

edge

CU Denver
School of Education
& Human Development

LEADING THROUGH CRISIS



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Amelia Parks, MA student in Literacy Education

A LETTER FROM THE DEAN

Safety and Learning

Higher education has never faced a bigger challenge than we are currently facing during the COVID-19 pandemic—this is, of course, true of so many industries in the U.S. right now. At CU Denver, we spent the entire summer planning for our "safe return to campus." We developed meticulous plans for how many people can be in each classroom at any one time for the 25 percent of fall courses that are meeting on campus. We have a testing program for the dorms, which have single-room occupancy only, and a campus-based contact tracing team. We have check-in stations that log attendance for every individual on campus each day so that should an outbreak occur, we can contact every individual who may have interacted with the virus. These are just some of the measures we've put in place. As I write this message, we are six weeks into our fall semester, and I can report that we have had only three cases, and they were quickly contained. I want to acknowledge our wonderful students and staff who have willingly complied with our rule to wear masks while on campus.

Safety is a top priority, but so is the quality of the learning experience. In the SEHD, we worked all summer on our online and hybrid courses. We also led the campus faculty in a Hybrid Teaching Academy because we have so much expertise in digital pedagogy. We were fully ready for the fall term and had robust enrollment in our classes. The feedback we are receiving from our students is very positive—I am very proud of our faculty. We are resilient, creative, and committed, and we have stepped up to the COVID challenge, though we dearly miss the community our "in-person" campus affords us, and we look forward to a full return as soon as possible.



This fall, we have also been getting to know our new Chancellor, Dr. Michelle Marks. Dr. Marks comes to us from George Mason University where she served on the Business School faculty and led the campus in strategic innovation as a vice president. Dr. Marks has engaged in an incredible 100-day listening tour of our campus and Front Range community to get to know us and is formulating strategic direction for our campus. Top of mind for her is how CU Denver can serve as an asset to the region and an anchor institution for Denver, our vibrant home.

I am currently on campus a few days a week and available by Zoom on all other days. Feel free to schedule a visit to share your ideas as an alum or a valued community member on how the campus and the SEHD can meet our collective goals. And, in the meantime, stay safe and be well during this very unusual time for us all. I hope you enjoy this e-version of *Edge*, an experiment for these pandemic times!

Best,

Rebecca Kantor
Rebecca Kantor
Dean

DEAN
Rebecca Kantor

EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT
Julia Cummings

WRITING
Serwaa Adu-Tutu, Meghan Azralon, Julia Cummings, Pamela Wineman

EDITORIAL REVIEW
Pamela Wineman

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION
Rachel Olson

FRONT COVER
Shane Saeed, MA student in Leadership for Educational Organizations, approaches her school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Serwaa Adu-Tutu, David Campbell, Scott Dressel-Martin, Kimberly Greenwell, Trevr Merchant

ABOUT

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WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT ONLINE EDUCATOR?



As learning online proliferates amid the disruptive force of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic precarity, and school reopenings, forward-thinking educators across the globe are actively building welcoming virtual classroom “sanctuaries” and “refuges” for their students.

“A pandemic forced us all to discover what happens when learning is pushed online,” said Sean Michael Morris, faculty member in the SEHD Learning Design & Technology program. “Educators are gearing up for teaching and learning through the screen, across time and time zones, while giving students an experience of curiosity and wonder. It’s an awesome responsibility.”

Morris recently co-led an international, asynchronous, online Digital Pedagogy Lab in collaboration with the SEHD. The event was 500+ participants strong across 15 countries and 20 time zones.

CU Denver is uniquely prepared and mobilized to provide thought leadership and direction in the area of human-centered

digital learning. Learning Design & Technology faculty provide influential courses, certificates, degree programs, faculty development workshops, and experiences like the Digital Pedagogy Lab so that education professionals and librarians can feel more confident, tech-savvy, and student-centered. For the fall 2020 semester, CU Denver created a holistic campus effort to provide national leadership around online course experiences in higher education. For example, 150 course sections are employing assistants to help faculty use digital tools more effectively and think very deliberately about fostering community-building and thoughtful feedback in their virtual classrooms. “Digital learning and teaching should not focus on tools and technology but on human beings,” said Morris. “And this is what CU Denver is doing. We engage students through practices that center them—their lives, their careers, their concerns.”

The following key takeaways from the Digital Pedagogy Lab explore humanizing practices for teaching online and offer examples of how educational institutions are adapting:

INVEST CRITICALLY AND CAREFULLY IN NEW TECHNOLOGIES.

Educators are encouraged to be better users of technology by asking critical questions of edtech: How accessible is the tool for students who are sight or hearing impaired? How do these tools invade a student’s privacy? How do we confront problems long identified with edtech, such as privacy violations, security concerns, racist algorithms, accessibility, all-male leadership teams, and outsourcing? The conference featured a “tool parade,” an opportunity for online educators to get their feet wet and consider what’s possible and what they might want to explore more deeply.



CENTER TEACHING IN ANTIRACISM, ACCESSIBILITY, AND EQUITY.

Digital pedagogy should acknowledge the very real circumstances of students’ lives—from the work and parenting they’re doing at home to societal issues they face. Addressing racism, establishing accessibility, and understanding equity challenges in students’ lives online and on-the-ground are necessary no matter the subject matter or content. The pandemic brings this into greater focus, but the work of teaching is never just teaching. We must find ways to reduce oppression and question privilege. The hope is to build bridges between our own humanity and the humanity of students.

Left page: Paw Ki Htoo, Elementary Education student. Below: Sean Michael Morris, faculty member, Learning Design & Technology program



ADVOCATE AT ALL LEVELS FOR YOUR STUDENTS’ NEEDS.

Digital pedagogy has become more urgent, especially as learning online (re)surfaces inequities that we have barely scratched at in our classrooms and can profoundly change access to education. As Morris noted, “Too often, I think, online teaching (and instructional design) employs methods to remove the student from where they are and place them where we want them.” Excellent teaching is rooted in understanding and valuing students and their experiences. Good digital pedagogy can develop from something as simple as talking to students, asking them to reflect on what they need as learners, and allowing them to make choices that align with their interests.



GET CREATIVE WITH YOUR NEW DIGITAL CLASSROOM SPACE.

