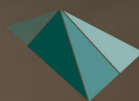




INSUFFICIENT

AT ANY ALTITUDE:
Rural teacher salaries in Colorado



KEYSTONE
POLICY CENTER



INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and retaining teachers in rural Colorado is posing ever-greater challenges to school districts across the mountains and plains, but for reasons as varied as the state's geography.

Out on the Eastern Plains, in tiny districts like Vilas, the sheer remoteness of the location makes hiring and holding onto teachers tough. In the mountains, even relatively larger districts like Montezuma-Cortez lack the resources to pay teachers an adequate salary, and the cost of living continues to escalate, far outpacing modest salary hikes. Districts close to the state line also face tough competition from neighboring states, most of which pay teachers more than does Colorado.

But rural districts face some common challenges as well. Except for those few affluent towns near ski resorts, property wealth is low, which means school districts rely disproportionately on state funding for their schools. And state funding can vary significantly from year to year, making planning and forecasting difficult.

Small rural districts also must spend a greater share of their budget on fixed costs like maintenance, utilities, and transportation. While urban and suburban districts typically spend 90 percent of their general fund budgets on salaries, rural districts often can dedicate only 60-65 percent of their budgets to pay.

Housing for teachers in rural areas presents another major obstacle to hiring and retention. In many communities, housing is scarce, forcing teachers to make long commutes. This means spending significant portions of low salaries on fuel and car maintenance. In other communities, housing is prohibitively expensive, making it hard to rent and impossible to buy near the schools where teachers work.

Finally, while the rural lifestyle suits some people, especially those who enjoy the outdoors, not everyone feels comfortable in a small community. When you tack on the dramatic remoteness of a place like Vilas, the pool of interested candidates shrinks to almost nothing.

This report consists of two sections. The first analyzes state- and district-level data showing the challenges faced by small, rural districts with offering competitive pay for educators. The second section examines two rural districts in greater detail, the tiny Vilas Re-5 district in southeastern Colorado, and larger Montezuma Cortez Re-1 district in Colorado's southwest corner. The report then concludes with some considerations for policy makers seeking to address this issue.



90%

% of budget urban and suburban districts typically spend on salaries

60-65%

% of budget rural districts dedicate of their budgets to pay.



Keystone research on rural teacher salaries

Teacher Workforce Research

While decades of research demonstrates that many variables affect the quality of a student’s education, a consistent theme is the importance of high-quality teachers in providing students a top-flight education with strong outcomes.¹ But we also know that the teacher talent market is becoming more challenging and that these challenges are more acute in more remote/rural settings.² These challenges are almost certain to deepen and accelerate in coming years as more teachers retire and there are fewer graduates coming out of teacher preparation programs.³

Given these challenges, it is important for policymakers to understand the levers they can use to increase teacher quality. One factor that contributes to teacher shortages, particularly of veteran teachers, is low salaries.⁴ Teacher salaries vary widely both nationally and within Colorado, which can have an impact on the talent pipeline.⁵

In recent years, many Mountain West states have seen large increases in teacher salaries. In New Mexico, lawmakers have set a state minimum teacher salary of \$40,000 (higher in some schools/districts)—significantly above the average salary in some Colorado districts.⁶ The following section of the report lays out the current state of teacher salaries in small Colorado districts to help policy makers understand the landscape and offers potential policy levers to help address these challenges.

Methodology Notes:

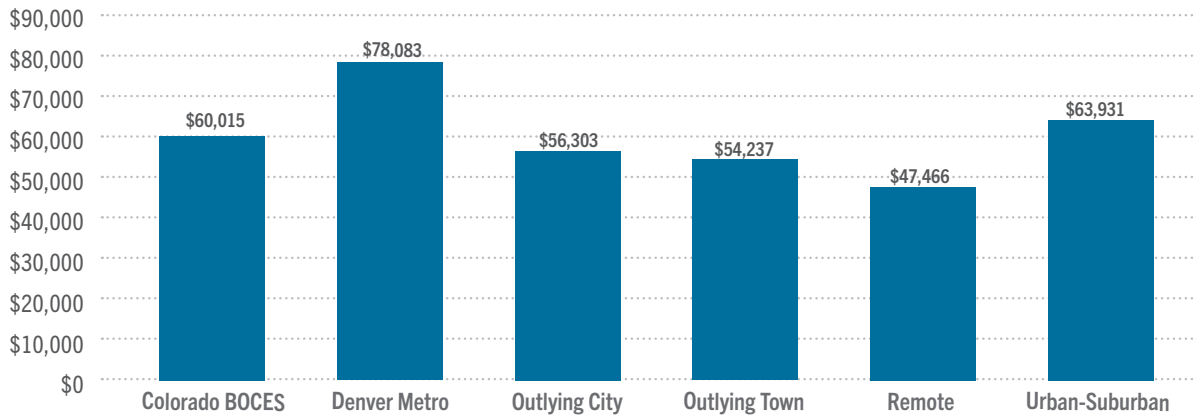
- **Publicly Available Data:** Throughout, this report relies on publicly available data sources, primarily provided by the Colorado Department of Education.
- **Average Salary:** The only salary data provided by CDE is “average salary.” While this is a helpful metric, it is dependent on two primary factors: the district salary schedule and the level of experience held by the district’s teachers. In general, district pay schedules are such that each year of experience adds to a teacher’s salary so average salaries decline as the level of experience amongst teachers decline. While this isn’t ideal, it is still representative of teacher pay in the state so valuable for research. In districts highlighted in this report we also have included their salary schedules to understand salaries separate from experience levels.
 - Additionally, because the focus of this report is on districts, we only looked at non-charter teacher salaries. Charter schools have the autonomy to set their own salary schedules so do not always follow district guidelines.
- **Included Districts:** The Colorado Department of Education classifies all districts by “District Setting.” For the purposes of this report districts that are either “Remote” or “Outlying Town” are included to represent smaller and more rural districts. There is still wide variation within these districts including, for example, mountain resort towns, farming communities, and small towns. These are defined by CDE as follows:
 - **Outlying Town:** Districts in which most pupils live in population centers in excess of one thousand persons but less than seven thousand persons.
 - **Remote:** Districts with no population centers in excess of one thousand persons and characterized by sparse widespread populations.
- **Timeline:** Except where otherwise noted all data included is from 2023-24, the most recent year for which CDE has published a comprehensive data set.



