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## Rural schools are in need

By Jennifer Brown , Denver Post Staff Writer

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*Edison School kindergarten students leave the playground on their way back to class in their school building, which was built in 1922. (Post / Karl Gehring)*

### Edison

Trailer homes dot otherwise empty fields on the dusty road that leads to Edison School, where the playground's old metal slide is tarnished and high-school seniors have to share a bathroom with 5-year-olds.

Superintendent David Grosche wants a new school for his elementary kids. But even if he could get this poor, southern El Paso County community to pass a bond issue, the most he could raise by law is about \$610,550 - 20 percent of the district's total assessed property value.

A new school would cost at least \$2 million.

By comparison, Silverton School District near Durango - half the size of Edison, with about 70 students - has the tax base to raise \$8.1 million in a bond election.

Rural school districts across Colorado are struggling to find the money to keep their buildings up to fire code, replace broken-down buses and buy new boilers - let alone build up-to-date classrooms and libraries. Now, a group of state lawmakers is working to close the gap between the richest and poorest districts.

The state kicks in extra money to smaller districts for classroom and operating costs. But when it comes to dollars for major building projects, local taxpayers are, for the most part, on their own.

And that means vast disparity in the condition of school buildings across Colorado.

A group of top Democrats, led by House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, is considering a November 2008 tax proposal. The group is weighing a statewide bond issue or perhaps a school-focused remake of Referendum D, the failed 2005 funding measure mostly for roads.

Romanoff, D-Denver, has state economists coming up with two numbers: the cost to make school buildings safe and the price tag to give Colorado state-of-the-art classrooms.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation, an education-advocacy group, has estimated immediate health and safety needs at \$400 million. Modernizing classrooms statewide could cost between \$5.7 billion and \$10 billion, the foundation said.

Romanoff embarked on school tours this summer thinking of radical education reform. But after walking through a few rural schoolhouses, the focus shifted.

"I set out on the trip thinking we could build a bridge to the 21st century, and we got stuck somewhere in the late 19th," Romanoff said. "The quality of your education depends to a large extent on your ZIP code, and the kids in the poorest parts of the state know it."

In Eagle County, which includes Vail, voters passed a \$128 million bond issue this year for a new high school, a new elementary school, new land and technology upgrades.

In Miami-Yoder east of



*Eighth-grader Maggie Igams, 14, logs onto the Internet using a computer in Edison School's library. The library was moved into a house near the El Paso County school to make room for an additional classroom. (Post / Karl Gehring)*

Colorado Springs, the floor in the science lab is rotting away. A kid's desk fell through a few years ago - while he was sitting in it.

The fire escape is a ladder off the steep ledge of the roof, and the library is a jumble of books in a dilapidated, overcrowded portable classroom.

"I don't know how you could call this a library," said Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, on a tour this summer. "It is just shocking to think that we're allowing our kids to come to school and learn in an environment that is so inadequate and unsafe."

Republican leaders are sympathetic to the plight of small schools but wary of a tax proposal on the 2008 ballot.

"The needs are compelling indeed," said Sen. Nancy Spence of Centennial, the ranking Republican on the Senate Education Committee. "I don't know that putting an issue on the ballot is the answer."

A promise of construction money for impoverished schools came in 2000 with the settlement of a lawsuit brought by six districts against Colorado for not holding up a constitutional promise of "thorough and uniform" education.

The state agreed to pay \$190 million over 11 years from its general fund.

But the money - put into a state grant program that takes applications from school districts - is woefully insufficient, say education experts and top Democratic lawmakers.

The state has spent \$75 million from the general fund and scraped together money from other sources, including Powerball sales, to fund the program. So far, \$145 million has been given or allocated this year to needy school districts for construction projects.

Even \$145 million hasn't had a significant impact or built many new schools, advocacy groups say. About 70 percent of school districts that apply for grants are turned down.

"There are enough leaky roofs and faulty boilers throughout the state that they pretty much consume the (grant) money each year," said Matt Samelson, Donnell-Kay's director of special projects.

Other states, including Arizona and New Mexico, have faced similar lawsuits and lost. Now, they are pumping millions more dollars into school construction than Colorado.

Edison finally was awarded a grant for a new elementary school this year after asking three previous times. But to get the promised \$1.7 million, the district has to come up with a grant match of \$300,000.

"It might as well be \$4 billion," said Grosche, the superintendent, who is contemplating the political ramifications of asking for a tax hike.

In Center School District in the San Luis Valley, Superintendent George Welsh is weary of trying to find funds to upgrade his elementary school, which was built in 1918. He figures he would lose his job if he asked for a tax increase from a community that makes its living from potatoes, lettuce and barley, and where about 85 percent of students are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced lunch.

It would cost about \$7 million to replace one of Welsh's schools, yet the district's total bonding capacity is about \$4.5 million.

"It would be against the law in the state of Colorado for us to build a new school," Welsh said. "There's no way to do it without a grant or a change in the law."

Telluride, which has almost the same number of students as Center, has a bonding capacity of \$128.9 million.

The Leadville parent who led the lawsuit against the state, John Giardino, believes the \$190 million settlement fell far short.

"It's obviously disappointing," he said. "We're talking about basic health and safety. We're not talking about 'smart' classrooms or, 'Boy, that's a beautiful building.'"

Giardino and other education advocates say it's refreshing that lawmakers have stepped outside the Capitol and into schools this summer, and that they seem determined to do something.

Politically, small school districts have been "kind of out of sight, out of mind," said Vody Herrmann, director of public-school finance for the Colorado Department of Education. "They are not as much of a focal point as metro-area schools."

Romanoff, though, is intent on making a bold mark on education reform during the next legislative session, his last.

"While we're having this debate, kids are literally back at school," he said. "I don't think we can wait."

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