

***A History of***

**COLORADO  
SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ORGANIZATION**

**Revised November 2021**

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The information in this report was written by Regional Manager Morris Danielson, Ed.D., in October 2002 as part of a report on Colorado school district organization. The historical information was updated by Jhon Penn, Executive Director of the Field Services Division, in November 2021 to reflect historical changes since the report's original creation.

On November 7, 1861, before Colorado became a state, the first territorial legislation creating public schools passed. This legislation:

- established a territorial superintendent of schools whose major task was to recommend a uniform series of textbooks to local districts,
- provided for the election of county superintendents of schools, and
- provided for the establishment of new tax supported school districts whereby electors could petition the county superintendents to schedule an election for that purpose.

When Colorado became a state on July 4, 1876, its first general laws provided for an elected state superintendent of schools and elected county superintendents. At that time, the parents of ten school age children (ages 6-21) could petition county superintendents for elections to establish new school districts. In 1945, the law was amended to require 15 children prior to setting such elections.

Colorado was founded by a group of Jeffersonians who valued local control and decentralized decision-making. In the state's constitution, the general assembly and state superintendent were forbidden to select a state list of textbooks. Today, this power remains delegated to local boards of education.

The General Law of 1877 provided for the organization of two types of high schools:

- **Union high school districts** were created when elementary districts from only a part of a county wanted to cooperate in the establishment of a high school.

Union High School Districts were entities made up of several independent elementary school districts for the sole purpose of providing education above the eighth grade on a cooperative basis while maintaining the autonomy of the common school district. They were governed in much the same manner as today's Boards of Cooperative Services (BOCES). The governing board would consist of one representative from each of the participating elementary school districts.

- **County high school systems** required all elementary school districts in the county to participate.

A separate committee composed of one board member from each elementary school governed a County High School System.

By 1886, there were 685 school districts, most of which contained only a single school. Over 60,000 children of school age were reported to be living in Colorado. However, only 40,000 were enrolled in the public schools. Due to the rapid expansion of population, the Homestead Act, and mining developments, more school districts were created reaching a total of 2,105 in 1935.

Prior to 1949, school district organizational change was based on the consolidation act described in 123-9-2, CRS. It was a simple process. Two or more boards would meet, determine to

consolidate, and set an election. No educational plans or reasons for consolidation were required.

Sometimes consolidation occurred because a school had been empty for a few years or had so few students that continuance was not cost effective. Sometimes consolidation would occur so that a district could extend its borders to include railroad property to enhance assessed valuation for property tax. Occasionally, school districts consolidated to provide a better education for students.

In 1946 and 1947, the General Assembly conducted a study of school district administration in the state. This study reported two major problems for schools of the state. One was school district structure and the other was finance for the schools. The School District Reorganization Act of 1949 was an outcome of this study. This act differed from the previous consolidation act in that educational planning was required. In addition, the act required that a county planning committee be formed to study organization throughout the county and to develop a detailed educational plan to be submitted to the voters. The 1949 Act was followed by revised versions in 1953, 1957, 1963, and 1965.

A legislative study completed prior to the passage of the 1957 Act listed reorganization of Colorado's school districts as Colorado's number one educational problem. At that time, there were 239 non-operating school districts in the state and 203 one-room school districts. The legislative study's report recommended that no county have more than six school districts. It also urged consideration of the establishment of school districts, which would provide 12 grades of education within their own boundaries. Finally, the report recommended that non-operating districts be abolished.

Extensive school district reorganization occurred between 1949 and 1965. By 1956, the state's number of school districts was reduced to 967. By 1961, there were 275 school districts and finally by 1965 the number was reduced to 181, where it remained for 18 years. Today, there are 178 school districts.

**Table 1: School District Reorganization**

| <b>Year</b> | <b># of Colorado School Districts</b> | <b>Year</b> | <b># of Colorado School Districts</b> |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1886        | 685                                   | 1965        | 181                                   |
| 1935        | 2,105                                 | 1995        | 176                                   |
| 1956        | 967                                   | 2000        | 178                                   |
| 1961        | 275                                   |             |                                       |

During this period of 1956 to 1965, Colorado's most extensive school reorganization occurred in the mountains and on the western slope where several countywide school districts were formed. On the eastern plains, reorganization efforts were less successful leaving the plains dotted with many small districts. More than anywhere else in Colorado, El Paso County resisted school district reorganization and still contains 15 school districts.

In order to retain local control in the small districts and still address economy of scale issues, the Boards of Cooperative Services Act was enacted in 1965. Boards of Cooperative Services (BOCES) served low incidence special needs students by providing teachers who served several

school districts. BOCES also utilized cooperative purchasing and shared management services in a variety of areas to attain more efficient use of public funds. This act has served to reduce the need of school reorganization.