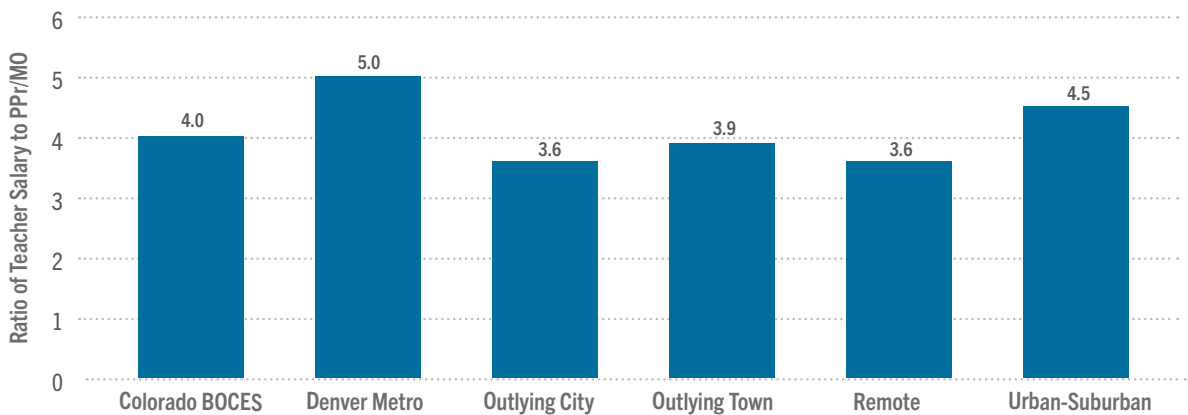
Key data findings: Comparisons across settings

While the focus of this report is on rural districts in Colorado, it is important to place these salaries in the broader Colorado context. Teachers in these smaller districts have lower salaries, on average, than their peers in other districts. Additionally, remote and outlying city/town districts spend a smaller share of school funding on teacher salaries than Denver metro and urban-suburban districts. In remote districts, the funding for 3.6 students covers the average salary of one teacher, compared to more than five students in the Denver metro area.

2023-24 Average Non-Charter Salaries



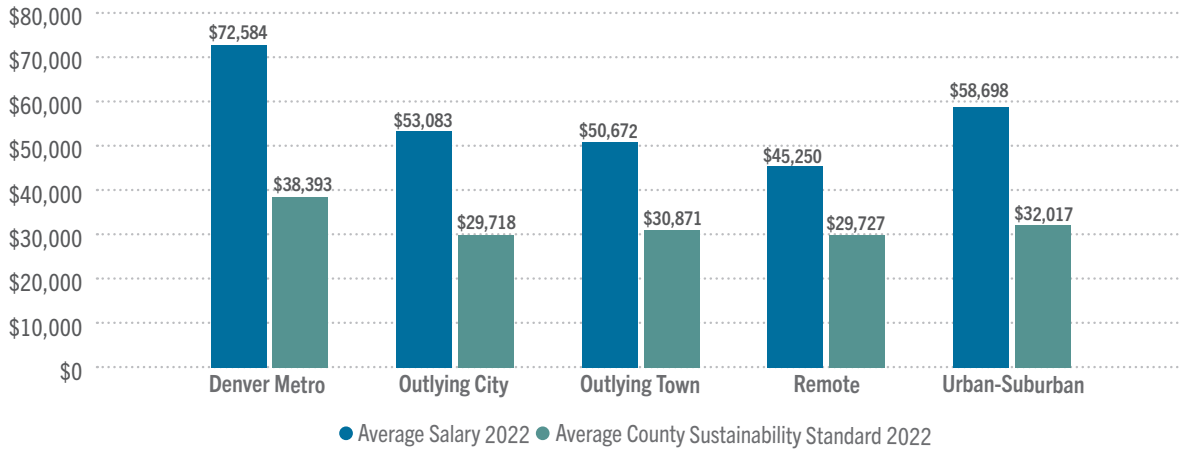
Teacher Salaries Relative to School Funding



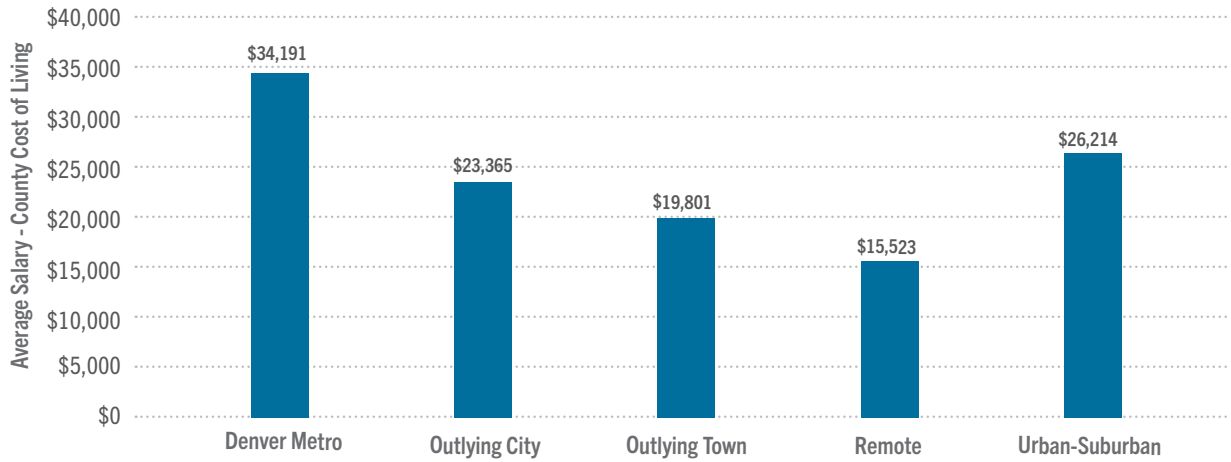
Also, while the cost of living in urban areas is often higher than in rural Colorado, the gap between a sustainable salary and the average teacher salary is still smaller in more rural settings. This suggests that teachers have less buying power in rural areas on average when adjusted for cost of living.⁷ It's important to note that these sustainability standards are based on a single-adult household, so do not take into consideration teachers supporting other household members.



