

CASE - 2026 Award Story

Nicole Petersen

Principal - Brentwood Middle School
2026 Colorado Middle-Level Principal of the Year

“What if our purpose in education was to help students find theirs? That question has pushed me to reimagine everything we do at Brentwood.”
— Nicole Petersen, inspired by Ross Wehner, World Leadership School

ON CAREER & BECOMING A LEADER

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

Many of the moments that shaped me as a leader began during my earliest days as a teacher. From day one, I was constantly looking for ways to support students and connect their learning to their lives. I loved my students deeply, and even then I found myself thinking about how schools could build stronger systems so every student had the opportunity to thrive. That mindset of always looking beyond the classroom to the broader impact of a school became the foundation of my leadership journey.

I also love the story of how I became a Brentwood Bengal. When I first walked into Brentwood, the school had just come off a tumultuous year that ended with an interim principal who did great work stabilizing the community. Before that, the school had a long-standing leader, John Diebold, who had built an incredible sense of belonging and pride. Ironically, as a college student at UNC, I worked at a daycare his daughter attended. During drop-off and pick-up, he would talk about Brentwood with such genuine love and pride that it sounded like the best-kept secret in Greeley.

After college, I taught at a local charter school where I had a wonderful opportunity to grow beyond my classroom. I later became an assistant principal at Greeley Central High School, where I gained invaluable experience in student discipline, PBIS, and most importantly the importance of high-quality instruction. I also had the opportunity to build the master schedule and write the school's UIP, experiences that stretched my thinking about systems and leadership. Those four years were filled with rich learning and growth.

Then, when the principal position at Brentwood Middle School opened four years later, I couldn't stop thinking about the passion John Diebold had shared with me years earlier. I had always said the only school I wanted to be principal of was Brentwood, so I knew I had to take the leap.

When I arrived, Brentwood's staff showed me what a true school family looks like. They trusted me as a new principal and allowed me to learn, take risks, fail, and try again. Together we have continued to push one another to be our very best for students. Thirteen years later, I can say with certainty that I have grown into the leader I am today because of the incredible educators and staff at Brentwood who believed in me and in the work we are doing together.



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

The leadership value that guides my decision-making most consistently is a simple but powerful principle: what is best for students. Every decision I make, big or small, is filtered through this lens. I am intentional about considering not only how students can grow academically, but also how they can develop the human skills that will allow them to thrive in life.

At Brentwood, we aim to prepare students to be thoughtful, contributing members of society. That means grounding every choice in what will help them reach their full potential, whether it's creating structures that support learning, fostering meaningful relationships, or providing opportunities to explore their passions and strengths. By keeping students at the center, every decision becomes an opportunity to shape both their academic growth and their character.



Nicole in action at Brentwood Middle School

ON CASE & PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

How has CASE supported your professional growth or leadership journey?

CASE has been an incredible source of professional growth and inspiration throughout my leadership journey. I deeply value the learning and mentorship opportunities it provides. Truly, there is something for everyone.

Attending the CASE conference over the years has always left me with a renewed sense of purpose and drive.

I vividly remember my early days as an assistant principal, when I didn't even know what I didn't know. The breakout sessions, networking, and discussions I participated in opened my eyes to new ways of thinking, leading, and supporting students and staff. Over time, I've also had the privilege of facilitating learning for others, sharing my experiences, and connecting with leaders who are navigating similar challenges and successes.

What makes CASE so meaningful is that it recognizes the importance of the work we do in schools and provides a platform to learn, grow, and celebrate leadership. It's not just about professional development. It's about building a community of leaders who lift each other up, challenge each other, and inspire each other to be the best we can be for our students.

How has CASE helped you stay connected to statewide leadership conversations?

The CASE organization helps me make sense of the political and policy landscape in education, offering clarity on emerging trends, initiatives, and best practices. Through CASE, I have been able to connect with peers across Colorado, share ideas, and learn from leaders facing similar challenges and successes. These connections strengthen my own leadership by exposing me to diverse perspectives and innovative strategies that I can bring back to Brentwood. They also reinforce the idea that effective leadership is both local and collaborative, grounded in our own school community but informed by a broader statewide vision. CASE keeps me connected, informed, and inspired, ensuring that the work we do every day aligns with both student needs and larger educational goals.

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— On the power of CASE

ON MENTORS & RELATIONSHIPS

How do you hope your leadership will be remembered by those you serve?

I hope to be remembered as a leader who was relentless in ensuring that every student and staff member had the support, guidance, and resources they needed to succeed. More than anything, I hope people know how deeply I care for the individuals who make Brentwood such a special place. I want my leadership to be remembered not just for what we achieved, but for the culture of trust, care, and high expectations we built together where every person felt seen, valued, and inspired to do their best.



Who has been a mentor or influence in your career, and what did they teach you?

