

CASE - 2026 Award Story

Meredith Scales

Assistant Principal - Hidden Lake Secondary School
2026 Colorado High School Assistant Principal of the Year

“ "The relationships are the work. Everything else is just logistics."
— Meredith Scales, advice to assistant principals early in their journey ”

ON CAREER & BECOMING A LEADER

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

Becoming a mom was my turning point. I'd always talked about "family first," but until I had my son two years ago, I didn't truly grasp the weight of that. It changed how I viewed the families walking through the doors, and I suddenly felt the immense trust they place in us. It also shifted how I lead my staff. Saying "put your family first" isn't a suggestion anymore but rather a requirement I protect for them. It's made me a more patient leader and honestly, a more human one.



What are some of the specific challenges you have faced in your career or in your current role, and how did you overcome those challenges?

Early in my leadership journey, I fell into a common trap: I was leading from the "manual" instead of from the heart. I was so focused on the technical aspects of what I thought a leader was supposed to look like that I unintentionally missed the mark on the most important part - the people. I was leading the work, but I wasn't fully seeing the students and staff. Eventually, a transition to a new building forced me into a hard reset. At the time, starting over in a new environment felt terrifying. But that discomfort ended up being the greatest gift of my career. Being in a new space allowed me to strip away the persona of the perfect leader and get back to the basics of why I entered education in the first place. I spent that year listening more than I spoke. I learned that you can't lead people you truly don't know, and that authenticity carries more weight than any title. Today, I'm in a school that feels like home because I show up as my true self. That early struggle taught me that professional success doesn't come from checking boxes - it comes from the strength of the relationships you build and the trust you earn every single day.

ON RECOGNITION & LEADERSHIP VALUESS

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

I've always been a little uncomfortable with public recognition. I've always viewed my role as just showing up and doing the best I can for the people I work with. But receiving this recognition has been a powerful moment of validation for me. It's a reminder that all of the hard days are just as important as the amazing days. It validates that building relationships and maintaining high expectations is the right way to do this work. Most importantly, though, this award is recognition for my incredible staff. I am only as good as the people I lead and my staff are the ones on the ground getting things done. I see this less as a title for me and more as a testament to the culture we've built, and for me, this recognition belongs to our entire building.

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

I'm a firm believer that the greatest gift we can give our students, especially in an alternative setting, is the dignity of high expectations. In our building we often talk about healing student trauma, and I believe that healing happens through competence and agency.



"When we lower the bar because of a student's circumstances, we unintentionally tell them they aren't capable of clearing it. We give control back to students who have often felt powerless and teach them they can be 'bigger than their story.'"

— On the dignity of high expectations



ON STAYING GROUNDED & ADVOCACY

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

Education is one of the hardest and most personal jobs in the world. Every morning, I wake up, rush to get out the door, drop my son off at daycare, and spend the commute from daycare to work mentally shifting from being a caretaker at home, to being a caretaker at work. My number one priority when getting to work is to walk around the building to greet staff and students and connect with them on a personal level, before the challenges of the day present themselves. For some, this personalization makes the work more challenging. For me, it grounds me in my purpose and serves as a reminder that the decisions I make everyday impact the lives of those in my building. And for me, that is worth everything.

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

Before I make a difficult or high-stakes decision, I start by listening to the people who are actually going to feel the impact. I want to understand their perspective, even if I know the final decision might be a tough one for them to hear. After, I look at the big picture and try to decide if the decision aligns with where we envision our school going and whether the outcome is what is best for students. If a decision is right for their growth and their future, I can stand behind it with total confidence, even if it's unpopular. I've found that staff and students can respect decisions, even when difficult, as long as they are made with transparency and a deep commitment to our shared goals.

WHY IT ALL MATTERS

Share a story that you look to for inspiration in your role. This could include a mentor discussion, a moment with a student, or a large impact from your school (etc.).

Anyone who knows me knows I'm a data person. I keep an obnoxious spreadsheet with information about every student in our building that I update regularly because I believe that tracking their growth is one of the clearest ways to show them we actually care about their success. Last year, I was digging through our beginning-of-year scores and noticed a new student who had absolutely blown the test out of the water - scoring in the 99th percentile. I pulled him into my office just to celebrate him, and that's when I learned his story. He had just spent two years in a juvenile detention center and was struggling to adapt back to the "real world," but he told me he'd always loved learning and felt like he was pretty good at it. I immediately went into advocate mode and connected him with our mental health team and coached his teacher to lead with his strengths. We made it a point to flood his home with positive phone calls every time he hit a benchmark or did something exceptional in class (which was often). By the end of the year, he was one of only two students in our building to hit the SAT benchmark in both categories. The moment that will stay with me forever happened during the last week of school. We were walking the halls to brag about his scores and he responded to one teacher by saying, "I'm going places, Miss." To see this young man go from a detention center to seeing college as a real possibility is exactly why I do this work, because we are changing the trajectory of lives.

ON CASE, COMMUNITY & ADVICE

How has collaboration with other assistant principals through CASE influenced your growth?

I am a lifelong learner and routinely reflect on my practices. I never want to be the smartest person in the room, and through this network I never have to be. CASE has allowed me to connect with leaders across the state to share ideas, identify solutions, and feel connection with others dealing with similar challenges. I always return from conferences with dozens of fresh and invigorating ideas.

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

The persistence of the people on the ground inspires me. Public education has been through the ringer over the past decade. Public scrutiny, million-dollar budget cuts, and a pandemic have created a world of impossible expectations, and yet my teachers still show up and pour everything they have into their students. That kind of grit isn't accidental. The fact that the heart of the work remains unchanged despite the noise outside is what gives me the most hope.

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

Protect your authenticity. You'll be pressured to make decisions that might not align with your "why," so you have to know your values before you walk in the door. Ask every question you have, no matter how small. But above all - prioritize the human being in front of you over the paperwork on your desk.



“

"My school community is my second family. And for me, that is worth everything."
— Meredith Scales, on staying connected to her building

”