Salary and Cost of Living



Salary Versus Cost of Living



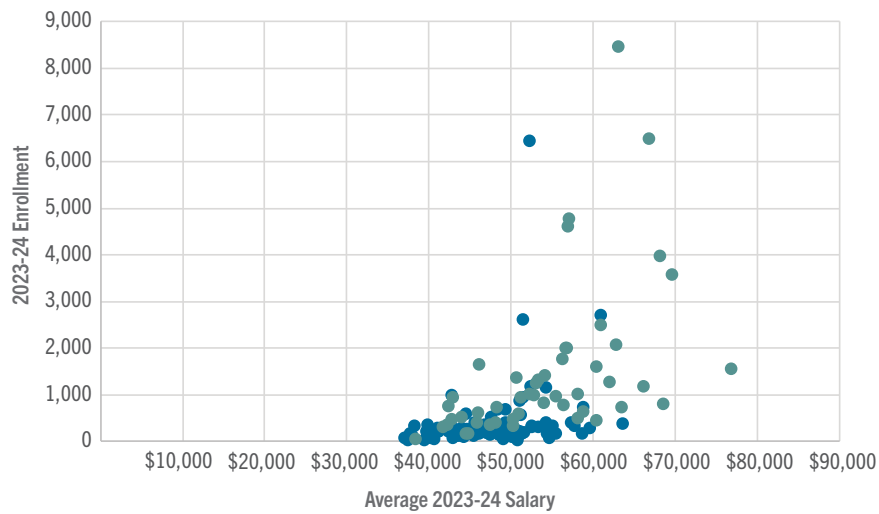


Key data findings: Variation within remote and outlying town settings

Within the smaller districts that are the focus of this report, there is wide variation in average salaries as well as other variables. The graphs below look at the relationship between average salary and a range of other variables. Generally there is not a strong correlation between salary and other factors, suggesting that:

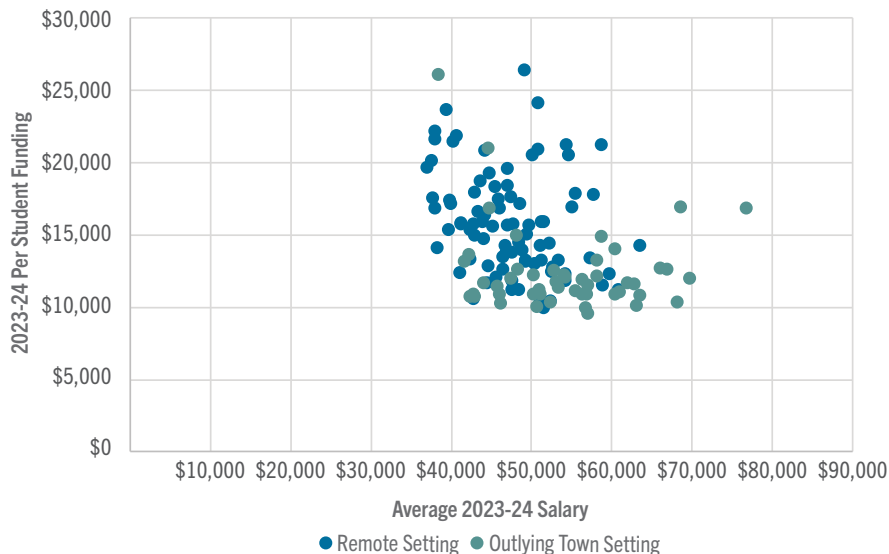
- In remote and outlying town settings there is wide variation in the average teacher salary, as well as in district size. These do not, however, appear to be correlated.

Teacher Salaries and District Size



- In remote and outlying town settings there is wide variation in the average teacher salary, as well as in school funding. These also do not appear to be correlated.