Student motivation and efficacy builds when their voices are affirmed and they feel included in establishing how the learning community operates. “Teachers can make deliberate decisions about how students engage and feel a sense of belonging in a virtual classroom community,” said Laura Summers, a faculty member in Learning Design & Technology. “It’s important that students are able to see themselves reflected in the virtual space and that they’re given permission to be creative.”

There are several free applications that can be embedded in virtual courses for students to co-create on a shared document (e.g., Padlet, Jamboard) and hold small-group collaborations on authentic problems of practice that build upon student agency. Students can also “make” away from the computer and return together or through recordings to share their creative solutions.

The important thing is to engineer a flexible system that allows students to explore and find personal connection to their lives, while simultaneously directing their actions and focus toward a specific obtainable goal.



TEACH WITH A FLEXIBLE AND NIMBLE MINDSET.

“The most important digital literacy is imagination and creativity,” said Morris. Teachers can and should feel empowered to be more agile. Rather than professional development and training focused on specific practices, teachers need support for becoming literate with a variety of technologies and pedagogies so that, in the case of another sudden move to online education, flexibility and invention will preserve the continuity of the learning experience.



Laura Summers, faculty member, Learning Design & Technology program

“A pandemic forced us all to discover what happens when learning is pushed online.”



NXTGEN TEACHER RESIDENCY:

“THEY’RE ALWAYS THERE FOR YOU”



“I love the feeling of belonging to this community, this body of educators.”

NxtGEN is an innovative teacher preparation pathway with a strong focus on diversifying the teacher workforce.

It develops undergraduates into highly competent teachers who possess the knowledge and skills needed to serve students of diverse languages, cultures, and abilities in urban and rural classrooms. The program hits a sweet spot, often attracting individuals who are interested in returning to their home communities to teach. Graduates earn a BA and a Colorado teacher’s license, and elementary teacher candidates also earn a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education endorsement. To date, the program has prepared 124 teachers for high-needs Colorado schools. The pathway is designed in close partnership with Aurora Public Schools, Denver Public Schools, Jefferson County School District, and St. Vrain School District. For more information, email Tania.Hogan@ucdenver.edu.

The NxtGEN Teacher Residency program is much more than three years of paid teaching experience and teacher education courses followed by a final yearlong residency in a school. It’s an opportunity for students of color, multilingual speakers, first-generation college students, and those who wish to be role models for children in highly diverse schools to receive forward-thinking mentorship from Dr. Tania Hogan, director of NxtGEN, together with a cadre of award-winning teacher education faculty, school site teams, and mentor teachers.

David Montes, student in Teacher Education with Tania Hogan, director of NxtGEN

Students in NxtGEN say Hogan cares deeply about social justice. She grounds them in their academics through helpful seminars and one-on-one appointments. She guides students through the process of gaining financial aid, scholarships, interviews, and paid internships that they love. She listens attentively and generously, day and night. She speaks thoughtfully to them about their coursework and internships, always helping them see the bigger picture or the extra article they could read. In short, she is the living example of the kind, compassionate, and exemplary teacher they wish to become themselves.

Nathalie Gomez, a senior in the program, describes NxtGEN as highly relational, supportive, a true community, and the reason she chose CU Denver. “Since I joined NxtGEN, I’ve been inspired by Tania. I want to be as supportive to the students in my classroom as she’s been to me. I just want to go above and beyond,” said Gomez. “There’ve been personal issues that she’s helped me figure out and incidents in classrooms that we’re still figuring out together. Tania helped me find an internship site where I could speak Spanish consistently and where I eventually obtained a full-time job as a third grade ELA-S teacher. I’m also planning to continue my schooling at CU Denver to get an MA. So that’s really exciting.”

David Montes, a second-year student in NxtGEN, loves the paid paraprofessional work in schools, as well as the academic and personal supports. “I enjoy it a lot. It’s hard work, but I have been doing hard work all my life. It’s just different,” said Montes. “I love the feeling of belonging to this community, this body of educators. It’s just really good. Tania is my hero.



Nathalie Gomez, student in Teacher Education

The people in NxtGEN listen to us. They are our personal psychologists. They take a big load off our backs. They are our friends. They are our teachers. They are a very big part of education, for me. I always recommend NxtGen. I think it’s a great program. They’re always there for you.”

“Early on, our students are getting the experience of what it’s like to be a teacher,” said Hogan. “They see

behind the scenes. They’re working in the schools five days a week, 8 a.m. to noon. So, the reality of teaching is visible for them. Our graduates know they want to be teachers, and they just have so much more instructional experience. They know the system. They know all the curriculum ahead of time. They learn how to interact professionally with teachers and families. We’re creating and empowering strong groups of new teachers.”

NXTGEN WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

Students take advantage of the many individualized wraparound supports that NxtGEN offers through the SEHD Success Center. They are designed to develop deep relationships within the NxtGEN student body and enhance each student’s approach to navigating a successful university journey. Students know they can come to the Success Center and talk to Dr. Tania Hogan and the Success Coaches about anything and be supported in a variety of ways.

- ✓ Academic support
- ✓ Individualized tutoring
- ✓ Paid early field experiences in teaching as a paraeducator intern
- ✓ Empowering cohort meetings
- ✓ Financial aid/scholarships
- ✓ Interview support for getting a permanent job in a school district
- ✓ Peer mentoring
- ✓ One-on-one support meetings
- ✓ Paid yearlong residency internships in some districts
- ✓ Socioemotional support
- ✓ Time management

LEADERSHIP FOR EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS (LEO)

EQUITY-FOCUSED EDUCATION LEADERSHIP IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

Alumni and students from CU Denver's Leadership for Educational Organizations (LEO) program became everyday heroes to many of us in 2020. Education leaders—through constant cooperation with their staff, boards, and state government agencies—provided thoughtful, actionable plans that strived to balance health and safety, equity, and support for learners, educators, and families. What commitments and values guide them? What challenges and opportunities excite them the most? We interviewed three LEO affiliates to explore how their CU Denver studies helped shape how they lead today.



LEO EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP



Lora de la Cruz, superintendent, Lake Oswego School District

DR. LORA DE LA CRUZ

(Administrator License '15, EdD '16), superintendent in Lake Oswego School District just outside of Portland, Oregon, was the first superintendent in the United States to close her school buildings and shift to online learning

after a case of COVID-19 was confirmed in her district. She and her team were front-runners in creating responses and messaging as the graveness of the pandemic was just beginning to become a reality.

