

CASE - 2026 Award Story

Natasha Straayer

**Director, Advanced Academics & Gifted Programming - Douglas County School District
2026 CAES Distinguished Service Award**

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"True leadership isn't about managing a system from an office — it's about championing the humans within it and protecting the joy of the work."

— Natasha Straayer, on district leadership done right

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ON CAREER & BECOMING A LEADER

When you reflect on your career so far, what moments or experiences most shaped you as a leader?

The transition from a school-based leader to a district director was a defining moment in my career. In this new role, I oversaw the implementation of ELD, Gifted, and Literacy Interventions, which demanded a steep learning curve in mastering the complexities of guiding the implementation of responsive systems and structures aligned with state and federal statutes. The most significant challenge was ensuring that the focus on individual student needs was never overshadowed by the weight of compliance.

This period taught me that effective leadership requires a constant balance of systemic precision and human connection. I realized that while I was responsible for high-level policy implementation for 62,000 students, my decisions were only as effective as their impact in the classroom. It required the humility to move from being a localized expert to a learner of a complex system.

This experience grounded my belief that to lead effectively, I must remain a visible and connected partner to our school leaders, teachers and students. It fueled my commitment to learn ways to translate state and federal mandates into clear, actionable support systems that empower educators rather than overwhelm them. Almost a decade later, I continue to seek ways to ensure strategies and structures remain rooted in the reality of the classroom and the goal of student access and agency.

What leadership value or belief guides your decision-making most consistently?

I believe that who I am as a person is inseparable from how I lead. My work in Douglas County is anchored by two primary values: curiosity and courage.

Curiosity is a vital tool in my everyday experiences. In a large district, it is easy to rely on established systems and structures, but curiosity drives our team to look deeper and ask, "Who are we missing?" and "What potential remains hidden?" By staying curious, I can lead my team to challenge the status quo and design systems that see the individual student rather than just a data point. This spirit of inquiry allows us to remain learners ourselves, constantly refining our processes to ensure we are surfacing talent throughout our community.

Curiosity alone isn't enough; it must be paired with courage. It takes courage to look at our data honestly and address the gaps in access for our students who have been marginalized. It takes courage to prioritize systemic change over the comfort of "how we've always done it." For me, courage means being the voice in the room that advocates for equity of access, even when those conversations are difficult or require us to rethink resource allocation or traditional structures.

I use clarity as the means to put these values into action.

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"Ambiguity is a barrier to progress. When we are clear about our 'why,' we eliminate the friction of competing priorities and create spaces where every student has the chance to thrive."

— On the role of clarity as a leadership tool

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ON RECOGNITION, CASE & THE FUTURE

How has CASE supported your professional growth or leadership journey?

Being connected to the CASE community for over 17 years has been essential in preventing my work from becoming siloed. More importantly, it has allowed me to stay connected to and supported by a network of exceptional leaders across the state who share a deep commitment to Colorado's students.

As a Director at Large on the CAES Board, I have the privilege of engaging with the statewide voice of public education. This connection provides the macro-perspective I need to translate complex state-level policy into actionable strategies that work for our students and staff. CASE offers a professional home where collective expertise helps us navigate the often "impossible" scale of district leadership. Staying supported by this network of high-caliber peers ensures that my local decisions in Douglas County are not only informed by the broader landscape of Colorado education but are also grounded in the shared wisdom and courage of the best leaders in our field.

What does this recognition mean to you personally, beyond the title of the award?

While I am so grateful for this recognition, I want to acknowledge the tremendous work of everyone in CAES and CASE at large. This award is a reflection of our collective commitment to our learners, teachers, and leaders and the tireless advocacy each of you brings to this field every day. It is a privilege to serve alongside such a dedicated and passionate group of leaders.



ON HOPE & EXPANDING PATHWAYS FOR EVERY STUDENT

What gives you the most hope about the future of public education in Colorado?

My hope for the future lies in the potential of our students, which is driven by their creativity, curiosity, and perseverance. Their innovation and agency demonstrate how much they can achieve, provided we cultivate the right environment for their talents to flourish.

This is why I am deeply committed to expanding equitable access to diverse postsecondary pathways. Whether through Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Concurrent Enrollment (CE), or Career and Technical Education (CTE) or a combination of each of these, we must ensure that every student has a clear, supported bridge to their future. I find hope in the fact that we are moving beyond a one-size-fits-all model to one that honors the unique talents and aspirations of every learner. By providing these varied pathways, we aren't just giving students credits; we are giving them the opportunity to explore their passions and the empowerment to step into their next chapter with confidence.

I also find hope in the growing collective courage of Colorado's educational leaders. We are increasingly working together to ensure that these high-level academic and technical opportunities are not the exception, but a standard accessible to all students, regardless of their background or zip code. When I see our community staying curious about "who we are missing" and taking bold steps to remove barriers to these pathways, I know we are building a future where every student is seen and empowered to reach their highest potential.

How do you advocate for students and staff in moments that require difficult decisions?

Advocacy is a fundamental, consistent practice driven by the core principle of ensuring equity of access to opportunity, agency, and empowerment for all. This belief acts as a compass for my work, proactively aligning our systems to meet the diverse needs of those we serve. A key aspect of my leadership is cultivating other leaders. I advocate for my staff by prioritizing their professional growth and autonomy. By seeking to understand the unique inspirations and aspirations of each team member, I can more effectively support them in aligning their personal goals with our district's mission, remove systemic barriers, and empower them to lead with purpose and independence.

Advocacy also involves safeguarding the "joy" in our work. I work to achieve this by providing clear strategic frameworks and unwavering support, ensuring my staff has the necessary capacity to remain inspired while managing the inherent complexities of a large district. My goal is to weave advocacy into the fabric of our district, establishing a sustainable culture where every educator is empowered to lead and every student has a genuine chance to thrive and succeed.

ADVICE FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

What advice would you give to district leaders who are early in their leadership journey?

To those early in their district leadership journey, my primary advice is to stay visible. It is easy to let the weight of compliance pull you away from the classroom, but I have found that spending non-negotiable time in schools is the only way to ensure your decisions are actually strengthening the people they impact.

Leading with care means leading with curiosity. When I visit schools, I am not there to monitor compliance; I am there to understand the reality of our educators. I believe my most vital role is growing other leaders. By taking the time to understand what inspires staff and providing them with the autonomy to lead in their own buildings, I can help bridge the gap between district strategy and classroom success.



When you lose hope, look to the artists, the athletes, your barista, your neighbors, your family and friends who held your hair while puking (for any reason), your partner with smelly morning breath and ridiculous hair making breakfast. The power of authenticity, showing up when it's uncomfortable, unreasonable, and/or unpopular will always make us better.

– Natasha's advice to everyone