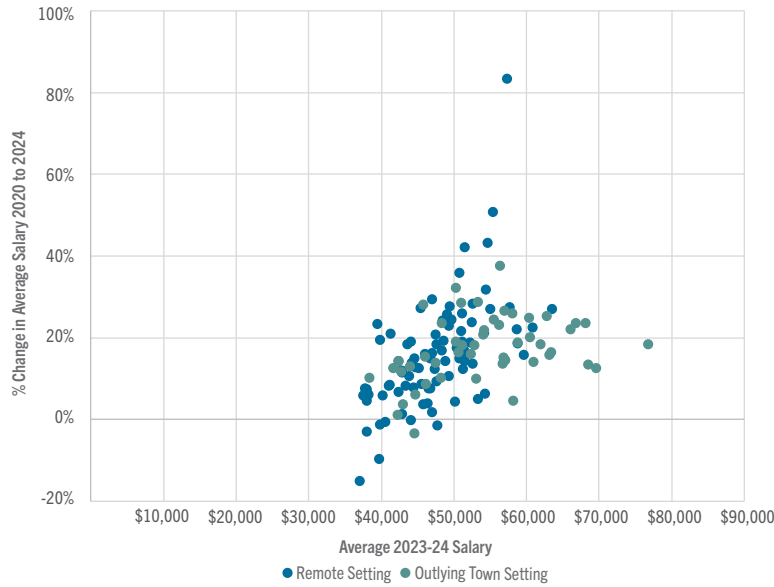
Teacher Salaries and School Funding





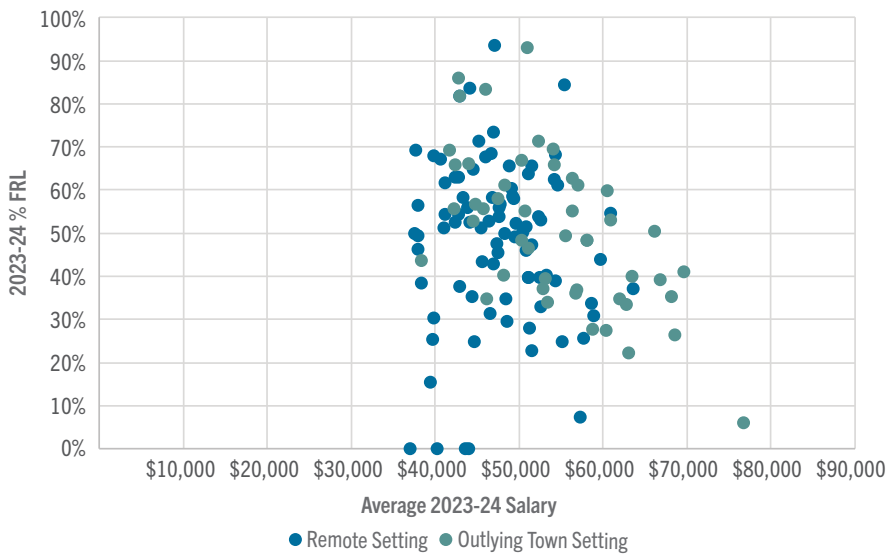
- Most districts have seen their average salary increase over time; given these consistent increases, the amount of increase seen over time does not appear to be the primary driver of if the current average salary is higher or lower.

Teacher Salaries Change Over Time



- While the demographics of these districts vary widely, there is not a clear relationship between student demographics and average salary.

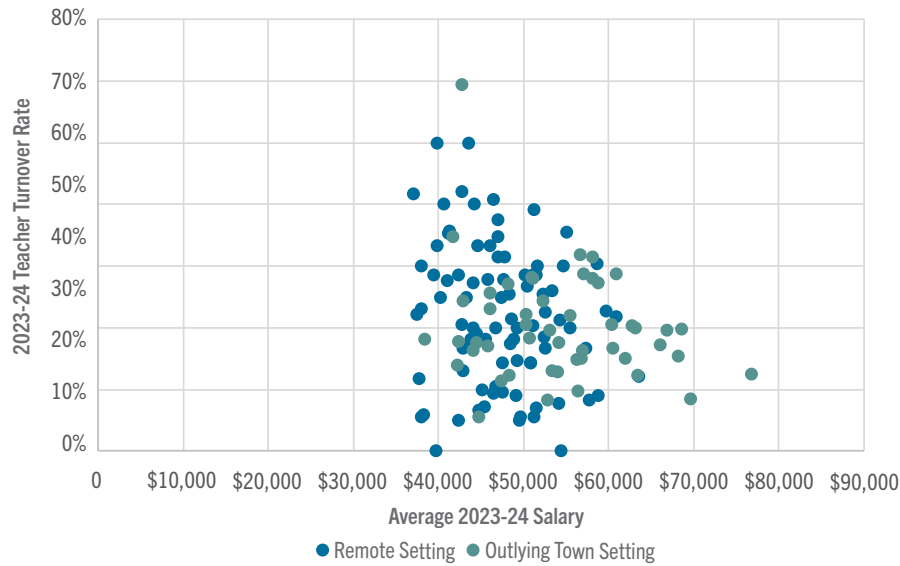
Teacher Salaries and Demographics





- There is not a strong correlation between average salary and teacher turnover, suggesting that salary may not be a primary driver of turnover. That said, most districts with the highest levels of turnover (over 40%) tend to have relatively low salaries.

Teacher Salaries and Teacher Turnover



The data clearly shows that teacher salaries vary widely across Colorado, as do other district characteristics. Additional research could be done to further unpack the reasons behind this variation and how they impact outcomes.

¹ <https://www.educationnext.org/in-schools-teacher-quality-matters-most-coleman/>

² <https://kappanonline.org/rural-teacher-shortage-ingersoll-tran/>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/05/us/teacher-prep-student-shortages-covid-crisis/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.epi.org/multimedia/teacher-shortages-pay/>

⁵ <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/educator-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank>

⁶ <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/teaching-is-changing-lives/#:~:text=Beginning%20in%202022%2C%20the%20starting,increased%20from%20%2460%2C000%20to%20%2470%2C000.&text=The%20current%20salary%20tiers%20in,Tier%201%3A%20%2450%2C000>

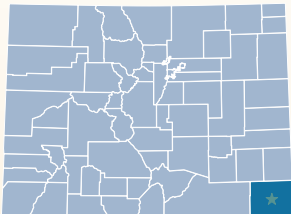
⁷ Cost of living drawn from the adult sustainable standard provided by county at: <https://selfsufficiencystandard.org/colorado/>



STORIES FROM THE FIELD

This section of our report will focus on two rural districts in very different parts of the state. Vilas, in far southeastern Colorado, sits close to both the Kansas and Oklahoma borders, on the windswept high plains. Montezuma-Cortez is located in the state's southwestern corner. Its high-desert setting and proximity to some of the state's most impressive mountain ranges appeal to many people. But its cost of living is high and salaries are low. Nearby New Mexico also poses daunting salary competition with recently enacted high starting salaries.

