A BILL FOR AN ACT

CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION
FOR PUBLIC EMPLOYEES NOT EMPLOYED BY THE STATE.

Bill Summary

(Note: This summary applies to this bill as introduced and does not reflect any amendments that may be subsequently adopted. If this bill passes third reading in the house of introduction, a bill summary that applies to the reengrossed version of this bill will be available at http://www.leg.state.co.us/billsummaries.)

The bill prohibits a county, municipality, or local education provider from imposing any disciplinary action against an employee on account of the employee's statements to any person about the local government that the employee reasonably believes to show:

V A violation of a state or federal law, a local ordinance or resolution, or a local education provider policy;

Shading denotes HOUSE amendment. Double underlining denotes SENATE amendment. Capital letters indicate new material to be added to existing statute. Dashes through the words indicate deletions from existing statute.
A waste or misuse of public funds;
Fraud;
An abuse of authority;
Mismanagement; or
A danger to the health or safety of students, employees, or the public.

The bill permits an employee to file a written complaint with the office of administrative courts for referral to an administrative law judge alleging that a local government has imposed disciplinary action that violates this prohibition and seeking injunctive relief and damages. Employees who lose the administrative hearing may file a civil action in district court. The employee protection does not apply if the disclosure was false or made with reckless disregard for the truth or falsity thereof, or if it was of a protected public record or confidential information that was not reasonably necessary to show one or more of the identified circumstances.

Administrative law judges are given jurisdiction to hear, determine, and make findings and awards on all these whistleblower cases. The director of the office of administrative courts is required to establish rules to govern these proceedings and hearings.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Colorado:

SECTION 1. In Colorado Revised Statutes, add 22-1-130 as follows:

22-1-130. Disclosure - retaliation prohibited - civil action - definitions. (1) AS USED IN THIS SECTION:

(a) "DISCIPLINARY ACTION" MEANS ANY FORM OF DISCIPLINE OR PENALTY, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DISMISSAL, DEMOTION, TRANSFER, REASSIGNMENT, SUSPENSION, CORRECTIVE ACTION, REPRIMAND, ADMONISHMENT, UNSATISFACTORY OR BELOW STANDARD PERFORMANCE EVALUATION, REDUCTION IN FORCE, OR WITHHOLDING OF WORK, OR THE THREAT OF ANY SUCH DISCIPLINE OR PENALTY.

(b) "EMPLOYEE" MEANS ANY PERSON EMPLOYED BY A LOCAL EDUCATION PROVIDER.

(c) "LOCAL EDUCATION PROVIDER" MEANS A SCHOOL DISTRICT, A
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZED BY A SCHOOL DISTRICT PURSUANT TO PART 1 OF ARTICLE 30.5 OF THIS TITLE, A CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZED BY THE STATE CHARTER SCHOOL INSTITUTE PURSUANT TO PART 5 OF ARTICLE 30.5 OF THIS TITLE, OR A BOARD OF COOPERATIVE SERVICES CREATED AND OPERATING PURSUANT TO ARTICLE 5 OF THIS TITLE THAT OPERATES ONE OR MORE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

(2) (a) Except as set forth in paragraph (c) of this subsection (2), a local education provider shall not initiate or administer any disciplinary action against an employee on account of the employee's statements to any person about the local education provider that the employee reasonably believes to show:

   (I) A violation of a state or federal law or a local education provider policy;

   (II) A waste or misuse of public funds;

   (III) Fraud;

   (IV) An abuse of authority;

   (V) Gross mismanagement; or

   (VI) A danger to the health or safety of students, employees, or the public.

