



***2023 National School Public Relations Association
Communication Awards***

GOLD MEDALLION ENTRY - BOND/FINANCE CAMPAIGN

**27J Schools - Brighton, Colorado
PreK-12 District | 23,000 Students
Communications Department (5 Team Members)**

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OVERVIEW

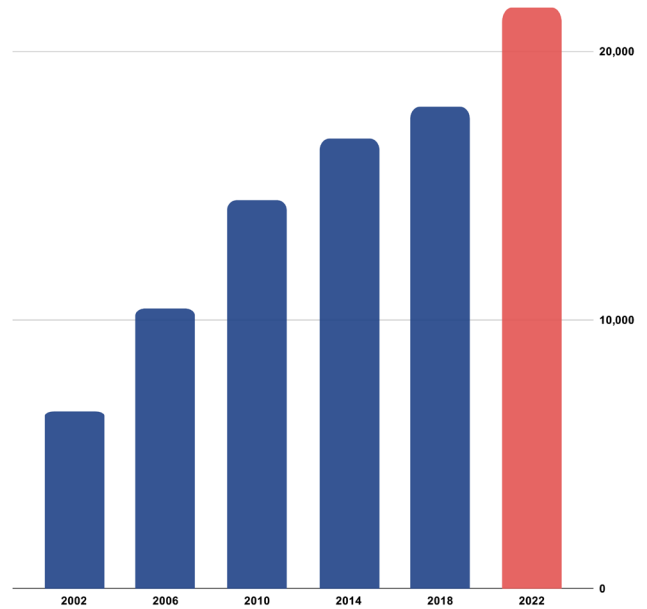
What started as another year of 27J Schools being the third lowest per-student funded district in the state of Colorado, turned out to be the year the community finally voted yes to raising their taxes to better support their neighborhood schools.

About 20 years ago, 27J Schools had about 5,000 students; today the district serves nearly 23,000. 27J Schools, a suburban district northeast of Denver, was able to convince voters that bond issues were needed because the community population and school enrollment were rapidly growing. Voters could easily see all the new housing going up and the expansion of businesses and services around them. However, the community never felt the district needed additional staffing, better compensation for teachers and support staff, improved programs or learning materials. Three themes kept coming up from the public.

1. The district's last local tax increase for school operations was passed in 2000. Virtually all other districts in the state passed several during that time. By early 2022, the district was losing teachers at an alarming rate as many said that while they loved their schools and students, they couldn't meet their own financial obligations.
2. Because the district prioritized putting funding directly into schools, there were a number of functions and systems at the district level that were neglected. For example, as a 23,000-student district, 27J had a department of only two staff members to handle safety issues.
3. Although voters approved a bond issue in 2021 which included adding on to each comprehensive high school a new STEM/CTE center, voters had not passed a mill levy override to support staffing for those centers.

There were no more options for 27J Schools to use to put more band-aids on the district's lack of adequate revenue. There had to be a change in local funding, but it had to be one that the community advocated to happen.

27J Schools Enrollment 2002-2022



In just two decades, 27J Schools' enrollment had quadrupled from 5,000 to 23,000+.





RESEARCH

The communications department dug into finding out more about the community's current values and priorities around education. 27J had lost its seven mill levy override elections since 2000. We launched a community-wide poll in 2021 and it showed the community didn't have much faith in its schools as only 26 percent indicated a favorable or very favorable opinion of the district. Even worse, a full 40 percent of voters said they had no opinion of the district. Only 26 percent of voters said they had a favorable or very favorable opinion about the education 27J was providing students.

Following up in Fall of 2022, we polled again and found only 26 percent of voters said they were satisfied with the quality of education 27J provided. A full 48 percent of voters said the district had enough money to provide students a quality education. An additional 13 percent had no opinion. Obviously, the district had not adequately, openly or effectively communicated about its funding predicament.

On financial trust, only 36 percent of voters said they believed the district was fiscally responsible and spent district funds wisely; 36 percent said the district was not fiscally responsible and 18 percent said they didn't know enough to give an opinion.

This was a clear case of the district not being engaged with the public.

Most people had no information about the district and in talking with community members, they said if they didn't know about the district, it was because the district didn't communicate about it and they assumed the district was not doing a good job.

