

The Billion Dollar Question



On November 8 the newly-seated Jeffco school board will ask voters for the [largest school tax increase](#) in Jeffco history: a \$987 million repayment obligation ([Issue 3B](#)) along with an ongoing \$33 million per year ([Issue 3A](#)), all to be paid by increasing our property taxes.

Whenever I'm asked to pay higher taxes, I'm reminded of the parable of the bags of gold, where a servant faithful with a small amount is subsequently entrusted with a larger amount. A billion-dollar tax hike is serious business, impacting everything from Jeffco's economic climate to our children's debt burden, so before voting on this we need to take a close look at how faithful our school administrators have been with tax dollars in the past — and how well they're preparing our children for the future.

Four years ago, Jeffco voters approved a \$99 million bond measure specifically for “equipping, improving, repairing, and furnishing” school facilities. While [school officials assure taxpayers](#) that the bond projects were “on scope and on budget — always,” [the records show otherwise](#). A general upgrade at [Colorow Elementary](#), for example, came in at more than double its budget of \$1,265,000. Mechanical work at [Standley Lake, Ralston Valley, and Pomona](#) climbed from \$1,325,000 to \$3,312,182 — a 150% budget overrun — and upgrades in the [Wheat Ridge, Jefferson, and Lakewood](#) areas ballooned from \$3,021,000 to \$5,834,878. With such consistent overruns in a \$99 million budget, imagine what can happen when over \$1 billion is in play (the [Aurora VA Hospital](#) comes to mind).

Fiscal responsibility and honesty are critical parts of the education equation, but the bottom line is [how well the schools are preparing our children](#) to thrive in today's global environment. For over a decade, Jefferson County has used the American College Test (ACT) to assess each student's readiness for college or career. In 2014, just [46% of Jeffco 11th graders](#) met ACT college and career standards for reading, math, and science — and despite significant increases in taxes and spending over the last ten years (see [chart](#)), Jeffco's ACT average has remained practically flat, not even meeting what [our state colleges recommend](#) for admission.

The Colorado Department of Education [recently reported](#) that public charter schools provide better averages on such tests while serving a higher percentage of ethnic minorities, yet the new Jeffco school board [voted to oppose legislation](#) giving charter students equal funding. A 2016 [Cornell University study](#) concluded that “teacher collective bargaining worsens the future labor market outcomes of students,” yet this board voted to reinstate union pay scale policies, forcing the id-wrenching demoralization of highly effective teachers being passed over by less effective teachers simply because of seniority. The board scrapped plans for an [\\$18 million debt-free school](#) and replaced it with \$48 million in [Certificates of Participation](#) debt. Now they want another billion in property taxes — even as the schools benefit from a recent [20% jump](#) in our [assessed property values](#).

As a grateful Jeffco graduate, I've supported various school tax measures in the past. Bring us a ballot measure that spends responsibly, funds all students equally, rewards teachers on merit, expands school choice, addresses academic improvement, is willing to embrace new ideas, and spends more on teachers, bus drivers, and staff than it does on [interest payments and astroturf](#) and I'll vote for it. 3A and 3B, however, are billion dollar placebos. They arguably fail to address core underachievement issues while ironically offloading a huge [financial burden](#) onto the very students being academically underserved — and our children deserve better than that.

Courier columnist John Newkirk served on the Jefferson County Board of Education from 2013 - 2015 and was a member of the Jeffco Public Schools Audit Committee. He has also served on the Colorado Commission for Judicial Performance (1st Judicial District) and the Colorado Association of Funders. Newkirk attended Wilmot Elementary, Evergreen Junior High, and Evergreen Senior High and now lives near Conifer with his wife and daughters.

Jeffco Schools - Student Expenditures vs Student Achievement