(b) The prohibition set forth in paragraph (a) of this subsection (2) does not apply to:

   (I) An employee who discloses information that he or she knows to be false or who discloses information with reckless disregard for the truth or falsity thereof;

   (II) An employee who discloses information that is from a public record closed to public inspection pursuant to section
24-72-204, C.R.S., OR THAT IS OTHERWISE CONFIDENTIAL UNDER STATE LAW, IF THE EMPLOYEE'S DISCLOSURE IS NOT REASONABLY NECESSARY TO SHOW ONE OR MORE OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES IDENTIFIED IN PARAGRAPH (a) OF THIS SUBSECTION (2); OR

(III) AN EMPLOYEE WHO DISCLOSES INFORMATION THAT IS CONFIDENTIAL UNDER ANY PROVISION OF FEDERAL LAW.

(c) IT IS THE OBLIGATION OF AN EMPLOYEE WHO WISHES TO DISCLOSE INFORMATION UNDER THE PROTECTION OF THIS SECTION TO MAKE A GOOD FAITH EFFORT TO INFORM HIS OR HER SUPERVISOR, AN ADMINISTRATOR ABOVE THE LEVEL OF HIS OR HER SUPERVISOR, OR A BOARD MEMBER OF THE LOCAL EDUCATION PROVIDER OF THE NATURE OF THE INFORMATION TO BE DISCLOSED PRIOR TO THE TIME OF DISCLOSURE.

(3) WITHIN NINETY DAYS AFTER THE EMPLOYEE KNEW OR SHOULD HAVE KNOWN OF A DISCIPLINARY ACTION, AN EMPLOYEE MAY FILE A WRITTEN COMPLAINT WITH THE OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE COURTS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF PERSONNEL FOR REFERRAL TO AN ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE ALLEGING A VIOLATION OF THIS SECTION AND SEEKING INJUNCTIVE RELIEF AND DAMAGES. THE EMPLOYEE MUST SERVE THE LOCAL EDUCATION PROVIDER IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COLORADO RULES OF CIVIL PROCEDURE. PRIOR TO THE TIME THAT AN ANSWER IS DUE, THE LOCAL EDUCATION PROVIDER MAY FILE A WRITTEN NOTICE REJECTING THE ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE’S JURISDICTION, AND, IN WHICH CASE, THE JUDGE SHALL DISMISS THE COMPLAINT WITHOUT PREJUDICE. HEARINGS ARE CONDUCTED CONSISTENT WITH THE PROVISIONS OF SECTION 24-4-105, C.R.S., UNLESS THE DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE COURTS ESTABLISHES DIFFERENT RULES THAT APPLY. THE FINAL DECISION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE IS SUBJECT TO JUDICIAL REVIEW BY THE
COURT OF APPEALS IN THE SAME MANNER AS AN AGENCY ACTION THAT IS
APPEALED IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 24-4-106 (11), C.R.S.

(4) AN EMPLOYEE WHO DID NOT FILE A WRITTEN COMPLAINT WITH
THE OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE COURTS OR WHO FILED A WRITTEN
COMPLAINT BUT THE LOCAL EDUCATION PROVIDER REJECTED THE
JURISDICTION MAY BRING A CIVIL ACTION IN THE APPROPRIATE DISTRICT
COURT OF THE STATE ALLEGING A VIOLATION OF THIS SECTION AND
SEEKING DAMAGES AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF.

(5) AN ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE OR DISTRICT COURT JUDGE
MAY AWARD AN EMPLOYEE WHO PREVAILS IN ACTION BROUGHT UNDER
THIS SECTION DAMAGES, INJUNCTIVE RELIEF, ADMINISTRATIVE OR COURT
COSTS, ATTORNEY FEES, AND SUCH OTHER RELIEF AS HE OR SHE DEEMS
APPROPRIATE.

SECTION 2. In Colorado Revised Statutes, 24-30-1003, add (6)
as follows:

24-30-1003. Administrative law judges - appointment -
qualifications - standards of conduct. (6) ADMINISTRATIVE LAW
JUDGES IN THE OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE COURTS HAVE JURISDICTION TO
HEAR, DETERMINE, AND MAKE FINDINGS AND AWARDS ON ALL CASES
REFERRED TO THEM IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 22-1-130 (3),
30-10-1101 (3), OR 31-4-601 (3), C.R.S. THE DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF
ADMINISTRATIVE COURTS MAY ESTABLISH RULES TO GOVERN THESE
PROCEEDINGS AND HEARINGS.

