

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PARTNERSHIP WINS ON A BALLOT MEASURE BY CENTERING YOUTH:

HOW THEY DID IT



ROCKY MOUNTAIN
PARTNERSHIP
StriveTogether® thrive together

 **kidsimpact**
ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

StriveTogether®
Every child. Cradle to career.

Summary

This briefing document tells the story of how [Rocky Mountain Partnership \(RMP\)](#) used a youth-centered strategy – including a youth impact assessment and a youth-led coalition – to help pass a local school ballot measure in November 2022. RMP is a group of cross-sector partners and community members in the metropolitan area north of Denver, Colorado, that is working to solve challenging problems that stand in the way of economic and social mobility. The area includes Adams County, the City of Arvada, the City of Aurora, and the City and County of Broomfield.*

The ballot measure, 5B, was a property tax increase (known as a mill levy override) to raise funds for [27J Schools](#) and its 22,000 students. With the support of RMP’s youth-led efforts, the measure passed by more than 57% and will raise \$17.7 million annually to pay for the following resources:

- Staff and resources for career and technical education and STEM centers (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).
- Teacher and support staff salaries.
- School safety personnel and training.



*This region is home to over 900,000 individuals, over half of whom are people of color. Adams County, the largest share of the region, is a “minority majority” community. It is also one of the fastest-growing regions in Colorado, having grown its population by 19% over the past 10 years, with no sign of slowing down.

Background

RMP is a member of the [StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network](#) and one of five network communities across the country participating in a pilot called Shifting Public Accountability and Resources to Center Youth (SPARCY). To effectively engage youth, SPARCY provides StriveTogether communities with technical assistance on youth impact assessments through [Kids Impact Initiative](#), a national nonprofit focused on strengthening public-sector accountability for children and youth’s well-being.

Per student, 27J Schools is the **third-least-funded school district in the state of Colorado**. Since 2000, the public has voted against every local ballot measure for a mill levy override. 5B was the first time in 22 years the district secured additional property tax revenue to support its schools.

RMP’s Community Coalition – comprised of youth and community leaders – supported the passage of this ballot measure by working alongside the “I am 27J” campaign beginning in September 2022. In Colorado, like most other states, a school district cannot use its funds to pay for any advocacy communication once a measure has been placed on the ballot by the local board of education. “I am 27J” took on the advocacy role to promote the ballot measure.

Because the school board put the issue on the ballot much later than is typical, the campaign had a short time frame to engage voters before the November election. “I am 27J” partnered with RMP to connect with new voters and uplift the voices of young people, building on the district’s marketing plan to increase awareness about its neighborhood schools and their accomplishments.

Strategy

Given that similar measures had failed many times before, the district knew a fresh approach was needed to pass 5B. Messaging and stories had to center young people’s personal experiences and be relatable to the average voter. RMP took the lead on communication, particularly targeting the 18- to 34-year-old voters. With its close connections to the community, RMP was uniquely situated to elevate the voices of young people and their families.



Focus Groups and Interviews with Community Members

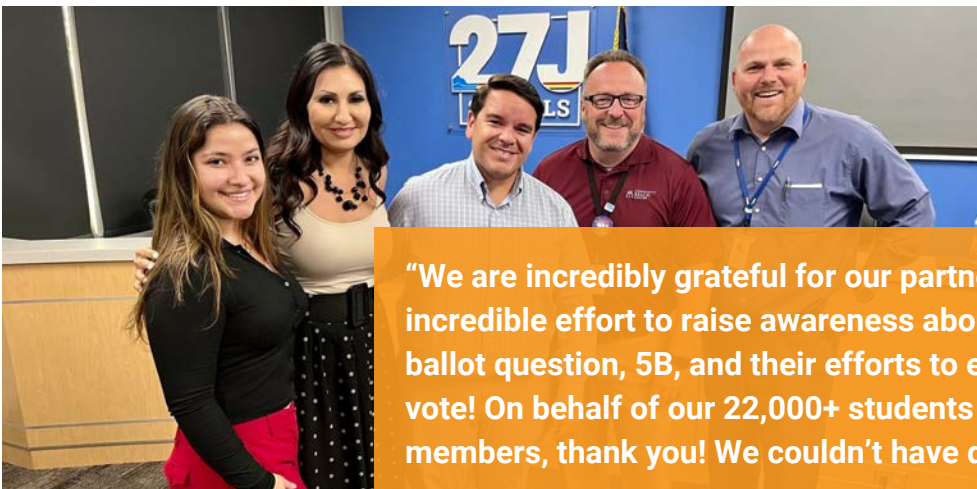
To understand how the historic underfunding of the district impacted students and parents, RMP conducted two focus groups as well as one-on-one interviews with parents, students, and recent graduates of 27J Schools.

