

## CASE - 2026 Award Story

# ToniJo Niccoli

**Principal - New Meridian High School & the Career Elevation and Technology Center  
2026 Colorado High School Principal of the Year**

“By bringing my office to the heart of the building, I stay grounded in the daily reality of our school and ensure I am accessible for the moments that matter most.”

— ToniJo Niccoli, on her mobile desk in the hallways

### ON RECOGNITION & WHAT THIS AWARD MEANS

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

This recognition is very humbling and exciting—it belongs to the staff, teachers, and community who have tirelessly invested their time and belief into elevating our building to what it is today. For me, it serves as a powerful confirmation of our journey, especially during moments when launching a new CTE pathway or pushing for higher graduation rates felt like an uphill climb. More than just a title, this award validates my long-standing belief that we have a relentless team that refuses to give up on any child's potential. Ultimately, it is a testament to our shared resilience, proving that the most meaningful achievements are often born from the greatest challenges.



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

I hope to be remembered as a leader who was genuine and approachable, and created an environment where every individual felt seen, valued, and challenged. While I am honored that my students often refer to me as their 'school mom,' I view that title as a profound responsibility to balance advocacy and love with the boundaries and high expectations they need to grow. Ultimately, I hope my staff remembers me as a leader who cared for them as whole people, ensuring they felt supported in their personal lives and empowered to find joy and innovation in their professional work.

## ON STAYING GROUNDED & LEADERSHIP VALUES

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### **What advice would you give to principals navigating complex and evolving expectations?**

My best advice for navigating the evolving demands of leadership is to remain grounded in your original purpose and to lead from the authentic lens of what is best for students. When you prioritize student outcomes above all else, the complex pieces of school management begin to align. Beyond that, I believe it is essential to extend the same grace to ourselves that we so freely give to our students and staff. We will never have all the answers and mistakes are inevitable, but our success is defined by how we model resilience and lead our communities through those challenges.

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

My biggest advice to aspiring leaders is to never let the 'business' of education pull you away from the heart of the work. There is so much joy to be found in staying grounded in the daily lives of your students and staff, so make sure you're right there in the thick of it with them. Remember that true success isn't found in accolades, but in the magic of those small, everyday wins you achieve alongside your team. When you lead with a relentless belief in every child and put relationships first, you aren't just managing a school—you are creating a community where everyone truly feels they belong.

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

The greatest lesson I've learned is that in a job where everything feels like a 'now' priority, you have to be the guardian of your own think time. I've embraced a personal 24-hour rule for decisions, because telling someone, 'Let me get back to you,' is actually a sign of respect—it shows I care enough to give their situation my full attention rather than a rushed answer. This pause allows me to weigh the pros and cons rather than just a reactive 'yes' or 'no.' By permitting myself to think, I've found that I am a much more thoughtful leader.

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

My leadership is driven by the belief that I can't truly support our staff and students from behind a closed door, which is why I launched my mobile desk in the hallways four years ago. This intentional visibility allows me and our admin team to provide on-demand support, whether I'm doing a quick SEL check-in with a student, reviewing a graduation planner, or stepping into a classroom to immediately support a teacher. By bringing my office to the heart of the building, I stay grounded in the daily reality of our school and ensure I am accessible for the moments that matter most. I have so much fun chatting with the students and celebrating their successes.



ToniJo at a national conference and at home with the people who ground her

## ON COMMUNITY, DISTRICT & CASE

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

Being connected to CASE is important to me because the principalship is such a singular role, and this network provides a wonderful space to collaborate and solve problems with peers who truly understand the job. I especially love the professional learning opportunities, which allow me to step out of my usual role as the facilitator and back into the role of a student. It is refreshing to focus on my own growth and stay up to speed on the latest educational trends and changes happening across Colorado. It's been a great way to stay inspired and keep my own leadership skills sharp.



### **How has your school, district, or professional community influenced the way you lead?**

Being part of the St. Vrain Valley School District (SVVSD) is nothing short of inspiring, as I am surrounded by a community that deeply believes in its teachers and the limitless potential of our students. This safety net of support allows me to lead with confidence, knowing that when I feel supported by my district, I can, in turn, provide that same security to my staff and students as they explore new ideas. Ultimately, the SVVSD vision has taught me that when we remove the fear of failure, we open the door for our students to achieve things they never thought possible.

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"My hope for the future of public education lies in the brilliance and adaptability of our students, who truly represent the strength and innovation of our nation."

— ToniJo Niccoli, on the future of public education in Colorado

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## ON MENTORS & ROOTS

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

While many have influenced my journey, I owe my deepest debt of gratitude to the teachers and coaches at Hoehne High School in Southern Colorado who first showed me how transformative an educator's life can be. In our small, rural K-12 community, they went far beyond the classroom to act as coaches, mentors, and guides, showing us that our potential wasn't limited by our zip code. They taught me that with a bit of grit, we could achieve anything, pushing us to envision a future much larger than the one we knew. It was their ability to create a culture of joy and challenge that inspired me to become an educator, and I strive every day to provide that same sense of limitless possibility for my own students.

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

My hope for the future of public education in Colorado lies in the brilliance and adaptability of our students, who truly represent the strength and innovation of our nation. We are currently witnessing a transformative shift in which schools are no longer just classrooms but launchpads that mold the future. Particularly in Colorado, we have the unique opportunity to bridge the gap between education and industry, empowering a generation that is not only prepared for the workforce but is eager to lead it. Seeing our students take risks, master new technologies, and pursue their passions with such grit gives me the ultimate confidence that the future of our communities is in incredibly capable hands.