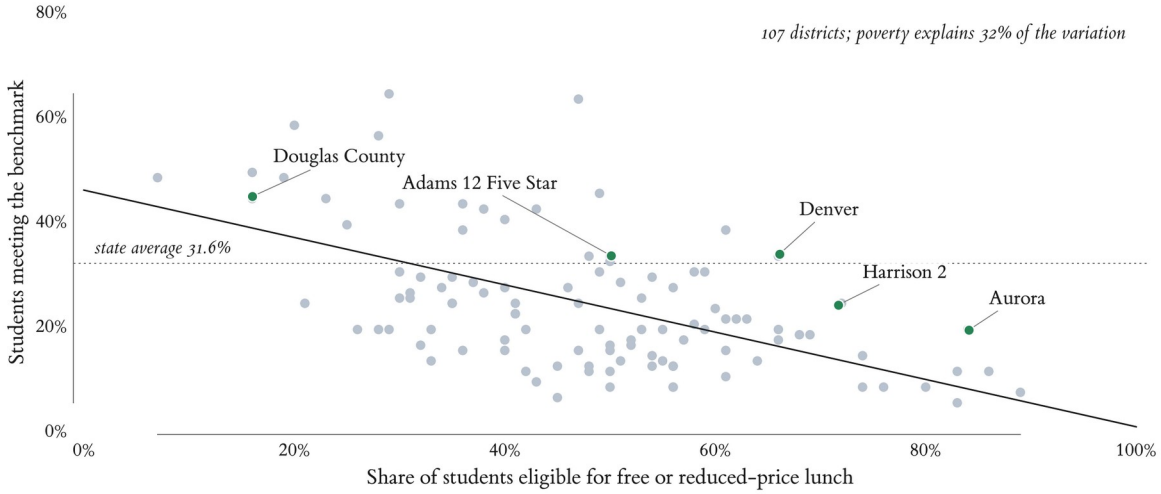
Share of students in grades 3-8 meeting CMAS English language arts expectations, by district, 2026



Each dot is a district with reportable results. Low-income share is K-12 FRL eligibility, October 2025.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT results and 2025-26 pupil membership.

The same pattern holds for 11th-grade math

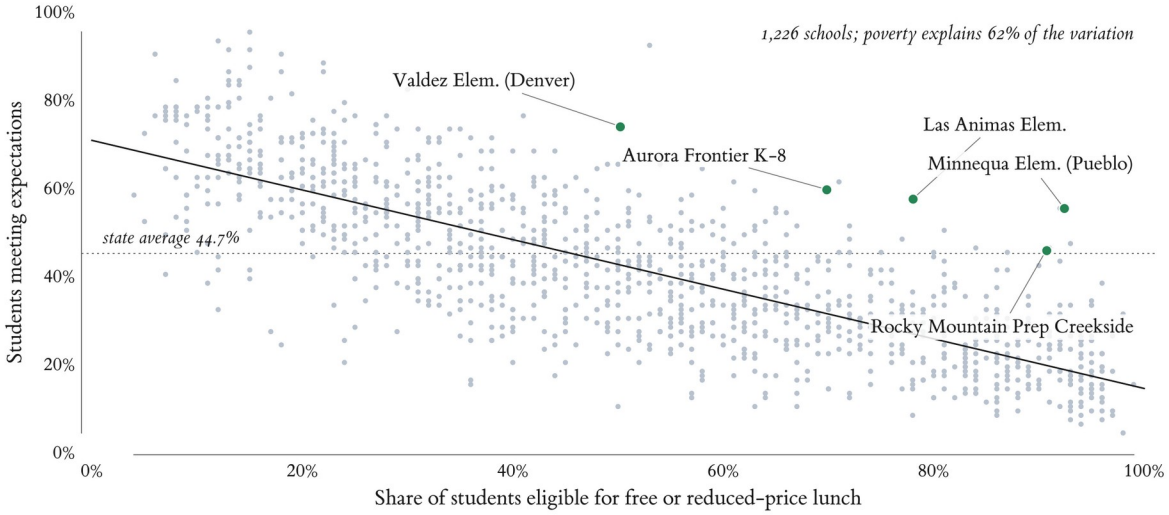
Share of 11th graders meeting the SAT math benchmark, by district, 2026



Each dot is a district with reportable results. Low-income share is K-12 FRL eligibility, October 2025.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT results and 2025-26 pupil membership.

Some high-poverty schools far outperform their peers in literacy

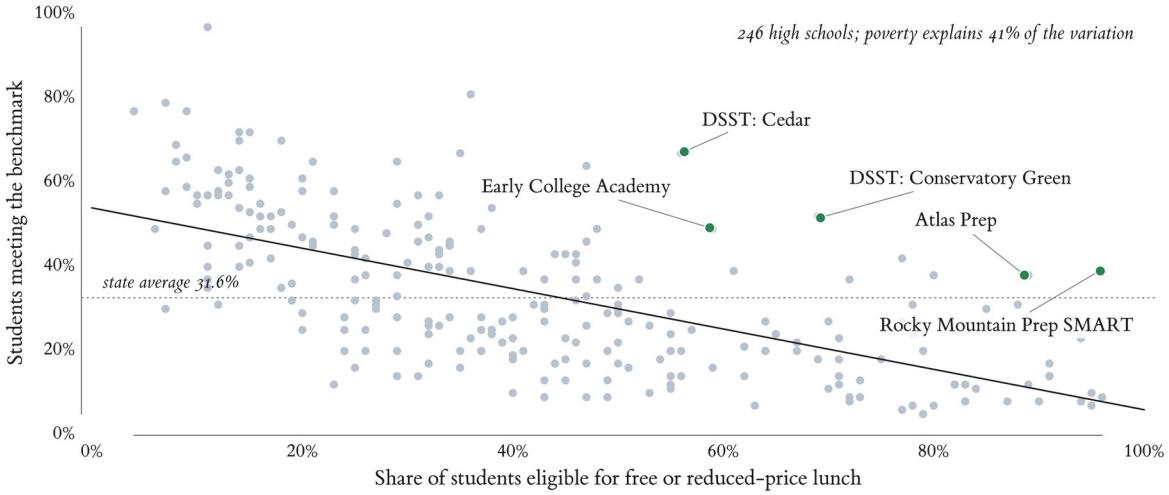
Share of students in grades 3-8 meeting CMAS English language arts expectations, by school, 2026