RMP received rich and consistent input from students and parents on the impact limited funding had on the school district.

Youth and parents emphasized a need for academic, mental health and other support services for students; transportation to school and after-school events; and sports programs and other extracurricular activities – all of which had been cut in prior years due to budget constraints.

Students told compelling stories about their school experience, what they missed out on in school, and how it impacted them. Parents also pointed out that there were limited opportunities and support for them to engage in their children’s education. And, as a result of being underfunded, the district was unable to provide adequate services for students and families with limited English proficiency.

These insights made it clear: While 27J Schools was doing the best it could with limited resources, it simply wasn’t enough. 27J students were losing their ability to compete with students in other districts because they lacked robust learning opportunities and lost many high-quality teachers who were unable to make ends meet on the low salaries offered by the district. A community poll showed that voters were very sympathetic toward teachers and wanted to pay them better. **Passing ballot measure 5B would provide essential funding to address some key needs impacting students, families, and the teachers who supported their learning.**



“We are incredibly grateful for our partnership with RMP and their incredible effort to raise awareness about our mill levy override ballot question, 5B, and their efforts to encourage young voters to vote! On behalf of our 22,000+ students and 2,000+ staff members, thank you! We couldn’t have done it without you!”

– Dr. Chris Fiedler, Superintendent of 27J Schools and RMP Co-Chair

Youth Impact Assessment

RMP used a youth impact assessment (YIA) to shed light on how increasing public education funding in the district through ballot measure 5B would benefit youth and families. A YIA is a set of questions about a proposed policy that uncovers the likely consequences of the policy for young people – such as whether it would improve educational, health, or other outcomes for youth – especially for youth most likely to be left behind. Kids Impact Initiative provided support to RMP as it conducted the YIA to educate voters about what 5B would really mean for students, parents, and the larger community.

Kids Impact Initiative assisted RMP in adapting its YIA template into nine questions to be answered regarding the 5B proposal. One of RMP's youth leaders also reviewed and helped shape the following questions:

- Why is a mill levy override for 27J Schools needed for youth?
- What does 27J Schools hope to accomplish by passing the mill levy override?
- How will increased funding for career and technical education affect youth attending 27J Schools?
- How will increased funding for compensation to attract and retain experienced staff affect youth attending 27J Schools?
- How will increased funding for school safety affect youth attending 27J Schools?
- Are there particular groups of young people who are especially affected by the measure?
- How will passage of the mill levy override affect voters aged 18-24 living within the 27J Schools boundaries?
- How did young people most affected by this proposal provide input into this assessment and/or the ballot measure?
- RMP's mission is to "come together to solve challenging problems that stand in the way of community members' economic and social mobility." How does the mill levy override support the region's vision of economic and social mobility for ALL?

RMP used the results from its focus groups and community interviews, along with additional data and information, to answer these questions. It organized the responses into an impact assessment resource document complete with content that could be adapted into a variety of formats to educate voters on social media, live media interviews, and other short messaging pieces. Typically, communities and government officials compile impact assessment results into a two-page summary or a longer, well-designed analysis. But because of the compressed time frame, RMP decided a resource document with comprehensive data points available for various uses would be the most effective way to communicate the findings to 27J Schools voters in an understandable and culturally relevant way.

The messengers were important, too. RMP provided the impact assessment findings to its Community Coalition to share with the broader community. Youth were especially powerful storytellers. [This news clip](#), for example, highlights a recent graduate of 27J Schools using the findings from the YIA to show how ballot measure 5B would affect her family and her younger siblings.

Youth Coalition

A crucial, complementary strategy to support the passage of ballot measure 5B was a youth-led Community Coalition. RMP enlisted and empowered youth to be the primary messengers of the impact assessment findings as part of larger education and awareness efforts. This coalition, comprised of youth and community members who attended 27J Schools or grew up in the area, connected with over 900 community members at over 20 community meetings and events, educating youth and families on the importance of the mill levy override and how the community could make a difference by voting "yes" on 5B.

The Youth Coalition connected with over 900 community members at over 20 community meetings and events.