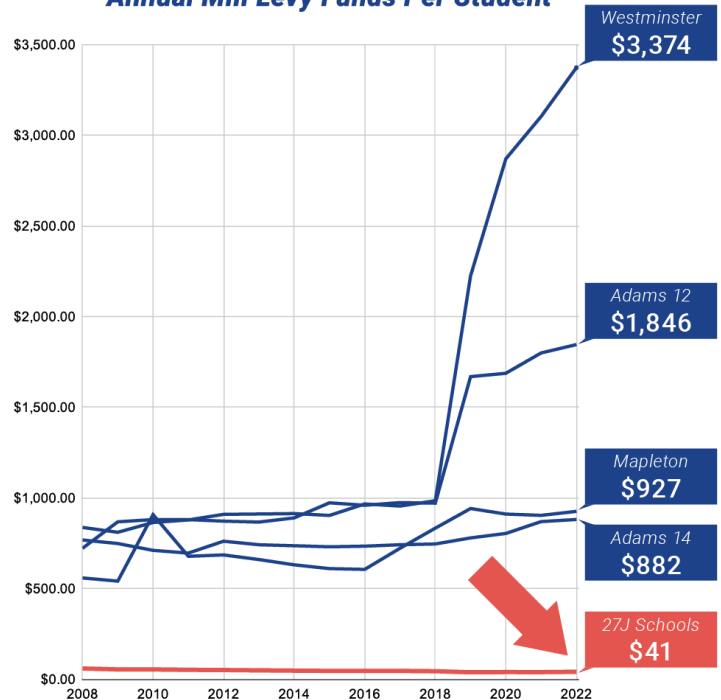
Based on this data, the communications department advocated for a **Blue Ribbon Commission** of community members to review and investigate the district's budget and funding situation. Over the summer of 2022, the committee dug into the state's funding system, the district's spending habits over the last two decades and how 27J stacked up to neighboring districts on things like funding-per-student, student/teacher ratios, instructional staff/student ratios and administrator/student ratios.

Past Election Results

Year	% Yes
2003	28.6%
2005	44.7%
2008	43.2%
2010	43.8%
2011	42.4%
2017	47.9%
2021	47.9%

27J Schools was 0 for 7 on mill levy override elections since 2000.

Annual Mill Levy Funds Per Student



Independent polling of likely-yes voters showed this chart comparing 27J's funding to neighbors' was one of the most effective message tools in increasing support for a potential mill levy override ballot question

RESEARCH (CONTINUED)

“I knew we were behind in funding, but I had no clue just how far behind we were. This is tragic!”