SECTION 3. In Colorado Revised Statutes, add part 11 to article
10 of title 30 as follows:

PART 11

WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION
30-10-1101. Disclosure - retaliation prohibited - civil action -
definitions. (1) As used in this section:

(a) "Disciplinary action" means any form of discipline or penalty, including, but not limited to, dismissal, demotion, transfer, reassignment, suspension, corrective action, reprimand, admonishment, unsatisfactory or below standard performance evaluation, reduction in force, or withholding of work, or the threat of any such discipline or penalty.

(b) "Employee" means any person employed by a county.

(2) (a) Except as set forth in paragraph (c) of this subsection (2), a county shall not initiate or administer any disciplinary action against an employee on account of the employee's statements to any person about the county that the employee reasonably believes to show:

(I) A violation of a state or federal law or a local ordinance or resolution;

(II) A waste or misuse of public funds;

(III) Fraud;

(IV) An abuse of authority;

(V) Gross mismanagement; or

(VI) A danger to the health or safety of employees or the public.

(b) The prohibition set forth in paragraph (a) of this subsection (2) does not apply to:

(I) An employee who discloses information that he or she knows to be false or who discloses information with reckless disregard for the truth or falsity thereof;
(II) An employee who discloses information that is from a public record closed to public inspection pursuant to section 24-72-204, C.R.S., or that is otherwise confidential under state law, if the employee's disclosure is not reasonably necessary to show one or more of the circumstances identified in paragraph (a) of this subsection (2); or

(III) An employee who discloses information that is confidential under any provision of federal law.

(c) It is the obligation of an employee who wishes to disclose information under the protection of this section to make a good faith effort to inform his or her supervisor, an administrator above the level of his or her supervisor, or a county commissioner of the nature of the information to be disclosed prior to the time of disclosure.

(3) Within ninety days after the employee knew or should have known of a disciplinary action, an employee may file a written complaint with the office of administrative courts in the department of personnel for referral to an administrative law judge alleging a violation of this section and seeking injunctive relief and damages. The employee must serve the county in accordance with the Colorado rules of civil procedure. Prior to the time that an answer is due, the county may file a written notice rejecting the administrative law judge's jurisdiction, and, in which case, the judge shall dismiss the complaint without prejudice. Hearings are conducted consistent with the provisions of section 24-4-105, C.R.S., unless the director of the office of administrative courts establishes different rules that apply.
THE FINAL DECISION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE IS SUBJECT TO JUDICIAL REVIEW BY THE COURT OF APPEALS IN THE SAME MANNER AS AN AGENCY ACTION THAT IS APPEALED IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 24-4-106 (11), C.R.S.

(4) AN EMPLOYEE WHO DID NOT FILE A WRITTEN COMPLAINT WITH THE OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE COURTS OR WHO FILED A WRITTEN COMPLAINT BUT THE COUNTY REJECTED THE JURISDICTION MAY BRING A CIVIL ACTION IN THE APPROPRIATE DISTRICT COURT OF THE STATE ALLEGING A VIOLATION OF THIS SECTION AND SEEKING DAMAGES AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF.

(5) AN ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE OR DISTRICT COURT JUDGE MAY AWARD AN EMPLOYEE WHO PREVAILS IN ACTION BROUGHT UNDER THIS SECTION DAMAGES, INJUNCTIVE RELIEF, ADMINISTRATIVE OR COURT COSTS, ATTORNEY FEES, AND SUCH OTHER RELIEF AS HE OR SHE DEEMS APPROPRIATE.