Building on the Momentum of the 5B Win

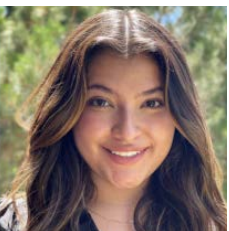
Within a two-month period, RMP was able to accomplish the following:

1. **Conduct focus groups and interviews.**
2. **Develop and disseminate the results of its youth impact assessment.**
3. **Coordinate and support a Community Coalition in engaging youth and other Coalition members to educate the community about the ballot measure.**
4. **Develop a communications campaign to support the measure.**

RMP staff are beginning to integrate best practices from these youth-centered strategies into their day-to-day operations.

Using the Results of the Impact Assessment to Foster Additional Improvements in the District

As essential as the funding coming from the approved ballot measure 5B is, the YIA found hurdles facing 27J students, parents, and staff that the measure alone cannot remove. Drawing from the impact assessment findings, RMP is completing a report for school district officials with recommendations from community members themselves on how to improve the education and well-being of its students beyond the ballot measure.



Gabriela Chavez
RMP Community Coalition Member

The board of education was so impressed with the leadership of RMP's advocacy work that it appointed Gabriela Chavez, a member of RMP's Community Coalition, to serve on an oversight council monitoring the implementation of the mill levy override funds and programs. More than 70 community members applied to serve on this important citizen group, but only nine people could be appointed. During the "I am 27J" campaign, Gabriela represented the voice of the community's youth, courageously sharing her message of appreciation for 27J Schools as well as her regret for missed critical learning opportunities. Her compelling message about the impact of inadequate funding resonated with voters, and board members wanted to continue to hear her voice as a way for the community and the district to stay accountable to one another in the use of 5B funds.

"I've been through this seven times. This community rallying together is what's different."

– 27J Schools district leadership



Integrating Youth Impact Assessments into RMP's Ongoing Work

RMP believes its experience using a YIA to support passage of ballot measure 5B provides a proof of concept for a YIA and a strong example of how it can be used to drive policy change. For its first YIA, RMP found it was important to have hands-on support from Kids Impact Initiative, whose staffing help allowed the assessment to be completed at an accelerated pace. Kids Impact provided input on the assessment's design and content, as well as offered tips on how to use the findings most effectively. Now, RMP itself is equipped to develop the capacity required to use YIAs to promote other policy changes.

Growing the Youth-Led Coalition

RMP is leveraging the work it did with youth on the 5B campaign to continue to support youth and community-led action. This includes elevating members of the Community Coalition to assume leadership roles alongside leaders from the school district, government, business, nonprofit, and community-based organizations.

Together, youth and community leaders will set strategic priorities for RMP, participate in innovative projects to advance these priorities, identify new projects that address key community needs, and hold the region accountable for achieving clear goals.

In addition to these shared roles, RMP's Community Coalition will play an elevated role in building trust and engaging community members in projects that will help address what is most impacting them in these ways:

- Gathering community input and perspectives to identify what individuals are experiencing.
- Using data (including through impact assessments) to identify what changes need to be made.
- Mobilizing the larger community and advocating for change (including supporting ballot measures beyond 5B, state legislation and other local policies).

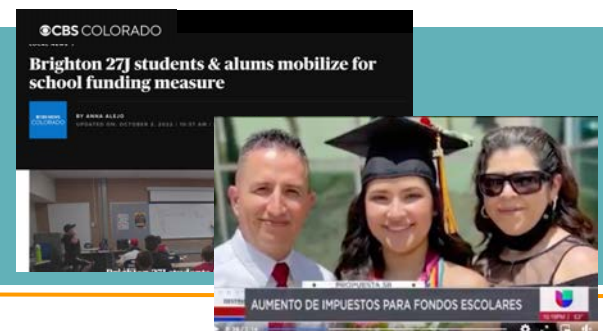
Conclusion

In just two months, RMP supported a successful ballot measure campaign that will bring tens of millions of dollars to one of the most underfunded school districts in Colorado. RMP attributes its success to two complementary strategies that center youth: 1) using a YIA to keep the focus of the measure on the experiences of 27J students and families and 2) empowering youth to serve as leaders and drivers of education and awareness efforts. **RMP is building on this work to elevate youth and community members and to use youth impact assessments as it continues efforts to improve economic and social mobility for all community members.**

Coverage of Mill Levy Override Win

[CBS Colorado Coverage of RMP's Youth and Community-Led Coalition](#)

[Univision Coverage of RMP's Youth and Community-Led Coalition](#)



Additional Resources / References

[RMP's Summary of the Mill Levy Override Win](#), [StriveTogether's 2022 Annual Report](#)
[Together for Change Podcast](#), [Kids Impact Initiative's fact sheet](#)