



Denver, Jefferson County school districts raise hourly wages for support staff struggling to afford food and housing

Denver school district is raising hourly wages to \$20 an hour and Jeffco is moving toward \$18 an hour.

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Amid mounting public pressure, two of Colorado's largest school districts have approved 20% pay raises for school support staff, with Denver Public Schools pledging to boost pay by more than \$4 per hour for many workers this year and Jeffco Public Schools agreeing to increase compensation by \$3 per hour by September 2023.

The pay bumps were prompted, in part, by a sharp increase in cost of living that has strapped employees in both districts and strained schools' ability to fill essential roles in the classroom, cafeteria and across grounds.

DPS will invest about \$28.2 million over three years into increasing wages for about 2,800 district employees who belong to unions, according to Miguel Perretta, executive director of employee and labor relations. Those employees include paraprofessionals, who assist teachers with lessons and often help students one on one and who will begin earning \$20 per hour starting Aug. 1, up 21%. Their hourly pay will continue to increase by 50 cents each of the following two years so that they are taking home \$21 per hour starting August 2024.

Paras who aid students with special needs will have a starting wage of \$21 starting Aug. 1, up 21%. Their hourly compensation will also increase by 50 cents each of the next two years. By August 2024, starting pay for paras serving students with disabilities will be \$22 per hour.

For paraprofessionals like Carolina Galvan, who works at Valdez Elementary School in Denver, the pay raise means she will be able to save more money for her family and one day have a shot at homeownership. And with more money in their pockets, some of her coworkers will no longer have to rely on government subsidies to secure food and housing.

“Now I’m putting more money in my household,” Galvan, 34, said. “Now I’m a little bit less stressed.”

DPS has committed to paying all support staff members, including those represented by a union and those who are not part of a union, \$20 by August 2024. That includes food service employees, custodians and nonbargaining employees, many of whom are currently earning \$15.87 per hour, Perretta said. Their pay will inch up year by year — to \$18 per month in August, \$19 per hour in August of next year and finally \$20 per hour in August 2024.

Separately, the starting minimum wage for bus drivers and mechanics within the district will jump Aug. 1 from \$20.43 to \$24.40. The district is still finalizing negotiations with the Denver Association of Educational Office Professionals, which represents office support employees, Perretta said.

He noted that DPS will cover the cost of increased wages with various sources of funding, including \$4 million that stems from a central office reorganization and about \$13.4 million in projected state funding.

DPS wants to “remain market competitive,” Perretta said, adding that the higher wages will hopefully bolster recruitment and retention within support staff roles as the district — like many across the state and country — faces shortages, particularly with its workforce of bus drivers.

“It’s a huge investment to our workforce, which is well deserved,” Perretta said.

It also gives the district’s staff a sense of stability for the next few years, said Bernadette Jiron, president of the Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals and Nutrition Service Employees.

“It’s a step forward for all these people ... that they know that they’re valued and the union is here for them to make sure they get what they deserve for the next three years,” said Jiron, whose union has about 1,300 members.

She is “ecstatic” that DPS has finally listened to its employees and rewarded them with raises they have fought for since the spring, particularly as the district runs understaffed across critical support positions, including paras, food workers and bus assistants.

“I am tired of being a follower,” Jiron said she told district leaders. “I need for you guys to be a leader for these employees.”

Galvan, the para at Valdez Elementary School, was among DPS staff who currently take home \$15.87 per hour and has been unable to afford a home, instead living in an apartment in Woodridge with her husband, daughter and mother. She has largely depended on her husband’s income to make ends meet, and the extra money added to her paycheck will set her up to be “a little bit more financially independent as a woman.”

She plans to build up a savings account with her increased wages so that her family can stay afloat in the event of another recession and potentially buy a house. Questions about whether she should remain at her post as a para in DPS without adequate wages to cover her family’s expenses feel less urgent now, and there’s a sense of respect from the district that wasn’t necessarily there before.

“I’m really happy how everything got together, and we’re on the same page now,” Galvan said.

Meanwhile, the Jeffco Public Schools Board of Education has approved a contract in which hourly pay for support staff members will start at \$18 by September 2023, according to a statement released by the Jeffco Education Support Professionals Association on Wednesday.

The increase follows a board candidate forum held last fall in which Coloradans for the Common Good asked six candidates running for office to support a pay increase of \$3 per hour over the next two years.

In a statement, library para and JESPA president Lara Center called the pay raise “a historic moment” for staff.

“This is the second year that we’ve fought for and achieved well-deserved and substantial pay increases for our members,” she said.

Both JESPA, which represents about 3,800 support staff, including paras, custodians, bus drivers, secretaries and food service workers, and the Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals and Nutrition Service Employees belong to Coloradans for the Common Good. The organization is composed of congregations, unions, educational institutions, nonprofits and neighborhood organizations all focused on community issues and helped publicize the need to pay support staff more.

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Joyce Brooks, chairperson of the organization's steering committee, refers to them as essential workers.

"They are great support staff for our teachers to help them deliver the kind of education our children need in these school districts," Brooks said, adding that those staff members also give the broader community insight into what's going on in public schools.

The wage increases will help staff members and their families afford basic expenses in the face of inflation while also keeping schools running with employees who are key to students' success, she stressed.

"I think we take them for granted too much," Brooks said, "but teachers can't teach, administrators can't administer without these folks out there helping them."