SECTION 4. In Colorado Revised Statutes, add part 6 to article 4 of title 31 as follows:

PART 6

WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION

31-4-601. Disclosure - retaliation prohibited - civil action - definitions. (1) AS USED IN THIS SECTION:

(a) "DISCIPLINARY ACTION" MEANS ANY FORM OF DISCIPLINE OR PENALTY, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DISMISSAL, DEMOTION, TRANSFER, REASSIGNMENT, SUSPENSION, CORRECTIVE ACTION, REPRIMAND, ADMONISHMENT, UNSATISFACTORY OR BELOW STANDARD PERFORMANCE EVALUATION, REDUCTION IN FORCE, OR WITHHOLDING OF WORK, OR THE THREAT OF ANY SUCH DISCIPLINE OR PENALTY.
(b) "Employee" means any person employed by a municipality.

(2) (a) Except as set forth in paragraph (c) of this subsection (2), a municipality shall not initiate or administer any disciplinary action against an employee on account of the employee's statements to any person about the municipality that the employee reasonably believes to show:

(I) A violation of a state or federal law or a local ordinance or resolution;

(II) A waste or misuse of public funds;

(III) Fraud;

(IV) An abuse of authority;

(V) Gross mismanagement; or

(VI) A danger to the health or safety of employees or the public.

(b) The prohibition set forth in paragraph (a) of this subsection (2) does not apply to:

(I) An employee who discloses information that he or she knows to be false or who discloses information with reckless disregard for the truth or falsity thereof;

(II) An employee who discloses information that is from a public record closed to public inspection pursuant to section 24-72-204, C.R.S., or that is otherwise confidential under state law, if the employee's disclosure is not reasonably necessary to show one or more of the circumstances identified in paragraph (a) of this subsection (2); or

(III) An employee who discloses information that is
CONFIDENTIAL UNDER ANY PROVISION OF FEDERAL LAW.

(c) It is the obligation of an employee who wishes to disclose information under the protection of this section to make a good faith effort to inform his or her supervisor, an administrator above the level of his or her supervisor, or a member of the municipality's governing body to be disclosed prior to the time of disclosure.

(3) Within ninety days after the employee knew or should have known of a disciplinary action, an employee may file a written complaint with the office of administrative courts in the department of personnel for referral to an administrative law judge alleging a violation of this section and seeking injunctive relief and damages. The employee must serve the municipality in accordance with the Colorado rules of civil procedure. Prior to the time that an answer is due, the municipality may file a written notice rejecting the administrative law judge's jurisdiction, and, in which case, the judge shall dismiss the complaint without prejudice. Hearings are conducted consistent with the provisions of section 24-4-105, C.R.S., unless the director of the office of administrative courts establishes different rules that apply. The final decision of the administrative law judge is subject to judicial review by the court of appeals in the same manner as an agency action that is appealed in accordance with section 24-4-106 (11), C.R.S.

(4) An employee who did not file a written complaint with the office of administrative courts or who filed a written complaint but the municipality rejected the jurisdiction may
BRING A CIVIL ACTION IN THE APPROPRIATE DISTRICT COURT OF THE STATE

ALLEGING A VIOLATION OF THIS SECTION AND SEEKING DAMAGES AND

INJUNCTIVE RELIEF.

(5) AN ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE OR DISTRICT COURT JUDGE
MAY AWARD AN EMPLOYEE WHO PREVAILS IN ACTION BROUGHT UNDER
THIS SECTION DAMAGES, INJUNCTIVE RELIEF, ADMINISTRATIVE OR COURT
COSTS, ATTORNEY FEES, AND SUCH OTHER RELIEF AS HE OR SHE DEEMS
APPROPRIATE.

SECTION 5. Act subject to petition - effective date -
applicability. (1) This act takes effect at 12:01 a.m. on the day following
the expiration of the ninety-day period after final adjournment of the
general assembly (August 10, 2016, if adjournment sine die is on May 11,
2016); except that, if a referendum petition is filed pursuant to section 1
(3) of article V of the state constitution against this act or an item, section,
or part of this act within such period, then the act, item, section, or part
will not take effect unless approved by the people at the general election
to be held in November 2016 and, in such case, will take effect on the
date of the official declaration of the vote thereon by the governor.

(2) This act applies to information disclosed on or after the
applicable effective date of this act.