On Feb. 28, at 5:30 p.m., she received a phone call from public health authorities notifying her of the emergency. Her cabinet and board were updated immediately. She worked until midnight with her communications director to put out the first of many notifications. They extended spring break out of an abundance of caution, then transitioned to full-time distance learning. "We needed to learn how to connect with our students while educating remotely during really challenging circumstances," said de la Cruz. The first individual who tested positive was hospitalized and on a respirator for three months. It was an extremely worrisome time.

De la Cruz is a leader who values human connection, service to others, integrity, and diversity. "Every human being has a need to feel that they are heard and valued and that they matter. So, I always begin from that place in any leadership position and any decision making," she said.

Her path to being a superintendent started at an early age. De la Cruz's mother was enrolled in teacher education classes during evenings and summers, and she brought her daughter along because childcare was not in her budget. Her mother, a Mexican immigrant who received her U.S.

citizenship more than 40 years ago, was a single mom of five children after her husband died in the Vietnam War. "We watched her go after her greatest dream, which was to engage in higher education to become an educator. What it modeled for us is that education has the power to change your life. It changed our life trajectory," said de la Cruz.

Determined to become an educator herself, de la Cruz's career path took her from elementary teacher to assistant principal to principal to area superintendent, and finally to superintendent. "I never forget that experience of being in the classroom, as well as having the incredible responsibility of making decisions for thousands of people across the system," she said.

She uses a distributed leadership model taking intentional steps to build connection, trust, and opportunities for collaborative decision making, implementation, and action. "My board, students, parents, community members, and I are passionate about racial justice, climate justice, and educational equity. We have worked together to create an antiracism resolution, which I know many school districts have done. And while words matter, they don't matter as much as actions. I'm proud that our resolution codifies actions that we are committing to as a district. We support changing the lens through which our district delivers educational programs that are more infused with very contemporary but long-lasting issues."

Her LEO experiences continue to resonate, particularly noting LEO's dynamic and diverse cohorts that remain in close contact after graduation, faculty who are cognizant about the needs of working adults and parents, opportunities to develop the fine art of giving professional presentations, and strong curriculum built around collaborating with school boards, policymakers, and lawyers.

Dr. Rodney Blunck, her doctoral faculty mentor, said that de la Cruz is "an outstanding member of the LEO Executive Leadership alumni. She exemplifies the professional and personal virtues of compassion, scholarship, dignity, and grace. Lora has and will continue to positively impact students, faculty, and communities for many years to come."

"It's critical for educators to not only enter the field but to keep pursuing our passions," said de la Cruz. "Each of us has something unique and important that needs to be contributed to the field of education. Whether it's a certification or a license or the next degree, go for it! We can never go wrong when we are pursuing the next level of educating ourselves. That contributes to building a stronger community."



LEO HIGHER EDUCATION

DEANDRE TAYLOR, a third-year student in CU Denver's EdD program with a concentration in the Leadership for Education Organizations in higher education, works as interim associate director of educational initiatives within Residence Life CU Boulder. He embraces diversity as a core strength in university settings. With approaches of care, patience, fortitude, listening ears, and the ability to lean into uncomfortable conversations, higher education leaders can and will improve services and opportunities for diverse university students and employees.

Taylor's undergraduate experiences in Wisconsin influenced his career path: from the bias-motivated incidents he experienced in residence halls to much more positive interactions that influenced his decision to stay at college. "I'm always thinking about how I can pay it forward to those individuals who helped me have a more welcoming experience, despite the challenges that I had," said Taylor. "How did they do that? Really, the tenets of diversity, equity, and inclusion uphold that vision for student success. Everyone should have access to quality education. Education is what is going to drive a person's life."

This moment in history provides a heightened opportunity for higher education faculty and professionals to get involved in diversity and equity conversations and take antiracist stances. Universities have opportunities to thread inclusionary initiatives and dialogue throughout their student touchpoints. This includes university housing. For his EdD dissertation-in-practice, Taylor plans to explore and discover barriers to upper mobility and career advancement opportunities for Black housing professionals at universities using data from the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I). What would improve employee retention and career success of diverse individuals in the field? How do we help to change systems that are confusing or oppressive? "We have to break down silos in our society," he said.

Dr. Rodney Blunck, Taylor's faculty mentor, had glowing remarks about his professionalism and abilities: "DeAndre is an excellent doctoral student and an equally exceptional role model for others. He leverages his passion for equity

along with his compassion for others to increase student agency and organizational flexibility needed to drive students' success."

Taylor highly recommends his doctoral program to others because all courses have equity as a focus. "The professors and my cohort peers, we push each other to think about education from that equity lens. When people ask me whether they should pursue a doctorate, I say, 'Absolutely. Believe in yourself. The hardest part is applying.' The things that I develop and learn in this program will follow me no matter where I go as a leader, no matter what. And other folks are rooting and cheering me on."

Doctoral studies keep Taylor grounded and focused on an end goal. It's an exciting time to be in higher education right now. "We are changing and shifting in many different areas as a result of COVID. I'm excited to lead through the change and see what it's going to look like in the years to come."



DeAndre Taylor,
EdD student



LEO PRINCIPAL LICENSURE

Shane Saeed, student in Leadership for
Educational Organizations

SHANE SAEED, an MA student in LEO, is a fourth-grade teacher at Red Hawk Elementary in St. Vrain Valley School District who completed her principal licensure in 2020. From the beginning of her teacher education days, she dreamed of becoming a school leader.

When her current "life-changing" school principal encouraged her to apply to CU Denver's principal licensure program, she jumped at the chance. "Seeing his impact on our school's culture really resonated with me," said Saeed. "This is what I want to do with a school as well."

According to Saeed, the experience was amazing. It strengthened her belief that positive school leadership creates excellent school systems and influences how she confronts new challenges and opportunities with reflection, partnership, and consensus-building.

"I absolutely have to applaud CU Denver's leadership program," she

said. "It's much more than reading theory and writing papers. University assignments involve action, big leadership project roles in schools, having hard conversations, planting seeds of change, and watching those seeds grow. That was just so powerful."

