



# LEADING WITH HEART

## Highlands Ranch High School's AP Stuebinger wins 2024 Colorado Secondary School Assistant Principal of the Year

*This is one of a series of articles highlighting the work and accomplishments of CASE award honorees for 2024. This award winner, Keri Stuebinger, received the 2024 Colorado Secondary School Assistant Principal of the Year. Each award winner will receive recognition at the annual CASE Awards Ceremony on April 26, 2024.*

Laughter filled the air in the cosmetology class at Highlands Ranch High School (HRHS) on the morning of Nov. 29 as Assistant Principal Keri Stuebinger entered the classroom and salon, greeting each student with a smile. Some students curled hair on a bodiless doll head, while others learned about nail applications in their high school class.

The classroom-to-salon educational space is Stuebinger's "baby," according to Principal Chris Page.

Stuebinger led the development of the cosmetology program three years ago, insisting on a full-sized salon and industry-worthy educational tools. Thanks to a 2018 voter-approved bond, the 1,600-square-foot space provides an educational opportunity for college credit and clinical hours for students to become estheticians, nail technicians, and more.

Now, at student-rate prices, there is a salon with its own secure entrance where customers can come in to receive color treatments, cuts, blowouts, nail care, and more from students. The licensing rate of the cosmetology program is 95%, according to Mark Mitchell, the year one cosmetology teacher at HRHS.

"She's been amazing helping to promote to the students in schools throughout the district," Mitchell said. "We have a waiting list every year."

Stuebinger, while serving as an assistant principal, is not an unusual sight for these students as she explores the campus Career and Technical Education (CTE) and math classrooms, her two main focuses at HRHS. With a campus of just under 1,400 students, Stuebinger said HRHS provides smaller class sizes compared to the average high school.

Stuebinger has served in various roles at HRHS since 2002, moving from English teacher to activities director to her role now as assistant principal. In her 10 years as an assistant principal, Stuebinger has helped train educators to meet state guidelines while on the evaluation council in the district and grew the CTE program at HRHS.

With over 20 years of experience at HRHS, Stuebinger defined her career here. Her daughters also attended HRHS: her youngest is a sophomore, and her oldest graduated last year.



I joke that I've grown up in this building," Stuebinger said. "...So this is truly home."

Stuebinger grew up in the Central Valley of California but left to attend Colorado Christian University, where she played soccer as a freshman. CCU was where she found her calling in education and leadership, met her husband, and graduated with a B.A. in English in 2000. She received her first master's degree in Humanities from the University of Colorado Denver in 2005 and earned her Administrative License in 2012.

It was in her post-secondary education that Stuebinger found the "heart-centric" philosophy that drives her to this day.

"All education for me post-high school was very people-centered," Stuebinger said. "I don't do the job for any reason other than because I love to connect...It is about the kids, it's about the people, it's about the heart of what we do."



As a collaborative leader, Stuebinger likes to maintain a team-centered focus.

"It really is a unified approach that is necessary," Stuebinger said. "If admin and counseling and teachers are all working together to meet the needs of kids, then we are doing what's best."

Not only does she work with preparing students for college, but she also asks, "what else?" knowing that students may be going into a trade instead.

"As I've raised my own children, and looking at what their life might be, I think that is helping me to really understand that not every kid is headed to a four-year college, and that is ok," Stuebinger said.

"But we have to provide them with the skills, the confidence, the opportunity to fail forward here in a safe space before we send them off to whatever they do, and I think that passion for relationships and realizing that not everyone fits the same box is truly what drives me and so then that is what makes me uniquely me."

## AN ACCOMPLISHED FRIEND, COWORKER, AND BOSS

The Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), through a selection committee comprised of secondary school leaders, selected Stuebinger as the 2024 Colorado Secondary School Assistant Principal of the Year on November 16. She and other award winners from this year will be honored on April 26, 2024, at the annual CASE Awards Ceremony.

Stuebinger's colleagues acknowledged how much she deserved to be recognized for her work at HRHS, nodding to her time spent supporting educators and improving the CTE programs.

Pointing to Stuebinger's work advocating for CTE and implementing the cosmetology program, Erin Kane, Douglas County School District Superintendent, said she deserves this award.

"We are so proud of Keri and all that she brings to our district, as our assistant principals fill so many roles in our schools," Kane said in an email. "To have CASE honor both our principal and assistant principal at Highlands Ranch High School with high accolades in back-to-back years is quite an accomplishment!"

CTE became one of the areas of the school where Page saw a chance for growth, so he assigned Stuebinger the job of expanding its opportunities for students.

"She really hit the ground running," Page said. "As Keri's gone through the process, it's opened her eyes to even more opportunities than we even thought were possible."

Page said Stuebinger goes above and beyond because she wants to do what is best for the students and school.

"Keri's extremely thoughtful," Page said. "She's passionate about doing things right and providing opportunity."

Stuebinger has always been supportive while also letting CTE teachers work how they need to, according to Mitchell.

"She's the most amazing person, she's done such a great job," Mitchell said. "This has been a passion for her to bring this to life for these students. Without her, I don't think this would have ever happened."

Stephanie Riddle, an HRHS math teacher evaluated by Stuebinger, said she has sought ways to help her grow as a teacher and implement innovative ways of learning.

"I think she's very supportive," Riddle said. "I like to try new things and to bring innovation into the classroom, and she always supports me."

Shannon Wessels, the family and consumer sciences teacher, has worked alongside Stuebinger since the early 2000s when they taught an information processing class. Over the years of working together, they have also become good friends, Wessels said.

"She's now my boss, which is kind of fun and weird," Wessels said. "She has really done an awesome job of understanding what CTE is... she really understands her staff and their full capabilities as people and what they're able to do."