Each dot is a non-AEC school with reportable results. Low-income share is K-12 FRL eligibility, October 2025.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT results and 2025-26 pupil membership.

A handful of high-poverty high schools beat the odds in math

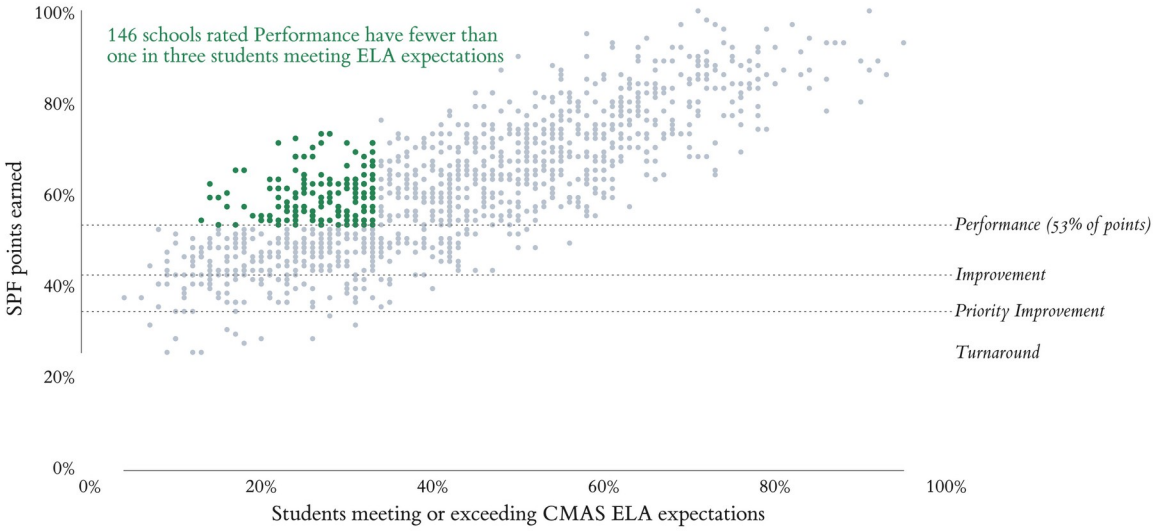
Share of 11th graders meeting the SAT math benchmark, by high school, 2026



Each dot is a non-AEC school with reportable results. Low-income share is K-12 FRL eligibility, October 2025.
Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 CMAS and SAT results and 2025-26 pupil membership.

Many schools earn the top rating with most students below grade level

SPF points earned compared with the share of students meeting CMAS English language arts expectations, by school, 2026



Each dot is a non-AEC school with a 2026 preliminary SPF score and reportable CMAS ELA results. SPF ratings include achievement measures, so part of the relationship is built in. Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2026 preliminary School Performance Framework and CMAS results.

Appendix D: How the School Performance Framework works

The School Performance Framework combines several indicators into a single percentage of possible points, and a school's rating depends on where that percentage falls. A school needs 53% of possible points to earn the top rating, Performance. Three design choices, summarized in Section 5, explain why many schools earn that rating even when most of their students are below grade level. This appendix focuses on those design choices rather than the full framework; CDE's District and School Performance Frameworks page (cde.state.co.us/accountability/performanceframeworks) explains how ratings are calculated.

Scale scores. CMAS and SAT results are reported both as performance levels, such as "met expectations," and as scale scores. The SPF rates achievement on a school's average (mean) scale score, not on the share of students who reach the standard. A school where many students score just below the cut for meeting expectations can have an average close to the state's and earn substantial achievement credit, even though few of its students count as proficient. Rating on average scores rewards improvement across the whole range of students, which is a strength, but a strong achievement rating does not tell families how many students are actually at grade level.

Growth weighting. Growth is measured with median growth percentiles, which compare each student's progress with that of students statewide who had similar prior scores. In elementary and middle schools, growth counts for 60% of the rating and achievement for 40%. In high schools, growth counts for 40%, achievement for 30% and postsecondary and workforce readiness for 30%. Weighting growth heavily gives credit to schools that move students quickly, which matters for schools serving students who start behind. But a median growth percentile of 50 means typical growth, so a school can earn solid growth points while its students make about a year's progress and stay below grade level. On-track growth, which asks whether students are growing fast enough to reach the standard, would give a clearer signal.

Norm-referenced benchmarks. Achievement points are awarded by comparing each school with statewide results from a baseline year rather than with the proficiency standard. A school "meets" expectations at the 50th percentile of that distribution and "exceeds" them at the 85th. Because fewer than half of Colorado students meet grade-level expectations, a school performing at the state average earns "meets" credit even when most of its students are below grade level.

Changes ahead. HB25-1278 makes relatively modest changes to the frameworks beginning in the 2027-28 school year, including a new postsecondary progress measure within a restructured postsecondary and workforce readiness indicator. The state is still working through data challenges in defining that measure, and the design choices described above largely remain.