- Blue Ribbon Commission Member

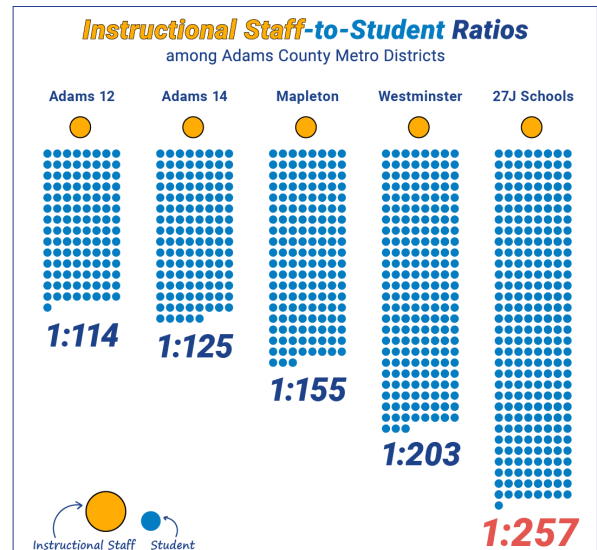
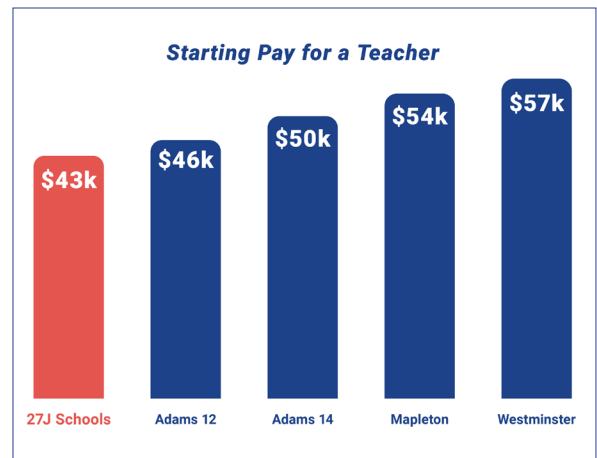
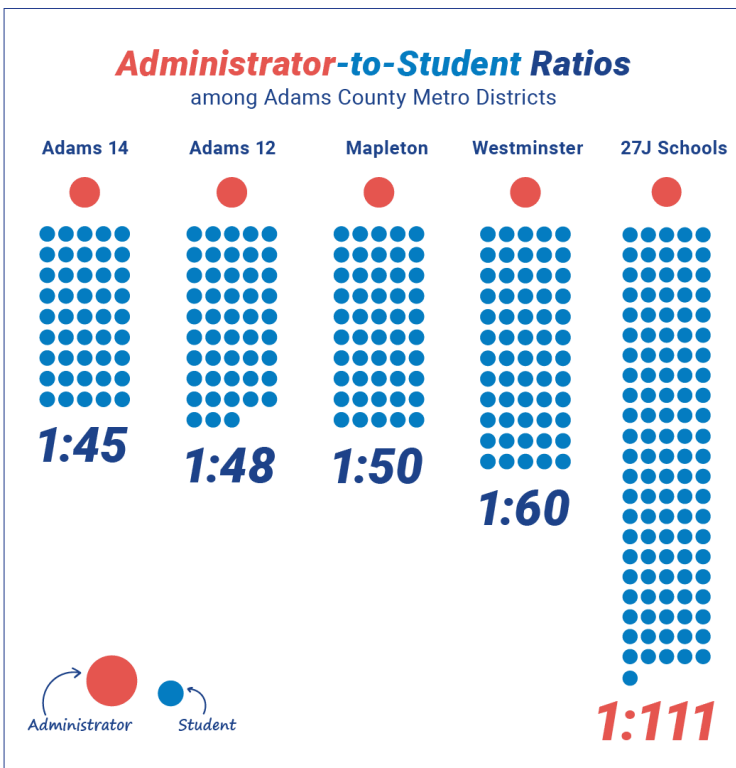
After a complete study of district finances, Blue Ribbon Commission members were thoroughly convinced that 27J Schools needed better funding. If the district didn't get an infusion of funding, it would continue to lose teachers and students weren't going to get the types of courses they needed to be successful after graduation. The commission presented its findings to the Board of Education and it also talked about its fears of going out to voters and possibly losing again simply because they felt it was going to take a lot of time to bring people along in understanding the dire financial situation. The Board understood those worries, but in the end, it decided it had a moral obligation to go back out to the public and ask for more funding.



Commission members included state and local officials, parents, grandparents, a teacher, and recent alumni.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Infographics played a key role in showing the public the funding disparity 27J Schools faced and its impacts.



PLANNING

A group of community members established a citizens VOTE YES campaign called “I am 27J.” This campaign was separate from the district’s information campaign. However, the two campaigns were strategically synchronized. Communications department staff volunteered on the citizens campaign during off-duty hours.

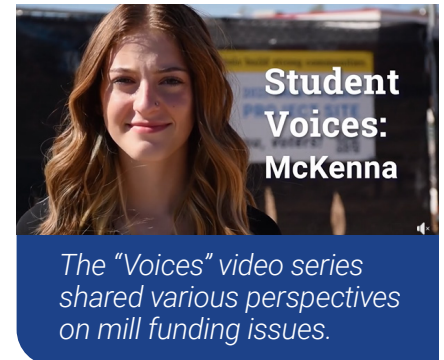
The communications department again set up polling to find out what areas of need resonated most with voters. We found teacher pay had a very strong sense of support as did school safety. And since voters invested in new school facilities with the bond issue passed the previous year, it wanted to see new STEM/CTE centers fully staffed and supplied with the necessary learning materials and curriculum. These were the issues supported most by the community so they became the three areas of focus on the ballot question set for November’s election.

CAMPAIGN GOAL:

Pass a mill levy override in 10 weeks to better fund teacher and support staff compensation, build a district safety department to meet the safety needs of a rapidly growing school district; and fully staff new STEM/CTE centers at each district-managed high school.