Saeed loved the community of the leadership program, fostered by the 16 friendly individuals in her cohort and her faculty mentor, Dr. Scott McLeod. "They are the people, down the road, that I will call to bounce around ideas," she said. Members of the cohort looked critically at equity, diversity, and inclusion in their schools. "I teach in a rather affluent, white community, but I think it is really important to make sure that we are supplementing our curriculum so that students are seeing not just mirrors but windows into different and other cultures. I want my students to be able to talk about those cultures and how they interact. We learned to build empathy in schools, so students really try to understand different cultures and races and ethnicities."

LEO also helped participants consider meaningful ways to integrate technology to augment student learning. For example, students in the cohort learned to use the 4 Shifts Protocol to redesign lessons and units for deeper learning, greater student agency, and more authentic real-world work. This redesign connected deeply with the principal licensure program's emphasis on robust instructional leadership and coaching. McLeod said, "Shane takes to this work like a duck to water. She has a real passion for using technology, for family-community engagement, and student-centered instruction."

"I can't recommend this program enough," said Saeed. "I'm hoping to pursue my EdD with CU Denver as well. If this is anything like what the principal licensure was, I just cannot wait."

Follow Saeed and her large global following of educators on Instagram at [@fantasticallyfourth](https://www.instagram.com/fantasticallyfourth).



Gov. Jared Polis reads to schoolchildren during the pandemic. Faculty members Kristie Kauerz and Diana Schaack



COULD THIS PANDEMIC TRANSFORM THE WAY WE INVEST IN CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR OUR YOUNGEST GENERATION?

THE STATE OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION DURING COVID

In a field already characterized by significant inequities, the COVID-19 pandemic is a long-lasting disruptive event that is exacerbating crises in early childhood care and education (ECE). As some community-based, private, and public ECE programs go remote, as others open their doors, and as still others furlough teachers or close doors due to reliance on family tuition, experts are seeing greater solidarity among working parents and guardians, businesses, and U.S. policymakers who are giving ECE programs and services elevated attention.

Researchers have shown that high-quality ECE programs can improve children's learning and social-emotional development trajectories, engaging them during the most sensitive window of brain development.

And the pandemic has reinforced how ECE provides an invaluable child care service for working families. ECE is both care and education and helps children and their families thrive. COVID-19 has shined a light on the economic implications of the ECE system in the United States.

"Public perception and awareness of the problems in ECE are changing due to the pandemic," said Dr. Kristie Kauerz, associate clinical professor and director of the National P-3 Center at CU Denver. "Families suddenly are saying 'Wait a minute, I can't go to work if I don't have these supports,' or 'Oh my gosh, I'm trying to work and be my child's teacher. And these preschool teachers need to make more money because it's hard to instruct these little kids.' What's yet

to be determined is how this all plays out in terms of how we leverage this new public attention to change policy strategies. And I don't know what that's going to look like yet."

Young children are feeling the pandemic the hardest. While school districts have offered distance learning options for K-12 students, it is especially difficult to provide online platforms for preschoolers (ages 3-5), children with special needs, and those who live in poverty. "Everyone's just really struggling with the best way to provide education services to young children right now," said Kauerz. "Online learning is really hard with preschoolers and kindergarteners."

"Prior to COVID-19, ECE existed on the margins and was a very fragile

system. Nowhere was this more visible than in terms of pay for early childhood teachers, which is abominably low," said Dr. Diana Schaack, assistant professor in SEHD. "Because ECE that serves children birth to five is largely family tuition driven and a fee-for-service industry, in Colorado alone, almost a quarter of ECE teachers who were making low wages to begin with have been furloughed or laid off due to temporary closures, reduced class sizes, and families disenrolling children. A recent national study showed that about 60 percent of ECE programs were on the brink of permanent closure due to the pandemic. The programs that are durable and have been able to survive are the ones that are publicly funded. Families have always seen the value of ECE. Businesses are now really starting to understand the value of ECE with the pandemic making it crystal clear that employees require ECE services to fully be available. Maybe, just maybe, out of this crisis, a much deeper appreciation will evolve that then translates into greater public investment for ECE that also allows ECE teachers to make a fair wage."

COLORADO GOVERNOR'S ECE PRIORITIES

Jared Polis, the governor of Colorado, has gone to great lengths to contain and mitigate the pandemic and to support young children and their teachers. Increasing statewide early childhood capacity and workforce development are priority projects on the governor's "Bold Four" initiatives. He and his administration are setting out to increase pre-school capacity in the state by funding an additional 20,000 half-day preschool slots by June 30, 2023. Steps in the plan include increasing the number of qualified ECE teachers; improving ECE access, especially in ECE deserts; and opening more public preschool programs.

"Given the enormity of the state's budgetary priorities—including transportation, corrections, Medicaid, and wildfires—we are so proud to have a governor who lays a stake in the ground that early childhood and the ECE workforce are central to his administration's success. It speaks volumes about his commitment and his values in this work," said Kauerz.

"He's been a historic champion of ECE," said Schaack. "Within his first several months in office, he had full-day K passed in Colorado, which we hadn't been able to do until he got into office. That has just been amazing. It is my hope that he can keep moving the ECE policy agenda forward in the midst of a really difficult time in our state and in our state's budget."

Dr. Rebecca Kantor, Dean of SEHD, is contributing to the state's ECE goals. The governor recently named her as a commissioner on his Early Childhood Leadership Commission, a federally authorized state advisory council for early childhood. Kantor provides statewide leadership, subject matter expertise, and champions best and promising ECE practices throughout the state.

Applications for the next cohort are due on Dec. 1, 2020.
For more information and to apply:
education.ucdenver.edu/PhD



New Early Childhood Policy PhD Concentration

CU Denver has launched one of only a handful of PhD concentrations in early childhood policy in the country, recognizing that Colorado and the nation need more policy leaders who can address large systemic issues in ECE, now more than ever.

The goal of this cutting-edge program is to develop leaders and academics who can move early childhood policy agendas and scholarship forward, thereby improving funding mechanisms and workforce agendas to support the care and learning needs of racially, linguistically, culturally, and ability-diverse children. Early childhood policy is quite different from K-12 policy and needs experts with PhDs who understand the unique challenges and opportunities in this field.

"We need people who deeply understand the different funding streams and the different policy initiatives that have shaped the field to be what it is today and to also be trained in policy skills in order to reform the field," said Dr. Kristie Kauerz. "This program has all of the right ingredients: a really interesting mix of faculty with different areas of expertise who will be dedicated to your success; an incredible set of core courses that include crowdsourcing from the best brains in the discipline, and an ECE community with true collaborative spirit. This program is going to gain a national reputation quickly."

