

CASE - 2026 Award Story

Jessica Ranalletta

Assistant Principal - Cimarron Middle School
2026 Colorado Middle Level Assistant Principal of the Year

“Every day at work, I come in and ask, 'How can things be better for students and staff today?' This guides every decision I make.”
— Jessica Ranalletta

ON LEADERSHIP & GROWTH

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

Every day at work, I come in and ask, “How can things be better for students and staff today?” This guides every decision I make and interaction I have. I want everyone to leave an interaction with me for the better. Servant leadership is something I live by and am committed to working toward every day. The world is a much better place when we feel like people are looking out for us.



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

The moments that most stick out are honestly the mistakes or mess-ups. I learned so much from doing it the wrong way many times. I appreciate those moments the most though, because it humbles me and reminds me that leaders are not perfect and to expect perfection of myself, well, is a waste of time. I also think about the principals, assistant principals, and deans who supported me when I was a teacher. I was incredibly lucky to have people in my corner while I figured out teaching and learning. I constantly find myself thinking about how they made me feel each and every day. They had my back but also challenged and pushed me to be better. I am forever grateful for the lasting impact their leadership has had on me and without a doubt believe my leadership was shaped by their presence in my life.

“Always lead with purpose. Every decision you make should be purposeful. Don't stay quiet. The power in schools comes from those willing to stand up and say, 'But what if?'"
— Advice to aspiring education leaders

ON RECOGNITION & COMMUNITY

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

It's a testament to all the effort and work others put into developing me as a leader. The countless professional development opportunities I've been blessed to attend, the coaching support I've been provided, and the opportunities I've had to grow as an educator over the past 15 years wouldn't have been possible without someone else looking out for me. This award represents their faith and belief in me and I approach my work each day with gratitude and continue to work hard to ensure their efforts are not lost as I strive to make a positive impact on others. It is also important for me to model for my daughter the importance of giving back to others. She and I have many conversations about my role in my school and what it means to me and those I serve. Watching her then give back to others, in her 6-year-old world, is amazing to watch.



How has CASE supported your professional growth or leadership journey?

I am deeply grateful for the support CASE has provided over the years. Everything from quickly supporting me after getting locked out of my CASE account, user error by the way, to allowing me to present most recently at the Winter CASE Conference. The respect and trust they extend to leaders across Colorado is palpable, and we are truly grateful they are on our side helping to lead the future of education in Colorado.

In what ways has being connected to other CASE members strengthened your work?

The power of connection is real. Being able to learn from others who are also working to shift things in their own schools and districts has been remarkable. I am also very much appreciative to be able to share my learning and experiences with others in the hope that it might help them in their next steps. I know we promote "collaboration" all the time with teams of teachers, yet very often forget the power of collaboration among leaders in different schools and districts. Imagine the possibilities if the leaders from different districts came together to solve the real issues we are facing today.

ON ADVOCACY, CHALLENGES & THE FUTURE

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

My hope lies in the intentional shift across Colorado from a culture of compliance to one of authentic connection. We are finally recognizing that restorative practices and instructional equity aren't "add-ons", they are the foundation of student success. Seeing educators approach each day attempting to educate the "whole child" model is inspiring. We aren't just preparing students for exams, we are empowering them to be the compassionate, connected leaders our future requires.

Looking forward, what do you think will be the biggest challenge for public education, and how do you think it should be addressed?

The greatest challenge facing public education is the growing crisis of disconnection. We are seeing a significant rise in student dysregulation and educator burnout, often driven by the pressure to recover academic "learning loss" without first addressing the foundational need for safety and belonging. When we prioritize pace over people, we lose both. Addressing this requires a fundamental shift in how we view school culture. This means investing in systems that ensure we can maintain high academic rigor while providing the equitable, restorative support systems that make that rigor accessible. We must remember that students cannot reach their "next chapter" of achievement if they do not first feel like a valued member of their school community.

How do you stay grounded and connected to students and staff while managing the demands of leadership?

Nothing is more important than the connections you have with staff and students, period. I always prioritize tasks each day based on what will serve connections with folks at the top of the priority list. For me, staying grounded requires moving from the balcony to the dance floor. It is easy for the administrative demands of a building to pull you into the office, but the real work of a leader happens in the hallways, the cafeteria, and the classrooms. I stay connected by intentionally modeling the work I believe in. Whether it's facilitating a connection circle with a group of students or joining a PLT meeting to look at data alongside my teachers, I prioritize being a "lead learner" rather than just a manager. By viewing every interaction as an opportunity for connection, I ensure that my decisions remain rooted in the heartbeat of Cimarron rather than the paperwork on my desk.

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

Advocacy in leadership is often about being the voice for those not in the room. When faced with difficult decisions, I advocate by applying a "People-First" lens backed by evidence. I rely on the data-driven collaboration of our Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and direct feedback from our community to ensure we aren't just making the easiest decision, but the most equitable one. In restorative work, advocacy means leaning into the tension rather than avoiding it. I advocate for staff by protecting their time and mental well-being through clear systems and resources. I advocate for students by asking, "How does this decision preserve this child's dignity and their path forward?" I ensure that even when a decision is difficult or unpopular, it is rooted in transparency, connection, and the long-term success of every individual involved.



"I facilitated a restorative conversation with three 8th-grade boys. Watching young men engage in a conversation about hurt and harm — and then move forward together — was one of the most important moments of my entire career."

— A moment of inspiration

ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

What advice would you give to assistant principals who are early in their leadership journey?

Leadership in schools is hard, and please know that while teaching is demanding as well, nothing quite prepares you for leading in a school building. Don't feel like a failure because the work is difficult; it is for everyone. It's SO important to find balance in your life with your work and home life early on. Your "to-do" list will never be empty. Give yourself grace and remember that you'll make mistakes. Learn from them. Staff are looking to you to model how to handle and work through the hard days. What you show your staff is what your staff will model for students.