STRATEGIES

1. Test messaging with potential voters to see what they feel are the most compelling reasons to support a tax increase for local schools.
2. Use the Blue Ribbon Commission members to be spokespeople with the community to remove the impression that everything was being driven by district administration.
3. Significantly reduce the use of the superintendent as the chief spokesperson and rather use knowledgeable parents, teachers, students and business leaders to speak to their peers.
4. Invest a significant amount of effort and funding in using videos to reach target audiences. (English and Spanish)
5. Use more community youth to speak about their educational experiences and to get 18-year-old students registered to vote.
6. Develop and use community-driven supporters to carry the message to their circles of influence.
7. Monitor social media and web trends every day to find what messages, formats and spokespeople performed best in order to exploit those best practices. Discard messages and formats not meeting expectations.
8. Be more transparent with the community about the good, the bad and the ugly. Let the community weigh in more and give them information and graphics they can share with their circles of influence.



IMPLEMENTATION

July 2022:

- As the Board of Education wasn’t set to consider a ballot question until September, the communications department geared up for what would be an extension of its communication and

STRATEGIES (CONTINUED)

July 2022 CONTINUED:

election campaign from the previous year and which continued into this year. The team reviewed its data on the community's values and priorities as well as what school needs it valued most.

- Using all of the latest polling data and community feedback from various surveys and community meetings, we drafted preliminary messaging.

August 2022:

- We developed and produced several videos to explain how schools are funded and how 27J stacked up to our neighbors. This explainer video was the first time many voters had an explanation of how funding works and exactly how their district stood compared to our neighbors. We developed social media posts and stories that put a personal face on each issue that emerged as a common theme among likely voters.
- Communications staff monitored social media platforms every day to spot trends, answer questions and identify misinformation so we could correct it quickly. We also tracked our narrative ensuring we were telling the news first.

September 2022:

- The Board of Education took its official vote to place the Mill Levy Override question on the ballot for the November 2022 election. The ballot question was to increase taxes to raise \$17.4 million to address safety, compensation, and staffing for new STEM/CTE centers.
- To reach the 70 percent of the community that didn't have a child in school, we used community engagement events like festivals, neighborhood meetings and school gatherings to talk with people face-to-face.
- Each school held a parent meeting about the ballot initiative. Several Blue Ribbon Commission members attended and talked with individuals to better explain how the commission did its work and came to its conclusions.
- The 27J citizens committee, I am 27J, held weekly campaign meetings online. It set up several work groups and parents handled activities such as window painting, contacting parents to attend their school information meetings, and hosting a car at multiple elementary schools' Trunk or Treat events at schools. Parents put thousands of Go VOTE stickers on candy wrappers.
- PTAs had meeting guest speakers talk about the election and answer questions.
- The communications staff developed an editorial calendar to aggressively post news stories about the district's financial situation and the impact on the community. It also developed and posted a wide variety of social media posts in which many featured video clips from some of the larger videos we used to educate the community on the district's financial realities.
- We developed a four-part Facebook Live broadcast aired on Mondays under the title of "Mill Mondays." (See next page)



Parent and community volunteers were key partners in the mill levy override campaign.

MILL MONDAYS: Facebook Live Series

- An alumna from one of our high schools had become a very successful and well-known news anchor in Chicago. Upon retirement, she and her husband moved back home to settle in Brighton. We reached out to Stacey Baca to see if she'd be willing to put on her journalist hat again. We needed her to be the voice of credibility to our community by getting answers to the community's questions and interviewing content experts about the various components of the ballot question. She agreed.
- Despite not having experience in producing broadcasts, the communications department quickly learned technical skills, production, and planning skills from Stacey who was used to having professionally-produced pieces. We learned from Stacey every time we were around her. Staff was eager to meet her professional expectations.
- Those sessions tapped an elementary teacher to talk about her pay, her responsibilities, what she experiences in 27J as a teacher and what her colleagues say about compensation. A guest talked about school safety because he was the executive director of safety and security in a neighboring district, plus he was a parent in 27J and a member of the community oversight committee for the 2021 bond. He explained the kinds of things schools needed to have the safest schools possible. Finally, we brought forward a high school student who had already earned several Career and Technical Education industry certificates and who was planning to go to college at the Colorado School of Mines to become an engineer. Communications Director Janelle Asmus also appeared in each of those interviews to provide facts and answer questions submitted by online viewers.
- The news format resonated well with viewers and performed very well based on engagement data collected each week. The show was broadcast live each week plus each episode was posted on the district's website for people to watch later.