The PhD concentration in early childhood policy augments current CU Denver ECE programs that build scholars in early childhood pedagogy and leadership capacity in the field, including a PhD concentration in inclusive early childhood education, an EdD concentration in educational leadership for equity with an early childhood concentration, and the Buell Early Childhood Leadership Certificate program.

ALUM SAYS THIS IS A TIME TO “LEAD COURAGEOUSLY”

Dr. Barbara Cooper strongly believes that being an educator is a calling, not just a job. The dramatic events of 2020 have only confirmed her conviction.

“You have to be called to do this work well because you really are impacting children who come from all walks of life,” said Cooper. “And unless you have a passion and a servant attitude and a servant leadership style, it’s going to be challenging to do this work, now more so than ever.”

Cooper was appointed Secretary of Early Childhood Education by Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey in July 2020. She earned both her PhD in education leadership and innovation and a master’s degree in administration, supervision, and curriculum development (magna cum laude) at CU Denver.

In addition to leading an executive state education agency that is part of the Governor’s cabinet, Cooper is responsible for 1,204 First Class pre-K classrooms in all 67 Alabama counties. Her team addresses the myriad needs of teachers, children, and families during a time when “reality can change in a day” and traditional methods are quickly falling to the wayside.

“It’s messy work, and there are no perfect answers,” said Cooper. “As educators, we have to look at this as an opportunity to mold children and not try to run away from the conversations because even children as young as four years old are experiencing this



Barbara Cooper, PhD alum. Right: Barbara with her husband Walter P. Cooper Sr.

(COVID-19) pandemic, and they’re experiencing the pandemic of racism. We can’t remain silent on these issues. It’s an opportunity to lead courageously.”

In just a few short months, Cooper’s team has ensured virtual resources are reaching hundreds of early childhood students and that teachers are prepared to teach in restricted classroom settings, remotely, or both

simultaneously. A personalized mentoring system is supporting teachers across the state and webinars are offered to “keep everyone understanding that although these are times we’ve not lived in before, we are committed to thriving as we determine new ways to support children and families.”

A South Side Chicago native, Cooper grew up in a home with a passion for learning, fondly noting that her

“If we can get it right from birth to five when the brain is being built, we impact a child, and we impact our nation for eternity.”

mother bought her a new book at the grocery store every weekend. At age four, she was enrolled in Head Start at the Altgeld Murray Center, where she remembers Miss Ball and Miss Pugh instilling what became a lifelong joy for learning. “I was always excited to go to school, every day,” she said.

Her worldview began to develop when she attended a high school quite a distance from her home. “I saw firsthand some of the issues that were plaguing our city in Chicago, and how so many children were not experiencing education in the same way I was. Those are my earliest memories of wanting to impact communities.”

She received her bachelor’s degree from Western Illinois University before her husband’s military career brought them to metro Denver. She pursued her graduate degrees while working first as a teacher and then as a principal, with two young children at home. After some time in the Aurora Public Schools as chief equity and engagement officer, as well as director of family engagement and community outreach, Cooper was recruited to become deputy superintendent of the Huntsville Public Schools in 2011, overseeing an administrative overhaul and the development of a roadmap to address more than 50 years of segregation in one of Alabama’s largest school systems.

She went on to serve as deputy state superintendent of teaching and learning and chief academic officer for the Alabama State Department of Education and at the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education as the director of the Office of School Readiness, which administers the nation’s highest quality ranked pre-K program.

Cooper said there are “countless examples” of how she was inspired by teachers during her life, all the way to CU Denver and her doctorate advisor, Dr. Dorothy Garrison-Wade. “She whipped us into shape and demanded excellence. I’ll never forget the support that Dorothy provided.”

Garrison-Wade, associate professor emerita in the SEHD, has remained a valuable mentor and traveled to Alabama to consult with Cooper on the mandatory desegregation plan for the Huntsville schools. “Barbara is truly a phenomenal woman,” she said. “As Barbara’s doctorate advisor, I learned just as much or more from her. She has a strong, nationwide reputation for promoting quality education and equity. I remain in awe of all of her accomplishments.”

Cooper’s children are grown, and she and her husband, Walter Cooper Sr., coordinator of the LET US Academy at Tuskegee University, have inspired the next generation: their daughter is an early childhood teacher.



“One of my favorite quotes comes from Witcraft, ‘A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove, but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.’ This is why this work is so critical,” said Cooper. “If we can get it right from birth to five when the brain is being built, we impact a child, and we impact our nation for eternity.”



A CHAMPION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND LATINX SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Like many students attending CU Denver, Maria Castro Barajas, who is pursuing an EdD in Leadership for Education Equity with a concentration in Latinx School Communities, is faced with balancing a full-time degree and supporting her family. Her drive to support students of color sets her apart. Castro Barajas works as the assistant director of the Pre-Collegiate Development Programs (PCDP) Bridge Program at CU Boulder and serves as president of the SEHD Doctoral Students of Color group.

As an advocate and leader in the Latinx community, Castro Barajas strives to keep first-generation students informed and motivated about pursuing higher education. Through the PCDP Bridge Program, which is the final stage of participation for high school seniors, she connects with students and their families, passing along her own experiences and knowledge of the higher education environment. "I've been through the PCDP program myself, so I've walked a mile in these students' shoes and can truly say I love working with this population of students. I am so happy I've come full circle," she said.

The PCDP Bridge Program also offers a three-week intensive summer residential academic program Castro Barajas created to assist PCDP students with their acclimation and retention at CU Boulder. Through this program, she provides academic information and social and emotional support for first-generation students and their families as they transition to institutions of higher learning.

For Castro Barajas, the Latinx EdD program is an opportunity to further her own education and lead more effectively. "The EdD program has allowed me to build great relationships with professors and colleagues in our communities. Together, we make a difference in changing systems of institutional oppression," she said.

Dr. Jorge Chavez, associate professor of Human Development and Family Relations, describes her as a wonderful student because she is "concerned with making a better world for the next generation of college students. She is in a position to serve as an example for the many Latinx high school and university students in Colorado. Maria is a leader."