Over my career, I have been inspired by so many incredible people. Our superintendent, Dr. Deirdre Pilch, has profoundly influenced me with her unwavering belief in our system. Charismatic, poised, and fiercely committed, she ensures that our students have the resources and support they need. As she says, we are “educating students out of poverty,” and her vision has shaped the narrative for all of District 6. Dr. Luster, who was my assistant principal during my first years at Brentwood, also had a lasting impact. As a teacher at Central, she fought tirelessly for students, and as an administrator, she demonstrated the importance of having a pulse on the building and the courage to have difficult conversations. She was my confidante, advocate, and biggest supporter, and I would not be the leader I am today without her guidance.

Heather Severt, my assistant principal for the past ten years, is another mentor whose influence is immeasurable. Balancing roles as both athletic director and assessment coordinator, she leads by example with energy, joy, and vibrance. She literally starts her day dancing in the drop-off line. Heather has taught me that every moment is a gift. She battled cancer while teaching and carried that grit and tenacity into everything she does. She consistently puts students first, supports staff with care and clarity, and pushes everyone around her to be their best. Her dedication, heart, and leadership inspire me every day.

ON BUILDING CULTURE & COMMUNITY

What role does community partnership play in the success of your school?

I take little credit personally, it’s really about empowering our teachers to dream big and giving them the support to make those dreams a reality. This year, we launched Bengals Connect, a mentorship program that pairs students in need of guidance with community members. Mentors meet with their students weekly or biweekly to provide academic support, play games, read together, or simply be a trusted adult to talk to. Lauren Morford, one of our math teachers, designed the application process for both mentors and mentees and recruited enough volunteers that 44 students now have a mentor. The impact on these students has been transformative, fostering growth, confidence, and connection. The impact has been transformative. This program has shifted the perception of middle school students within our community and we've even been officially adopted by a local church.

What leadership lessons have you learned that you wish you had known earlier in your career?

One leadership lesson I wish I had learned earlier is that I don’t need to have all the answers right away. Early in my career, I loved problem-solving and assumed that being the “solution provider” was what people expected. Over time, I realized that I am surrounded by educators with deep knowledge and valuable perspectives and that their voices matter even more.

By shifting my mindset from having all the answers to empowering staff (and ultimately students) to help solve our biggest challenges, I have seen stronger collaboration, greater creativity, and more sustainable solutions. Leadership isn’t about doing it all myself. Instead, it’s about creating a culture where everyone has the space, trust, and support to contribute to the work that matters most.

How do you create a culture where both students and staff feel supported and challenged?

We intentionally build a culture rooted in joy, belonging, and a relentless belief in both staff and students. Whether someone is new to our school or a long-standing veteran, they immediately feel our energy, warmth, and pride. We make sure teachers know they are change-makers in students' lives, and we create moments that matter for both staff and students. These practices sustain adults, humanize school, and make it a place where kids truly want to be. For staff, this culture begins in the hiring process and continues as we support them in learning their roles. We celebrate accomplishments with traveling trophies, birthday treats, and weekly kickoffs that recognize successes. For students, our focus on connection and engagement starts before they even arrive. Our robust 6th-grade transition program brings feeder schools to Brentwood, takes us to them, and includes a registration night with "signing-day" photos in their new shirts, plus a two-day Summer Jumpstart in small groups. All 6th graders participate in WEB Day with 8th-grade leaders, and staff deliver cookies to every incoming student before school starts. New students throughout the year participate in "Bengal Academy," partnering with a student leader during their first week. We also celebrate student passions through high participation in athletics, music, and extracurriculars. All of these intentional practices create the conditions for high behavioral and academic expectations while keeping relationships and human connection at the heart of learning. At Brentwood, supporting and challenging students and staff go hand in hand because when people feel valued, they are ready to grow.

What does effective school leadership look like in practice at your building?

Effective school leadership at Brentwood starts with presence. Our leaders are actively engaged in collaborative planning, data teams, and grade-level meetings. We are visible when students arrive on the bus, during lunch, and at dismissal. We are in classrooms providing feedback to teachers and supporting students in their learning. When a teacher needs help with a particular student, we show up every time.

Equally important, we have built systems that ensure every student has access to rigorous, grade-level learning, supported by strong literacy practices, consistent academic expectations, and responsive interventions. We intentionally cultivate a culture of joy and belonging so that students feel celebrated and staff feel valued.

The results speak for themselves: high student growth, increased engagement, strong staff retention, and a school community that truly feels like family. At Brentwood, effective leadership is not just about managing operations, it's about creating conditions where both students and staff can thrive.



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— Nicole Petersen



FAMILY & LIFE BEYOND THE BUILDING

Who has been your constant partner throughout this journey?

My husband, Jeff Petersen, has been my constant partner throughout this journey. We met as students at UNC, went through the pre-teaching program together, taught in the same building, completed graduate school, and have raised three wonderful children while pursuing leadership in our district. He challenges my thinking, celebrates my successes, and encourages me to give my best every day. His belief in me is a guiding force in my professional and personal life.

Together, these mentors and partners have shaped my approach to leadership, reinforcing the importance of vision, courage, joy, and unwavering belief in both students and the adults who serve them.