October 2022:

- We hit the streets and went door to door to talk with likely voters. We found out the overwhelming majority of likely voters were committed to vote in less than a month. Feedback from door visits indicated a lot of enthusiasm for the campaign and the transparent way in which the district laid out the facts, its decisions over the past two decades, and how it had done its homework to develop a responsible plan to address some of the funding needs of a growing district.
- Communications staff distributed drop-in articles for schools to include in newsletters. The articles addressed common questions and the biggest concerns people expressed.

STRATEGIES (CONTINUED)

October 2022 CONTINUED:

- District leadership decided what things would be cut or reduced if the ballot measure was unsuccessful.
- Community members created selfie videos saying why they were supporting schools with their vote. The superintendent sent out messages to all staff and parents every week the last month prior to the election encouraging people to turn in their ballot.
- One community's mayor advocated with his city council to pass a reduction in their local property taxes that would offset the school tax increase for members of their community. The reduction was passed by Commerce City.
- We pitched a lot more news stories to the Denver metro media with a largely community lens. We arranged for parents and business leaders to talk with the media about the most important issues so the district would not be the entity championing the message.
- In online community e-newsletters, we featured the results of community polling and showcased how their views were incorporated into the district's work in meaningful and powerful ways. We earned very good feedback in the form of likes and shares from the community and our click-throughs were really high.

EVALUATION

CAMPAIGN GOAL: EXCEEDED

On November 8, 2022, voters in 27J Schools ended a 23-year mill levy drought in the district by passing the mill levy override ballot issue with 57.3 percent of the vote!

Following the win at the polls for the mill levy override, we again turned to the community to find out how their opinions may have changed and what most likely spurred the change in voting behavior.

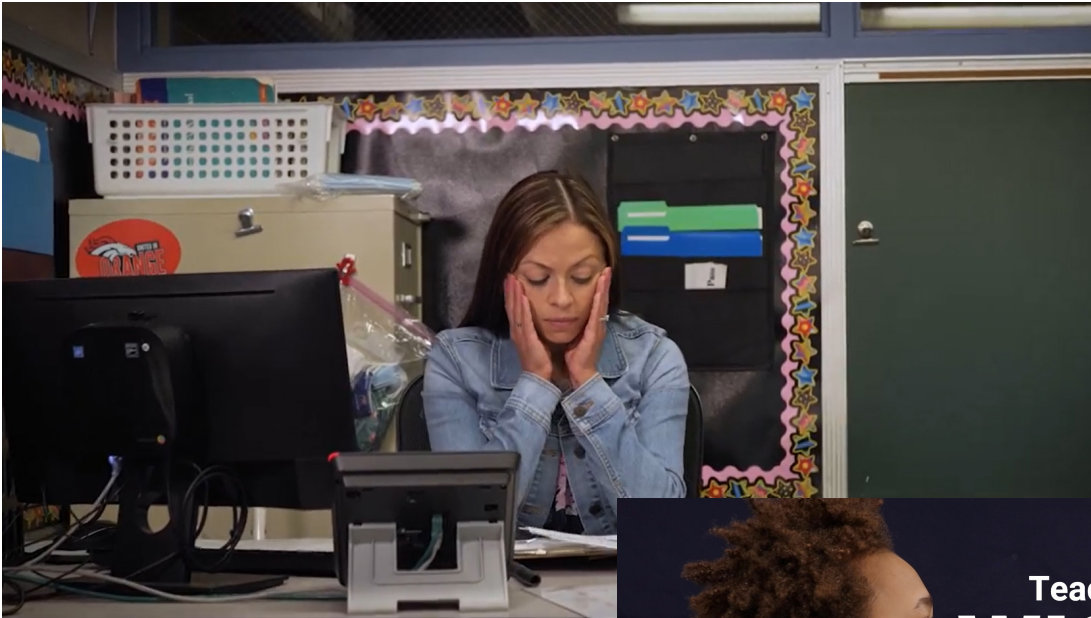
Compared to 2021 community poll data, the 2022 campaign was able to

- Increase the total percent of people expressing a favorable opinion of 27J by 25 percent
- Decrease the total percent of people expressing no opinion about the district by 28 percent.
- Increase the percent of people expressing approval for the job 27J was doing educating students by 29 percent.
- Decrease the percent of people expressing no opinion about the job 27J was doing educating students by 23 percent.