As the university system grows more diverse, it becomes critical to understand and address the needs of a more



Maria Castro Barajas,
EdD student

diverse population. Individuals like Castro Barajas help shape a better atmosphere. She asserts that the "Latinx community is a central part of the United States. As the community grows, it is imperative that Latinx students receive the necessary skills while in K-12 in order to reach college."

With the advent of COVID-19, approximately 24 percent of America's Latino community have lost their jobs. This is sure to have an impact on their children's education and amplifies the lack of higher education access in the community. Castro Barajas hopes that her experiences as a first-generation, Latina student and her activism for higher education advocacy will help improve futures in Colorado's Latinx community.



Gabriel Castaño, EdD student

LEADING IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITH A PASSION FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Gabriel Castaño, who is pursuing an EdD Leadership for Educational Equity with a concentration in Higher Education, initially struggled to navigate the higher education process. The lack of proper guidance from his undergraduate institution forced this first-generation student and son of immigrant parents to withdraw and enroll at a local community college. "K-12 made sense because they just tell you what classes to take and walk you through the process," Castaño recalled. "But when it came to my undergraduate years, my parents and I didn't know anything about choosing the right classes or applying for financial aid. We didn't know where to begin."

Unfortunately, the Castaño family's experience is not unique. According to educationdata.org, the overall dropout rate for undergraduate students in the United States is 40 percent. Most give up before even entering their sophomore year. Much like Castaño's experience, these students feel lost and overwhelmed by the entire process. Once he received the proper guidance, Castaño was able to complete an associate's degree and return to a four-year institution.

From his start as an admissions counselor to his current role as CU Denver's assistant vice chancellor of enrollment, Castaño has spent the last 16 years serving other first-generation and under-represented students. He realized early on that his passion, actions, and time could have an immediate impact

"The EdD Higher Education concentration enables current education leaders to become effective and passionate about educational access, equity, and social justice."

on the lives of students and parents. In his current role, Castaño works to implement strategic enrollment management for CU Denver, aiming to increase student success and retention rates. He hopes to make education accessible in a climate that supports diversity and inclusion.

In his first year as a doctoral student, Castaño is in his element. His graduate advisor, Dr. Diane Hegeman, said, "Gabe contributes his student enrollment management background, coupled with his knowledge and passion for serving under-represented students, to help them achieve their goals and exceed their aspirations."

The EdD Higher Education concentration enables current education leaders to become effective and passionate about educational access, equity, and social justice. "I love that I am able to take what I learn about leadership for educational equity, access, and retention of first-generation and Latinx students and use it in my work right away," said Castaño.

Castaño enjoys learning alongside a diverse group of peers who share his passion for achieving the mission and goals of higher education institutions. Thanks to advice from Dr. Hegeman, he views the experience as less of a destination and more of a journey. "When I can see myself crossing that finish line of earning the doctorate, it doesn't mean I'm done learning." Castaño allows himself room to learn, develop critical professional skills, evolve into a transformational CU Denver leader, and impactfully serve others.

GRANTS *Select Funded Projects*



“Math isn’t just for everyone. Math belongs to everyone.”

With this grant, Dr. Heather Johnson and her team want to create a lasting partnership that transforms instructional practices in introductory college math courses.



\$1.6 MILLION NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION GRANT

SEHD faculty members Dr. Heather Johnson (PI), associate professor of Mathematics Education, and Dr. Courtney Donovan (co-PI), clinical assistant professor in Research and Evaluation Methods, received a \$1.6 million grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) for Promoting Mathematical Reasoning and Transforming Instruction in College Algebra (ITsCRITiCAL). The project is a collaboration with Metropolitan State University of Denver, Santa Fe Community College, and Texas State University.

The project aims to transform education practices in college-level algebra to promote students’ reasoning. As society sees an increase in the need for STEM professions, it’s important for students to be prepared for the new changes. “We want math classes to be places where students can engage in reasoning, not just find answers,” said Johnson. “We collaborate with faculty across institutions to create spaces where that can happen.”

With this grant, Johnson and her colleagues have three research goals:

- Develop new and transformative approaches**
 ITsCRITiCAL will develop innovative digital tasks, known as Techtivities, that will investigate mathematical reasoning rather than answer-finding. Researchers also hope to embed developed tasks into existing courses that connect to high-leverage content. For instructors, ITsCRITiCAL will provide support and extend opportunities to promote student reasoning and ensure they can examine which student voices are being heard.
- Create Communities of Transformation**
 Innovative tasks are only one part of transformation. How instructors implement those tasks impacts students’ opportunities to learn. To promote lasting change, ITsCRITiCAL will create Communities of Transformation to ensure that evidence-based practices continue across its institution partners. These collaborative spaces foster faculty interaction to promote innovative practices. Instructors across institutions can connect via video conference and social media to network, support, and sustain innovations.
- Draw connections**
 ITsCRITiCAL will draw connections between instructional practices, instructor beliefs, and students’ covariational reasoning, math attitudes, and course success. Covariational reasoning involves forming and interpreting relationships between changing quantities, such as distance and height. It is a competency important for students’ success in key areas of college mathematics (e.g., functions, rates, and graphs) as well as for critical thinking as an educated citizen.

Top photo: Heather Johnson, Math Education faculty. Below: Courtney Donovan, Research and Evaluation Methods faculty

Select Funded Projects GRANTS



CATALYZING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS OF COLOR

Early Childhood Education program faculty members Dr. Rebecca Vlasin (PI) and Dr. Michael Barla (co-PI) are partnering with Clayton Early Learning, Mile High Early Learning, and Sewall Child Development Center on the place-based Designing for a Diverse Workforce project. The partners have engaged a cohort of diverse early childhood education teachers within their unique community work settings. Together, they are codesigning and implementing undergraduate coursework (12 credits) through contextualized, culturally sustaining, and job-embedded experiences. The goal is to improve access to professional learning opportunities that build toward a bachelor’s degree while proactively addressing inequities and barriers that many ECE educators of color face as they pursue professional preparation and higher education.

This innovation was made possible by \$190,000 in funding through the Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Colorado Initiative. The initiative is funded by the Buell Foundation and Gary Community Investments and led by Early Milestones Colorado.