The General Assembly integrated the Consolidation Act into the School District Organization Act during the 1974 session. From that time on, the law has required that all school district consolidation include the development of educational plans.

In 1983, the Arriba and Flagler School Districts consolidated. Vona/Seibert School District consolidated in 1984. Arapahoe School District in Cheyenne County consolidated in 1986 with Cheyenne Wells School District. Egnar 18 in Dolores County consolidated in 1986 with Dolores County School District. Genoa in Lincoln County consolidated in 1986 with Hugo. These consolidations reduced the number of Colorado public school districts to 176.

During the time of Colorado's most extensive school reorganization activity, expanded educational opportunity and economy of scale were the key issues encouraging school reorganization efforts. While these issues remain important, emerging issues in the 1990's compelled the state to re-examine school organization. Public concern related to student achievement and increasing desire for expanded options from which students and parents can choose are among these new issues.

During the 1992 legislative session, Senator Al Meiklejohn and Representative Jeff Shoemaker sponsored a new school organization bill, which became the School District Organization Act of 1992. For the first time since 1949, the new law allowed "deconsolidation" or the splitting of existing districts. However, the new law did not make it easier to reorganize. Even a simple detachment and annexation now required a planning committee and vote of all eligible electors in all affected school districts. The General Assembly felt that because any reorganization affected the taxes of all citizens, they should all have the opportunity to vote on the issue.

In 1993, the board of education in the Gunnison Watershed School District Re-1J created a school organization planning committee to study the separation of the Gunnison School District into two districts. The planning committee developed a plan, which provided a separate school district for the Crested Butte and Marble communities, leaving the remainder of the county in an existing Gunnison School District.

Because the number of voters in the community of Gunnison significantly outnumbered the voters in Crested Butte and Marble, the planning committee decided an incentive had to be developed to encourage Gunnison voters to approve the plan. Therefore, during the 1994 sessions of the General Assembly, Senator Powers of Crested Butte successfully sponsored a bill changing the law to permit the planning committee to develop a financial incentive for the plan. Under the plan, the citizens of Crested Butte and Marble would vote to accept bonded indebtedness for 16 million dollars. Ten million of those dollars would be used for capital improvement in the Gunnison School District and six million would be available for the new Crested Butte and Marble Districts.

During the elections of November 1994, this plan failed by a 55% to a 45% margin, although it passed by a large margin in the proposed new Crested Butte and Marble School District. Even the bonded indebtedness vote was successful in the proposed new district. Generally, it was

believed that the primary reason for the failure of the reorganization effort was concern by the Gunnison voters over the potential loss to the Gunnison School District of Crested Butte's substantial property assessed valuation.

The next attempt at deconsolidation occurred in Weld County. The Weld County School District Re-3 (J) is made up of agricultural properties in five diverse communities: Lochbuie, Hudson, Keenesburg, Prospect Valley and Roggen. The school district is located near the new Denver International Airport and is targeted to have high growth in the future. In the Weld R-3 School District, a school organization planning committee was activated by petition. The petition stated its intent to create one or more additional districts within the boundaries of the current district. In November of 1998, by an overwhelming vote, the citizens in the district rejected a plan to create an additional school district named Lochbuie Re-15.

In November of 2000, West Yuma School District RJ-1 was dissolved by its voters at the end of the fiscal year and in July 2001, two new districts were formed – the Yuma School District 1 and Liberty School District J-4. Additionally, the voters in November of 2000 also dissolved the East Yuma School District to form the Wray School District RD-2 and the Idalia School District RJ-3.

The citizens of Rico initiated a petition process to detach itself from the Dolores County School District to be annexed to the Telluride R-1 School District. Ultimately, the effort to do so was defeated at the polls in January 2003. The Telluride School District supported the effort in the vote as did the residents of Rico (the vote in Rico was 76 to 22 in favor). However, the voters in the Dolores District outside of Rico voted the measure down by 200 votes.

In August 2017, the Agate School District's board of education submitted a resolution in cooperation and mutual agreement with the surrounding school boards of Byers, Deer Trail, Kiowa, Limon and Big Sandy to form a school organization planning committee to plan an amicable dissolution and annexation of the Agate School District in cooperation with one or more of their neighboring districts. The school organization planning committee was formed and met, but the committee was dissolved by the Agate School District shortly after their local school board election resulted in several new board members being elected to the board.