Vilas



Average teacher salary
(2023-2024)

\$39,775

compared to the
state average of

\$68,647

Overview

Vilas is a very small district in southern Colorado near the New Mexico border serving 361 students in 2023-24, 47% of these students are from low-income households. However, the district's enrollment in 2024-25 dropped to 50 students, after Vilas closed its Homeschool Options program at the end of the 2023-24 school year. That program served about 300 part-time (and partially funded) students from across the state whose primary education was from homeschooling.

The district has 25 employees, 10 of them teachers. The average teacher salary in 2023-24 was \$ 39,775.00 compared to the state average of \$68,647. This average salary was up 20% from \$ 33,277 in 2019-20. Vilas had a teacher turnover rate of 29% in 2023-24 compared to a state average of 21%. One way to put these salaries into context is to compare the average teacher salary to the salary economists have determined is sufficient in the area. In Vilas' county this sufficient salary is \$ 24,285.95, more than \$14,000 lower than the average teacher salary, suggesting that, while low, these average teacher salaries are sufficient for living in the county.

Remoteness

Vilas School District RE-5 is one of Colorado's smaller school districts. The tiny town of 86 souls is 177 miles southeast of Pueblo and 174 miles due north of Amarillo, Texas. The nearest supermarket is a Walmart in Lamar, 60 miles away. The closest Home Depot is in Garden City, Kansas, 155 miles distant. Longing for a shopping mall? You'll have to drive to Amarillo for that. Denver? That's a cool 265 miles over the northwest horizon.

In other words, Vilas is out in the middle of nowhere. That suits many residents just fine, but it can pose a challenge when trying to recruit teachers from outside the community.

“ A few years ago you'd have to drive to Lamar to buy parmesan cheese,” said John Wittler, the school board president and a Vilas native. **“The quality and availability of fresh fruit and produce here is very, very low.”**



Vilas

That remoteness was fine with Shiva Fischer, who moved to Vilas in the summer of 2024 to become the district's new elementary school principal. "(Superintendent Abby Pettinger) emailed me after I applied and said, 'You do understand we are about an hour away from a Walmart,'" Fischer recalled. "I was like, OK, that's kind of cool. I was in Little Rock, Arkansas. I was tired of the big city." Fischer grew up in a small Texas town.

Fischer said she has found ways to compensate for the remoteness, and the lack of fresh food. Whenever she travels to a bigger town, or even to Denver, she takes along a cooler and stuffs it with fresh produce from Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. And she has found a meal kit delivery service that will drop a package of fresh ingredients for a wholesome meal right at the door of the farmhouse where she's living temporarily, even though it's 15 miles out of town on a dirt road. She gets a box delivered weekly.

Fischer, however, is atypical in her attitude. Vilas' distance from a town of any size affects recruitment and retention, both Pettinger and Wittler said. Occasionally a young teacher who wants to get his or her feet wet in the profession in a small, low-pressure atmosphere will take a job in the district. And sometimes a career-changing teacher who needs to pursue alternative licensure will choose Vilas, because the district works with such teachers to get them a credential. But these teachers rarely stay more than a couple of years.

“There's rarely if ever someone from Kansas City or Denver who decides to move here long-term to teach,” Wittler said.

The rare exception is what he called a “trailing spouse” — someone whose husband or wife comes from Vilas, or who inherits a family farm, and the couple decides to move back home for the long haul. Teaching is a stable job with benefits, so provides an attractive option for a second income, despite the low pay.

But people who move to the Eastern Plains thinking it will be cheaper are often surprised by a number of hidden costs. Gas costs more in remote areas, and driving 100-plus miles round-trip to go grocery shopping adds up significantly over time. For this reason, while there aren't nearly as many things to spend money on in Vilas as in, say, Pueblo, or even Lamar, the overall cost of living isn't appreciably lower.

At the start of the 2024-25 school year, Vilas for the first time hired two special education teachers from the Philippines. “They have a very good skill level, and they've been teachers for many years,” board member Wittler said. “And for them, it's probably a substantial pay increase.”

While there have been some cultural adjustments for teachers and students alike, Pettinger said bringing in the two teachers has been a significant net positive for the district. “It has been really good for our students to see a different culture and to learn about a different culture,” she said. “A lot of our students may never get farther than 100 miles from this area, so to get to learn firsthand about experiences across the world has been just fantastic for them.”

Pay and housing

Vilas, which has almost no property wealth, cannot afford to pay its teachers anything approaching the state average. New teachers make about \$32,000 per year. The latest salary schedule posted on the district website (2022-23 school year) shows that a teacher at the highest step and with a master's degree and 16 or more years' experience tops out at \$38,400.

What makes the low salaries Vilas can afford to pay especially challenging is the town's proximity to the Kansas and Oklahoma borders — about an hour away by car. Both states offer more robust education funding support, meaning nearby Kansas and Oklahoma districts can pay teachers significantly more.



Vilas

“It’s incredibly challenging to retain anybody in this profession right now, because anybody can go anywhere and get a job that pays more,” Pettinger, the Vilas schools superintendent said. **“They can easily go across the border over to Kansas and make close to \$20,000 more.”**

Nearby Stanton County, Kansas school district lists a base certified staff salary of \$44,500. “It’s enough higher in most cases that it makes up for any extra commuting expense if you live anywhere near the border,” Vilas school board President John Wittler said.

Then there is the question of housing. Simply put, there is precious little available, either to buy or to rent. The school district owns about 10 houses in or close to town, which it has held for 20-odd years, and rents to teachers and other staff. But the houses are old and some are in disrepair. Teachers can rent them for between \$600 and \$700 per month, utilities included. The district employs 18 people full time, so not everyone can get district-owned housing.

When Shiva Fischer moved to Vilas in 2024 from Little Rock with her preschool-aged daughter, she was offered a district-owned house to rent. But it needed repairs and in early 2025 it still wasn’t ready for occupancy. So mother and daughter have been living for several months in the basement of a school board member’s house, which is on a cattle and wheat farm 15 miles down a dirt road from the elementary school.

