

## CASE - 2026 Award Story

# Renee Dahl

## Assistant Principal - Monterey Elementary School 2026 Colorado Outstanding Assistant Elementary School Principal of the Year

“The small, everyday actions matter — the conversations, the planning, the problem-solving, the advocating. And knowing that they make a difference for our students and community means more to me than any title ever could.”  
— Renee Dahl, on what this recognition means

### ON CAREER & BECOMING A LEADER

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

As I reflect on my career so far, several key experiences have shaped me as a leader.

The guidance of both former and current mentors played a major role. They included me in important conversations, supported me through challenges, and modeled effective leadership while offering the feedback I needed to grow.

My first two years as an administrator brought unique challenges—leading during COVID, adapting to hybrid learning, and navigating strict protocols. The following year, our entire school relocated for a semester during a building renovation, requiring constant flexibility and collaboration. These transitions added stress to an already demanding profession, but they strengthened my resilience and leadership skills.

I also learned the importance of collective leadership and the power of a team working toward a shared goal. Both successes and setbacks have been essential parts of my growth and continue to shape the leader I am today.



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

Being student centered is the core value that guides every decision so doing what is best for them must remain at the heart of our work. Sometimes the choices that benefit students most can be uncomfortable or challenging for adults, but I believe deeply in prioritizing student learning and well-being. Our responsibility is to build a strong foundation that allows students to grow—academically, socially, and emotionally. By staying grounded in what students need, I can make decisions with integrity, purpose, and a focus on long-term impact.

## ON RECOGNITION & WHAT THIS AWARD MEANS

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

Being named Colorado's Outstanding Assistant Principal is an incredible honor. This award reminds me that the small, everyday actions matter, the conversations, the planning, the problem-solving, the advocating. And knowing that they make a difference for our students and community means more to me than any title ever could. Much of what we do as school leaders happens behind the scenes, and this recognition shows that those efforts are making a meaningful difference for students and are visible on a broader scale.

What touches me most is that this honor reflects the commitment and heart I bring to work every single day, along with the dedication of the incredible team I get to work alongside. Our work is demanding, endless at times, and filled with challenges that don't always have easy answers. Yet it's work I believe in with my whole heart.

It also reflects the commitment and dedication that extends beyond our building and district. Every day, I believe deeply in the work I do in partnership with an amazing team. The job is challenging and constant, but this award reminds me that the effort is worthwhile and does not go unnoticed.



"Setbacks and perceived obstacles should be viewed as opportunities to learn, reflect, and grow just as much as moments of success."

— Advice to aspiring education leaders



## ON STAYING GROUNDED & OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

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

Staying grounded begins with being visible and present for students. I make it a priority to be outside greeting students as they arrive, and throughout the day I check in with them in classrooms and hallways. Listening to their stories, celebrating their hard work, and acknowledging their accomplishments keeps me connected to the "why" of our work. Attending weekend events and running an after-school club with 50 aspiring cheerleaders also helps me stay rooted in the joy, energy, and passion students bring to school. Being in classrooms regularly allows me to see firsthand what students are learning and experiencing every day.

Staying connected with staff is equally important. For me, this means being approachable, asking questions, offering encouragement, and truly listening when support is needed. Celebrating small gains both for students and staff helps build a positive culture and reinforces that we are growing and learning together. These daily interactions remind me of the impact we have collectively and help me maintain balance amid the demands of leadership.

## **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?**

Throughout my career in education, I have faced a variety of challenges that have required creativity, flexibility, and thoughtful leadership. One ongoing challenge has been leading in a smaller school setting. Fewer students mean fewer staff members, which can create difficulties in utilizing personnel effectively without causing burnout or overwhelming teachers. To address this, our leadership team focused on using our time and resources strategically to best support student learning while also honoring staff capacity. We reimaged our core schedule to build in opportunities for teacher collaboration, implemented differentiated and targeted skills time, and paired grade levels to maximize instructional support from reading interventionists and instructional paraprofessionals. Additionally, we identified ways to provide teachers with increased planning time, which helped support both instruction and staff well-being.

Another significant challenge has been navigating periods of teacher shortages. During my time as an assistant principal, our school experienced staffing gaps that resulted in larger class sizes. In response, we developed strategic schedules that allowed us to “flood” support at key times of the day by leveraging special education staff, CLDE support, and paraprofessionals. This approach allowed us to provide additional assistance where it was needed most and helped maintain instructional quality despite staffing limitations.

Budget constraints have also presented challenges, particularly when our school was unable to retain an instructional coach like many other schools in our district. To overcome this, our principal identified a platform that supported peer coaching within the building. Through this model, teachers were able to record lessons, upload videos, and receive targeted feedback directly within the platform. This innovative approach strengthened instructional practices, promoted collaboration among teachers, and allowed the administrative team to continue supporting professional growth despite limited resources.

These challenges have reinforced the importance of creative problem-solving, collaboration, and a commitment to maximizing available resources in order to best serve students and support staff.

## **ON CASE & PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY**

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

Being connected with other CASE members has strengthened my work through meaningful opportunities for professional collaboration. Attending CASE conferences has allowed me to learn from leaders across the state by hearing about the challenges their schools have faced and the strategies they have successfully implemented to turn things around.

Listening to these success stories and reflecting on how they could translate to our work at Monterey has been incredibly valuable.

These connections provide space to take proven ideas and thoughtfully adapt them to fit the unique needs of our school community. For example, after attending a session where a school shared how they significantly improved reading scores using a specific program, our team reviewed their data and chose to implement that same program to better support students in need of Tier 3 instruction.

In addition, my involvement with CASE has inspired me to participate in Colorado Department of Education cohorts as another way to collaborate with educators and leaders statewide. These experiences help broaden my perspective, challenge the mindset of “this is how we’ve always done things,” and encourage innovation. Ultimately, these connections continue to motivate me to enhance the school experience for students through thoughtful, collaborative leadership.

### **What advice would you give to aspiring education leaders who hope to follow a similar path?**

My advice to aspiring educational leaders is to be intentional about learning from those around you. Take time to observe leaders in action and reflect on how they build relationships, make decisions, and support students, staff, and families. Ask thoughtful questions to better understand not only what decisions are made, but why they are made, and consider which leadership qualities most align with your own values and vision.

Seek out mentors who will guide and challenge you—individuals who are willing to provide honest feedback, encouragement, and support throughout your journey. When opportunities arise to lead beyond the classroom, embrace them. Each experience helps build capacity, confidence, and perspective. Educational leadership is a journey of continuous learning, reflection, and service. By remaining open to growth and committed to students, aspiring leaders can continue to develop the skills and mindset needed to make a meaningful impact.