In the legislative session of 2019, the School District Organization Act of 1992 was further amended by S.B. 19-183, C.R.S. § 22-30-129. As a result of S.B. 19-183, a school district pursuing dissolution and annexation in one of three circumstances may use a newer, alternative process outlined in C.R.S. § 22-30-129. This alternative process is available for dissolution and annexation only if one of the following three circumstances is present: (1) acting under the state accountability system, the State Board of Education declares that a school district is no longer accredited or directs the district to organize; (2) the school district does not provide a full education program with 12 grades; or (3) the school district enrolls fewer than 50 students. In all other circumstances, the school district(s) must still use the original process, outlined at C.R.S. §§ 22-30-101 to -127. For detailed information regarding the respective school district organization procedures, please see the Manual of Procedures for the School District Organization Act of 1992 As Amended:

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/manualofproceduresforschoolorganizationactof1992revised2021>

Denver has a unique situation in that by amendment to the Colorado Constitution, the city, county, and school district boundaries must be coterminous. Therefore, a change in municipal boundaries for Denver automatically changes the school district boundaries. Any changes to the boundaries of the Denver Public Schools would require an amendment to the State Constitution.

The following tables summarize the current distribution of school districts per county:

**Table 2: Counties with One School District**

|                |             |               |              |
|----------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1. Archuleta   | 2. Denver   | 3. Gunnison   | 4. Mineral   |
| 5. Clear Creek | 6. Dolores  | 7. Hinsdale   | 8. Moffat    |
| 9. Crowley     | 10. Douglas | 11. Jackson   | 12. Pitkin   |
| 13. Custer     | 14. Eagle   | 15. Jefferson | 16. San Juan |
| 17. Delta      | 18. Gilpin  | 19. Lake      | 20. Summit   |

**Table 3: Counties with Two School Districts**

|              |                |              |               |
|--------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1. Alamosa   | 2. Costilla    | 3. Ouray     | 4. San Miguel |
| 5. Bent      | 6. Grand       | 7. Park      | 8. Sedgwick   |
| 9. Boulder   | 10. Huerfano   | 11. Phillips | 12. Teller    |
| 13. Chaffee  | 14. Kiowa      | 15. Pueblo   | 16. Cheyenne  |
| 17. Montrose | 18. Rio Blanco |              |               |

**Table 4: Counties with Three School Districts**

|             |             |                |             |
|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| 1. Conejos  | 2. La Plata | 3. Mesa        | 4. Routt    |
| 5. Fremont  | 6. Larimer  | 7. Montezuma   | 8. Saguache |
| 9. Garfield | 10. Lincoln | 11. Rio Grande |             |

**Table 5: Counties with Four School Districts**

|          |           |            |         |
|----------|-----------|------------|---------|
| 1. Logan | 2. Morgan | 3. Prowers | 4. Yuma |
|----------|-----------|------------|---------|

**Table 6: Counties with Five School Districts**

|         |           |               |               |
|---------|-----------|---------------|---------------|
| 1. Baca | 2. Elbert | 3. Kit Carson | 4. Washington |
|---------|-----------|---------------|---------------|

**Table 7: Counties with Six School Districts**

|               |          |  |  |
|---------------|----------|--|--|
| 1. Las Animas | 2. Otero |  |  |
|---------------|----------|--|--|

**Table 8: Counties with Seven School Districts**

|          |             |  |  |
|----------|-------------|--|--|
| 1. Adams | 2. Arapahoe |  |  |
|----------|-------------|--|--|

**Table 9: Counties with Twelve School Districts**

|         |  |  |  |
|---------|--|--|--|
| 1. Weld |  |  |  |
|---------|--|--|--|

**Table 10: Counties with Fifteen School Districts**

|            |  |  |  |
|------------|--|--|--|
| 1. El Paso |  |  |  |
|------------|--|--|--|

A commonly asked question CDE receives concerns the use and meaning of the various school district codes currently existing in school district names. Below is a listing of letter codes appearing in Colorado school district names resulting from the various periods of school district organization efforts:

- **Re, RE, R** – Reorganized
- **RD** – Reorganized/Deconsolidated
- **C** – Consolidated
- **J, Jt, (J)** – Joint, crosses county lines
- **RJ, REJ, Jt-R** – Reorganized Joint

If there is no letter, this means the school district was never reorganized or consolidated with other districts. Some school district names originated as a combination of the consolidating districts and some school district numbers were created from a combination of the consolidating districts.

Below is additional information pertaining to school district code designations:

- **1935 Study by College of Business, CU** – There were over 2000 school districts. The need to reorganize was recognized. Districts were elementary, secondary, or union school districts.
- **1949** – 1st reorganization bill HB900 – Permissive consolidation, the “C” designation was applied.
- **1953 Major reorganization act** – The “R” label was applied.
- **1959** – created a county process establishing a committee that had to develop a reorganization plan and then each district voted whether to accept or not accept the plan – and if consolidated, an “Re” label was applied.

November 10, 2021