The community confirmed the most compelling messages in the campaign. In the order of most compelling, those message were about:

- Need to increase teacher salaries
- 27J was significantly underfunded compared to neighboring districts
- Need to improve student safety
- Need to increase funding for STEM/CTE programs
- The fact that quality schools have an impact on the local economy
- Avoid cuts to sports, activities and bus services

These data are now used as research in our ongoing, district communications plan.



But in the past 20 years, voters have told 27J kids they **are** worth less.

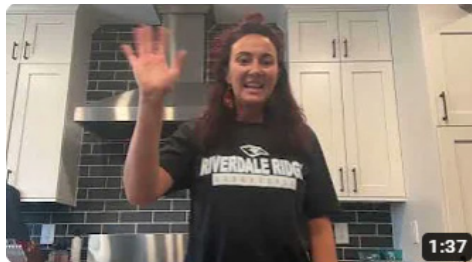


**WHEN 5B
DOES PASS...**

LINKS

- [“How are my local, 27J schools funded?”](#)
- [“Teachers Matter” - Teachers Elevate All of Us series](#)
- [“27J kids are worth more than \\$41 per year”](#)
- [“Vote Yes on 5B”](#)

TESTIMONIALS



Data told us our voters wanted to see “people like them” talking about what they thought about the mill levy override proposal. In response, parents launched a selfie testimonial video project.


Using parent networks and the work groups from “I am 27J,” dozens and dozens of selfie videos were made and posted to the campaign’s social media channels. Social media data revealed that the videos were extremely popular. The videos getting the most attention -- kids.

VOLUNTEERING





VOTE YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS!

GET THE FACTS ON SCHOOL FUNDING!

 SCAN ME

- ✓ Pay teachers better to hire and keep the best.
- ✓ Better protect students with trained safety staff at every school.
- ✓ Provide all students with job-ready skills and in-demand industry training.



YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS

YOUR YES VOTE ON 5B PROTECTS STUDENTS FROM GUN VIOLENCE AND THREATS, PAYS TEACHERS BETTER SO WE CAN HIRE AND KEEP THEM, AND PROVIDES ALL STUDENTS WITH JOB-READY SKILLS!

YOUR YES VOTE ON 5B KEEPS YOUR LOCAL TAX DOLLARS AT YOUR LOCAL SCHOOLS AND COSTS LESS THAN \$1/DAY ON A \$500,000 HOUSE.

RETURN your ballot today with YOUR YES VOTE ON 5B!

Paid for by Iam27J
 361 Terra Vista St.
 Brighton, CO 80601

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WHAT'S AT STAKE?
 WHAT'S INCLUDED?
 GET ANSWERS BY
 SCANNING THIS CODE


 SCAN ME

Keep this card handy until you VOTE YES ON 5B!

VOTE YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS!

YES ON 5B WILL:

GET THE FACTS ON SCHOOL FUNDING!

 SCAN ME

- ✓ Pay teachers better so 27J doesn't lose great teachers to neighboring districts who pay much more.
- ✓ Better protect students with trained safety staff at every school.
- ✓ Provide all students with job-ready skills and in-demand industry training.

YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS

VOTE YES ON 5B TO INVEST IN 27J KIDS!

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YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS

Take a look at your neighborhood, the schools, and the children who go there...

These are the leaders of tomorrow!
 Let's make sure we prepare them well with the tools and skills they will need!

YOUR YES VOTE ON 5B MEANS SAFER SCHOOLS, BETTER TEACHER PAY, AND BETTER PROGRAMS FOR ALL OF OUR STUDENTS!

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 361 Terra Vista St.
 Brighton, CO 80601

Keep this card handy until you VOTE YES ON 5B!

VOTE YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS!

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A YES VOTE on 5B helps EVERY student!

5B DROP OFF your ballot today with YOUR YES VOTE on 5B!

- ✓ Pay teachers better so we can hire and keep the best.
- ✓ Better protect students with trained safety staff at every school.
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WHAT'S AT STAKE? WHAT'S INCLUDED? GET ANSWERS BY SCANNING THIS CODE.


 SCAN ME

YES ON 5B FOR 27J KIDS