Photos by Scott Dressel-Martin/ Clayton Early Learning

MEETING COLORADO’S WORKFORCE NEEDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

CU Denver has been awarded a \$110,000 grant from Constellation Philanthropy for ASPIRE to Teach in Community-Based Early Childhood Care and Education (ASPIRE ECE). Dean Rebecca Kantor and Dr. Suzanne Arnold will serve as principal investigators. This innovative program leverages an existing alternative teacher licensure program, ASPIRE to Teach, originally designed as a “quick-entry” pathway into P-12 teaching. ASPIRE ECE will supply high-quality online preparation for Colorado’s newest early childhood educators, enabling them to best provide care and education for young children and their families. Each early childhood educator will receive instructor-led, yearlong video coaching for increased effectiveness and retention as well as monthly online professional development learning opportunities with peers and instructors.

YEAR IN REVIEW



1 NEW COUNSELING ACCREDITATION

SEHD has received specialty accreditation for the university's MA in Couple and Family Counseling/Therapy program from the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE). "COAMFTE accreditation is the gold standard for couples and family counseling program," said **Dr. Diane Estrada**, associate professor in Counseling. "It is an assurance that we meet rigorous standards for quality of faculty, curriculum, and connections in the community."



10 NEW UNDERGRADUATE TEACHER EDUCATION PATHWAYS

Colorado needs culturally sustaining teachers now more than ever. While the state faces teacher shortages in general, shortages of secondary and special education teachers are extreme. SEHD's award-winning educator preparation residency programs have expanded to meet these needs. The SEHD rural partnership with Otero Junior College has added pathways in middle school math, secondary science, and special education. The BA in Education and Human Development on the Denver campus has additional secondary pathways in math, science, English, and social studies. And, NxtGEN has new pathways in the Jefferson County School District, Aurora Public Schools, and St. Vrain Valley School District.



2 COUNSELING FACULTY EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND INFORMED CARE

Dr. Chaya Abrams and **Dr. Lisa Forbes**, clinical professors in Counseling, developed and taught a new course on trauma and adverse childhood experiences and the impact on children's development and learning. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of children and families experiencing various kinds and degrees of trauma. The course introduced early childhood educators in culturally diverse settings to the concept and common behavioral indicators of childhood trauma, and, importantly, to ways to increase a sense of safety in classrooms through trauma-informed care and interventions based in play therapy.



20 TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS MATCHED WITH FAMILIES IN NEED

The SEHD Student Success Center developed the Learn and Grow Collaborative, matching talented education students with families of children and young adults during the pandemic, when each can be of service to the other.



2 MONTHS OF MOTHERHOOD RESEARCH DURING COVID-19

Dr. Lisa Forbes, assistant clinical professor in Counseling, and **Dr. Courtney Donovan**, clinical assistant professor in Research and Evaluation Methods, researched the effects of COVID-19 on parenting attitudes, mental health, and substance abuse while providing mental health support for mothers during the pandemic. For more information and to access the support, search for The Mothering Project on Facebook or @themotheringproject on Instagram.



35 ST. VRAIN EDUCATORS LEARN ABOUT EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

How do St. Vrain educators build and nurture classroom communities—even while teaching students from a distance? SEHD and the St. Vrain Valley School District partnered to develop a new MA program for teacher leaders. This district-customized Learning Design and Technology program helps teachers create nimble, equity-focused, and deeper-thinking digital learning opportunities during unprecedented times.

YEAR IN REVIEW



80 LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PANDEMIC LEARNING

Dr. Scott McLeod, associate professor in Leadership for Educational Organizations, launched two projects to aid school district leaders as they shift to digital learning. For his "Coronavirus Chronicles" interview series, McLeod engaged in 10-minute check-ins with 43 schools around the globe to help school administrators improve their instructional leadership during the pandemic and use technology to enhance learning and teaching. His second project, "Silver Lining for Learning," featured 27 live conversations on Saturdays to discuss the future of innovative post-COVID education worldwide.



2020 CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED FACULTY LECTURE

In March, associate professor **Dr. Manuel Espinoza**, along with two members of his Right2Learn undergraduate research collective, Maria Karina Sanchez Velasco and Tania Soto-Valenzuela, wove together captivating, unforgettable stories and research findings about human dignity and civil rights from 1876. More than 200 people came to see the trio speak on "Masterpieces Made Visible: Educational Dignity, Social Dreaming, and the Colorado Constitution" during the second annual Distinguished Faculty Lecture.

SUPPORTING FLEXIBILITY FOR ALL COLORADO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

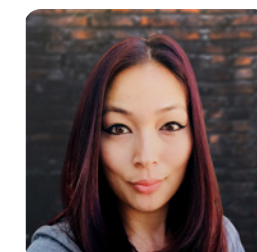
Dr. Julie Oxenford O'Brian—co-director of the Center for Practice Engaged Education Research (C-PEER)—helped school districts think through assessment, accountability, and data collection challenges during the pandemic. She helped to develop recommendations to the Colorado Department of Education for policy flexibility during COVID-19. She provided advice on suspending new graduation requirements, administering state assessments, administering and using state required local assessments, evaluating educators, and accountability and improvement planning.

NEW FACULTY



Chaya Abrams, LPC, LAC, assistant clinical professor in the Counseling program, earned her PhD

from Adams State University. Prior to this position, she taught as an adjunct faculty member at Johnson & Wales University, Colorado State University, and Regis University. Her scholarly interests include historical trauma and historical trauma response, the impact of program modality on counselor preparation, and the multicultural aspects of clinical supervision.



Robin Brandehoff, assistant clinical professor in the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education

program, hails from Hawai'i and East Los Angeles. She was a high school administrator and educator for more than 12 years before getting her PhD at CU Denver, where she helped direct the nationally recognized Pathways-2Teaching program. Her research examines the oppressions and traumas of marginalized communities of color through mentorship, performance, and counter-stories to support and educate Latinx gang-affiliated youth and the educational leaders and mentors who work with them.



Julia Mahfouz, assistant professor in the Leadership for Educational Organizations program, completed most

of her schooling in Lebanon prior to earning her PhD from The Pennsylvania State University. Most recently, she worked as an assistant professor at the University of Idaho. Her research agenda focuses on deepening our understanding of social-emotional learning through lenses of intervention implementation, school improvement efforts, and preparation of school leaders.

LOVE & LITERACY

GO HAND IN HAND

Energetic and upbeat, Amelia Parks works as an English, literature, and composition teacher at Colorado Early Colleges Aurora. Motivating diverse youth to deeply enjoy reading and writing, particularly as they find their voices during this unprecedented time, is her passion and goal.