The district-owned house she and her daughter will move into is a mobile home, which the district is completely refurbishing and “pinning down” to make it feel more permanent. It’s located on a lot next door to the elementary school she leads, so there will be no commute.

State funding: over-reliance and variability

Vilas receives approximately 90 percent of its roughly \$2.6 million budget from the state. There is little local revenue available due to low property values and the lack of a commercial tax base.

State funding has a capricious element to it, which causes headaches for districts heavily reliant on it, and makes even short-term planning a challenge.

From 2010 until last year, Colorado employed a device called the Budget Stabilization Factor (BSF) (commonly known as the negative factor), that allowed the state to reduce K-12 education funding below the levels required by Amendment 23 of the Colorado Constitution. This much-reviled tool was implemented during the Great Recession to help balance the state budget (about one-third of the general fund goes to funding K-12 education), stripping billions in promised funding from districts across the state. It hit poorer, rural districts especially hard because of their over-reliance on state funding. The BSF varied year-to-year depending on the health of the state budget.

Although the state eliminated the BSF in 2024, negotiations continue over how this will play out on the ground. This creates ongoing uncertainty for districts like Vilas. It’s still impossible to plan with confidence for future pay hikes.

Pettinger said the state has never released any multi-year forecasts showing how these changes will affect state funding of districts. “We really have no idea what the long term ramifications will be,” she said.

Another potential change that worries rural district is the proposed elimination of multi-year enrollment averaging in state budget allocations. For many years, Colorado has funded districts based on a five-year enrollment average. This helps cushion the blow of declining enrollment by spreading the pain across multiple years, gradually stepping down allocations.



Vilas

In 2024, the legislature voted to reduce that averaging to four years beginning with the 2025-26 school year, and Gov. Jared Polis has said he wants to eliminate it altogether, because under the current system, the state is “funding empty chairs.” About 40 states do not employ enrollment averaging over multiple years.

This proposal worries rural superintendents a great deal. “It would be a huge hit to many districts across the state. And in my opinion, it’s just not the right avenue for Colorado regardless of what other states are doing,” Pettinger said. Until the 2024-25 school year, Vilas brought in extra revenue by running a statewide online school. But that school, which served about 300 part-time (and partially funded) students from across the state, closed in the spring of 2024.

Given that enrollment decline, Pettinger said, the Vilas budget could be cut in half – to \$1.3 million – should the multi-year enrollment averaging be eliminated.

High fixed costs

Small districts, and especially those in remote areas, face much higher fixed costs as a percentage of their budgets than do larger districts in more densely-populated areas of the state. This directly impacts their ability to pay competitive salaries.

Vilas dedicates about two-thirds of its budget to teacher pay, while many urban and suburban districts can use up to 90 percent of their budgets on salaries,

There are multiple, inter-connected reasons that small districts like Vilas face higher fixed costs. If a school roof springs a leak or an HVAC system goes down, finding a repair company or person willing to make the drive can be a major chore, and adds significantly to the expense. The lack of competition for such services also tends to drive up the price. Large districts, by contrast, have their own maintenance operations and easy, quick access to materials.

Pettinger said Vilas spends about 7 percent of its budget – roughly \$90,000 – on insurance. The districts spend on average about \$130,000 per year on utilities and repairs for its buildings, including the houses it owns and rents to staff.

Wittler also cited curriculum and textbook purchases as expenses that consume much larger shares of small-district budgets. “The difference in what you pay per textbook if you’re buying 20 versus 80,000 is enormous,” he said. And memberships to organizations like the Colorado Association of School executives and the Colorado Association of School Board (where Wittler served as president in 2021) consume a far larger proportion of a small budget than a large one. Those organizations charge dues on a sliding scale, “but the scale only slides so far,” Wittler said.

This is one of the big challenges small districts face that many people don’t understand, Pettinger said. “It’s a hard pill to swallow, paying so much in fixed costs,” she said. “Because really, where we want to be investing, our highest return on investment is in our people. And people don’t understand that. That’s hard to explain until you have a more in depth conversation. You know, we’re not blowing our money.”

Other barriers and benefits

Another barrier to hiring mentioned by both Pettinger and Wittler is Colorado’s lack of teacher licensing reciprocity with other states. To teach in Colorado, teachers licensed in other states have to jump through several hoops, including passing Colorado-specific assessments, and, in some cases, completing an induction program. Highly experienced teachers can skip some but not all of these steps.



Vilas

“I do feel like we do miss some opportunities because we are so close to Kansas and Oklahoma, and if the (licensure process) was simpler, we could possibly attract some candidates,”

Pettinger said. **“I’ve voiced this a little bit (at the state level) and people understand, but it just hasn’t made traction yet at a higher level.”**

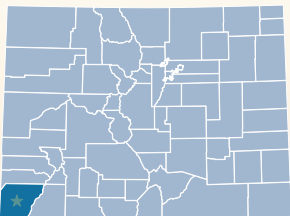
Wittler said the district has on occasion supported teachers from other states getting certified through an alternative licensure program. These educators can teach while going through the process. But this “has an expense and time element to it.”

Despite all these challenges, Shiva Fischer said she moved to Vilas because it has some highly alluring qualities. As a single parent, she feels supported by a community of strong women. Some of them, like

Superintendent Pettinger, are themselves single moms. Fischer said she and Pettinger care for each other’s kids when one of them needs to go out of town on business.

“You have to have that kind of support system, and that, I think is important for the school administration to understand: That you can gain good qualified employees, but you’ve got to provide some supports, make sure that they know they will be taken care of on more than a professional level,” she said.