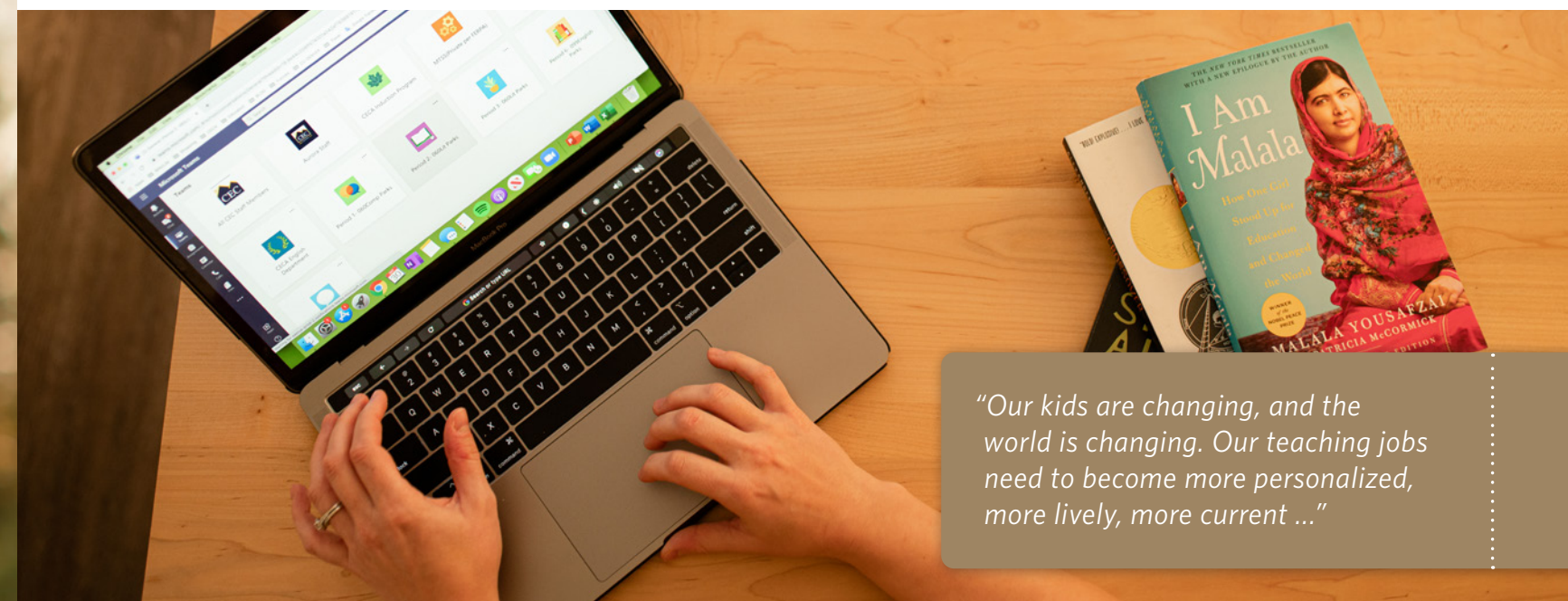
Amelia Parks, MA
student in Literacy
Education

Developing enthusiastic readers starts with love and a desire to understand students' individual differences and passions, said Parks. "I'm rooted in the belief that kids learn best from adults who listen to and care about them deeply. Loving your students is key. It's the only way you get to know their needs and make informed decisions in your classes."

Becoming a teacher happened "organically" for Parks. Her mom is a college faculty member. Her dad teaches in K-8 schools. Excellent English professors in undergraduate school supplied the extra spark needed to light the fire. She earned her BA in English literature and teacher licensure from Fresno State University. Then it was time for her to gain her "sea legs for

refugees—have enormously powerful stories and perspectives to convey, all with unique cultural perspectives.

"It is a pleasure to work with Amelia Parks," said Argys. "In classes at the university or in Denver Writing Project seminars, her passion, professionalism, and sincere concern for her students' learning is



"Our kids are changing, and the world is changing. Our teaching jobs need to become more personalized, more lively, more current ..."

Inspiring students' confidence to develop positive bonds with characters in books inspires a gateway to lifelong learning. Parks's personal experience informs the way she empathizes with students and recommends book selections. "As a child, reading for pleasure didn't come naturally to me. When I received negative feedback, I gave up easily. It wasn't until some really wonderful teachers in my life, one of whom was my mom, introduced me to the books that were just my favorite books of all time, and still are—like *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter*—that I cried with the characters and empathized with them. Of all the 'aha' moments that I want kids to experience, it is the one of connection."

teaching" and "develop a teaching rhythm." A move to Colorado for her husband's job fueled a desire to further her education by pursuing an MA in Literacy Education at CU Denver. Parks was drawn to the university because of its proximity to the city and because her work colleagues told her that "CU Denver's faculty is really great. And the advisors' really care."

Parks's university classes have been extremely relevant. An overwhelmingly positive experience was a summer institute called the Denver Writing Project. Richard Argys, senior instructor in the SEHD and Parks's faculty advisor, made sure the class was steeped in discussions about culturally responsive teaching and youth voice. For Parks, it was a strong reminder that her students—many of whom are

inspiring. Already an accomplished writer and critical thinker herself, Amelia consistently views current research into effective teaching practices through her lens as a classroom teacher. I appreciate and admire her devotion to finding as many methods, as many ways as possible, to enhance student learning in her high school classes."

As a "newish" school leader on her school's campus, Parks is excited to be a model for the ideas and activities she is learning in grad school. "Our kids are changing, and the world is changing. Our teaching jobs need to become more personalized, more lively, more current—filled with curiosity, experimentation, and new topics—to keep literacy and writing engaging and fun."

Remembering Reina Montez (Romero)

SEHD EdD student Reina Montez (Romero), most recently an assistant principal at East High School in Denver Public Schools, passed away suddenly and unexpectedly this fall. Her cohort and faculty miss her dearly. "We are all the beneficiaries of her love, kind personality, and leadership presence," said Dr. Jim Christensen, program coordinator and senior instructor in the Leadership for Educational Organizations program. Her ultimate goal was to become a superintendent of a school district. Our hearts go out to her entire family, including her husband, Brian; son, Corran; and mother, Jean.



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