Montezuma-Cortez



Average teacher salary
(2023-2024)

\$47,579

compared to the
state average of

\$68,647

Overview

Montezuma-Cortez is a small district in southwestern Colorado serving 2,517 students. 40% of these students are from low-income households. The district has 384 employees, 161 of them teachers. The average teacher salary in 2023-24 was \$47,579 compared to the state average of \$68,647. This average salary was up 20% from \$39,752 in 2019-20. The district had a teacher turnover rate of 50% in 2023-24 compared to a state average of 21%. Teachers in Montezuma Cortez make over \$18,000 more on average than the salary deemed sufficient for living in the county.

Teacher recruitment and retention challenges

When Tom Burris left the Montezuma-Cortez school district in 2008, he was offering a starting salary of \$27,000 for novice teachers. When he returned as superintendent in 2022, the starting pay had increased to just \$31,500, though the cost of living in the area had risen dramatically over those 14 years.

For several years after the Great Recession, Montezuma-Cortez froze salaries, said Jim Parr, the district’s Executive Director of Student Academic Services. This meant no cost-of-living raises, and it also kept people from moving up the salary schedule, typically the surest way for teachers to earn higher pay as they gain experience and educational credentials.



Montezuma-Cortez

Since 2022, Burris has managed to raise base pay to \$40,000, and thanks to a successful mill levy override election last fall – the first successful funding hike vote ever in Cortez – starting pay for the 2025-26 school year will rise to \$47,000. And everyone’s pay, regardless of where they sit on the district salary schedule, will increase by \$7,000.

“That’s an improvement, but it still falls short, Burris said. “We are still behind a lot of other districts,” he said.

That’s especially true of districts in New Mexico. With the state line less than 30 miles south and the town of Shiprock no more than a 45-minute drive from Cortez, New Mexico’s substantially higher salaries pose a serious competitive threat when it comes to recruiting talent.

The starting salary in Shiprock is \$54,000 per year, and with three years experience pay increases to \$65,000, and with five years it jumps to \$77,000. It’s not unusual, Burris said, for Montezuma-Cortez to lose teachers to Shiprock. Bureau of Indian Education schools on the Navajo reservation also pay substantially higher starting salaries.

But southwestern Colorado has a lot going for it, given its proximity to high desert landscapes and rugged mountain terrain. People who love the outdoors are drawn to the area, even if it means making some financial sacrifices.

An avid outdoorsman, Karl Van Syckle, 64, decided to move from Bountiful, Utah to Cortez in 2022 to finish his teaching career. He was drawn by the landscape, the indigenous culture, and because the political climate in Utah was not to his liking. But the move has taken a heavy financial toll.

Van Syckle said his take-home pay last year was \$39,800. “That pays rent, gas, and groceries, with maybe \$400 or \$500 left over every month,” he said. “It has been super hard. My car has 147,000 miles on it.

I have to hope it keeps running because I cannot afford a car payment.”

None of this came as a total shock, Van Syckle said: “I came into this with my eyes wide open.” He said he “pre-bought” fishing and target-shooting gear before leaving Utah, knowing he would not be able to afford such luxuries on the Montezuma-Cortez salary.

Van Syckle lives in a 15-by-30-foot converted barn loft, for which he pays \$1,000 a month. Fortunately, it’s just north of town and 2.5 miles from the school where he teaches. He knows he will never be able to afford to buy a place in the area, and expects to have to move away when he retires, much to his regret.

“I absolutely love living here,” he said. “I can look out my bedroom window on winter mornings and the sun is coming up behind, Point Lookout at Mesa Verde, and it is just absolutely beautiful. And I go look out my front window and Ute Mountain can be just lit up red.”

Even teachers who have put down firmer roots in the area can find it tough to manage their finances, given the low pay. Alison Robinson has taught in Montezuma-Cortez for 12 years. She was an archaeologist in the area before becoming a teacher. She and her husband, who co-owns and operates a small brewery, have one daughter, and they own a home.

They get by, but their budget is tight. The family income is under \$60,000.

“ We love the life we live, but it’s certainly not extravagant,” she said. “It can be challenging to live within our means.”



Montezuma-Cortez

Recruitment and retention strategies

In many ways, the area sells itself to at least certain job candidates. But district leaders know they must do more to keep the pipeline open and flowing. Teacher turnover can be as high as 20 percent per year, according to James Parr.

And while recent raises have improved the district's ability to recruit, the sustainability of those raises over time is in question, Parr said. "There's a danger and a risk in it, in that we have a robust carryover budget at this point, but our raised salaries are going to eat into that for a number of years," he said. "There's going to be a point here in the next five years or so, where it becomes a deficit budget. So while in the moment, it's fine, it's certainly something that is hard to sustain."

Superintendent Burris said he is trying to get creative with recruitment and retention incentives, especially for those teachers who want to live in the area because of its outdoor amenities. He said he went to a recruiting fair in Greeley recently, and his table was next to one for a Denver-area district. That district was offering \$65,000 starting salaries, and he was offering \$40,000. "If I had a sign on my table that said 'ski pass included with your contract,' I don't know for sure but I'm betting we could have attracted some folks." He estimated passes to the Purgatory ski area, 85 miles to the northeast, would cost the district about \$1,000 per interested teacher. Given that the district operates on a four-day school week, teachers would have time to take advantage of the perk.

Another recruitment strategy that Burris employed for the first time this year was to hire roughly 20 teachers from the Philippines, many of them special education teachers.

While a \$40,000 salary is far more than these teachers could earn back home, they, too, face the same cost of living challenges as everyone else. And many of them

arrived without winter clothing or any experience living in cold weather.

They also don't own cars, so the district has set up an informal shuttle system, where an assistant superintendent drives about 20 of the teachers to and from work every day.

Budget and financial constraints

In November 2024, Montezuma-Cortez voters passed a mill levy override, raising property taxes modestly to make educator salaries more competitive with neighboring districts. The 53%-47% win was notable, because the district had never before succeeded in passing a mill levy hike. District officials said they overcame pervasive distrust and skepticism about government spending by focusing the mill levy exclusively on salaries for teachers and paraprofessionals.

In the summer of 2025, when the higher revenues kick in, starting teacher salaries will increase to \$47,000, bringing the district closer to some of its major competitors, including Shiprock, N.M. (mentioned earlier) and nearby Durango, which starts teachers at \$51,500 and has raised salaries by 27 percent over the past three years.

Burris and Parr said it will be challenging for the district to raise salaries significantly beyond the \$47,000 anytime soon. So they will need to rely on other incentives, including the district's four-day school week,⁸ to draw teachers to its schools.

Burris had hoped to boost salaries to \$50,000 with passage of the mill levy. But, he said, Montezuma County property valuations dropped by \$76 million last year, significantly affecting the district budget and forcing him to scale back the raises.

The dilemma comes in that this raise is only for teachers and paraprofessionals, and it's based on something that fluctuates every year. So we've got to figure out how to deal with that fluctuation," he said.

⁸ See previous Keystone Center report "Doing Less with Less" <https://www.keystone.org/doing-less-with-less-how-a-four-day-school-week-affects-student-learning-and-the-teacher-workforce/>



Montezuma-Cortez

Montezuma-Cortez spends about 80 percent of its budget on teacher salaries, Parr said. But with the exception of a high school built a decade ago, the district's infrastructure is aging. Many of its schools were built in the 1960s and are "asbestos infested," requiring constant mitigation and maintenance. This means the budget is constantly strained by fixed costs, adding a further challenge to increasing teacher pay.

Even with recent raises, the challenge isn't going away, superintendent Burriss acknowledged. "if I'm a newly graduated education major from, Fort Lewis College or Greeley or Boulder, and I want to teach in your district, and you're starting me at \$47,000, it doesn't matter where I live, I'm going to be stressed to pay rent, whether I'm out in the county somewhere and having to drive in a long way or I'm in town," he said.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The data and stories included demonstrate that salaries in small, rural districts pose an almost insurmountable challenge and will continue to do so without systemic shifts at the state level. Given high fixed costs and low property wealth in many remote areas, districts can only do so much without additional support from the state. Clearly, this poses challenges for the state given current budget constraints. But other, neighboring states that face similar challenges have found ways to implement across-the-board educator pay increases. Colorado must find a way to emulate these successes.

The state should consider convening a task force focused on this issue bringing together a range of stakeholders. Some potential items for this group and policy-makers to consider could include:

- 1 Research on state legislation across the country around salaries, including minimum salaries.
- 2 Consider changes to the school finance formula that are focused on areas that struggle to offer competitive teacher salaries, knowing this may be challenging given recent revisions to that formula.
- 3 Opportunities to increase total benefits for teachers without raising salaries, such as subsidized teacher housing.
- 4 Establish a new state program to target districts like Vilas and Montezuma to provide additional teacher salary funding. The program could be similar to the BEST program which was designed to provide targeted support to school districts and charter schools with great needs for basic school facilities but lacking a tax basis to fund adequate facilities.

Why is it imperative to create policies to help rural school districts attract and retain teachers? A wealth of research studies over the years⁹ has demonstrated that high-quality teachers have a greater impact on student learning than any other factor outside the home environment. As this report demonstrates, small rural districts face daunting challenges hiring and keeping teachers for the long haul.

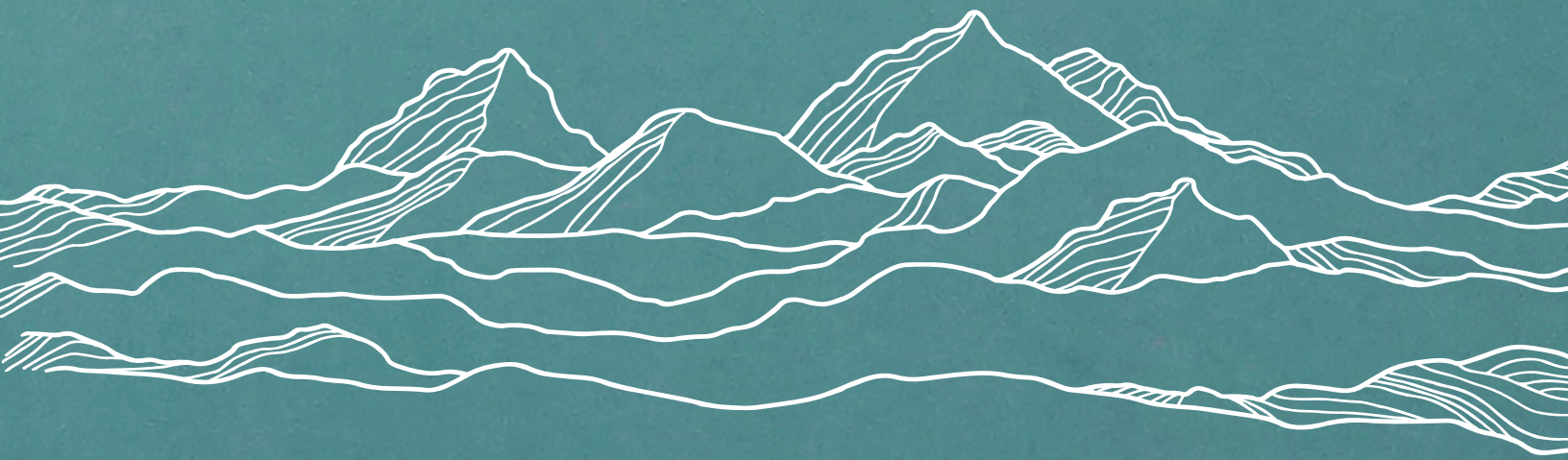
No single policy or group of policies can ameliorate all of these challenges. But it is clear that the state can and should do more.

⁹ One recent example of such research: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/educ.2024.1367317/full>



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