

C H A P T E R   O N E

# Humanity and Jefferson County Open School

**hu·man·i·ty**

1. Humans considered as a group; the human race.
2. The condition or quality of being human.
3. The quality of being humane; benevolence.
4. A humane characteristic, attribute, or act.

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As you read this book you will see that humanity is defined broadly; humans as a group inclusive of all shapes, sizes, colors, and cultures; humans as individuals, having an appreciation of their own uniqueness, conditions, and qualities; and humane treatment, of one another and of our world and environment. All of this is humanity.

In a time when policy demands accountability for academic proficiency, public school teachers and principals are being discredited and dishonored, and public schooling is under intense pressure for reform, we must begin thinking about how to balance our need for educating children who are more than just robots that we can stuff full of facts and figures. We must begin reflecting on what humanity is relative to education and schools—the humans we teach, the qualities that make them human, their ability to be humane and act in humane ways.

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Educators need to develop a vision for the future so that the next generation and every generation thereafter can learn to be caring, kind, gentle, compassionate, civilized, sympathetic, respectful, tolerant, and charitable. Teaching for peace, social justice, and democracy needs to be an inherent piece of school culture and life. Our schools need to be sensitive to these “humanities,” treat students fairly and equitably, and model these behaviors so that students can see what they look like and how beneficial they can be. Students need to learn what being human is all about; understand their own and others’ emotions, development, curiosities, and frailties. This self-discovery is part of finding humanity. It’s a critical component in discovering who we are, how we act and react to the world around us.

This book focuses on one school, Jefferson County Open School, which believes it has some good ideas about how to think about teaching for humanity and engaging the heart, the hands, and the mind. Throughout this book the school community defines what they believe to be the human side of what they do, and they try to explain how they do it and how they think about it. This is not to say they are perfect, but they are thinking very seriously about it. They describe a mission and school culture that focuses on the people, treating them openly and honestly; rich and powerful teaching and curriculum that gives attention to not only students’ cognition, but their feelings and social needs as well. They talk about learning as a passion because it considers human curiosities, interests, and pursuits. The community is also a crucial element in the chapters ahead as they examine their own community and the interactions among all humans including the extended community of families and alumni. They talk about life-long learning because finding humanity is not a process that begins or ends in school. As educators, we must promote a life-long process of understanding who we are and what we can contribute to others and our environment. And finally, they will look at their own human frailties and complexities and how they must continually keep humanity at the forefront of their minds and find new and different ways to teach and model acts of being humane in their school and in their community.

### **JEFFERSON COUNTY OPEN SCHOOL**

This is a story about Jefferson County Open School (the Open School) in Lakewood, Colorado, about a mile from the Denver city limits. The school facility includes three connected two-story

buildings. The east wing houses the elementary students and the west wing the secondary. The central building includes some secondary and special use classrooms (art, music, home economics) and commons areas (cafeteria, library, office, clinic). There are two gyms, a playing field, and a playground.

Jefferson County Open School is a public alternative school in Jefferson County School District, the largest school district in the state of Colorado. The school is available to students prekindergarten through twelfth grades from throughout Jefferson County and the surrounding Denver communities. Classrooms are mixed age. The Pre-School includes ages three through five in one classroom. The Early Learning Center (ELC) includes two teams of grades kindergarten through second grade in one classroom with two teachers, one teacher's aide, and most often at least one student teacher or intern. The primary objective of the ELC is for students to see themselves as learners and members of a learning community. The Intermediate Area (IA) is three teams of grades three through six in one classroom with two teachers, one teacher's aide, and most often, at least one student teacher or intern. The IA staff believes that students who work, learn, and socialize together on a regular basis are more able to resolve conflict and care for each other. Throughout the year, teachers provide students with a wide variety of experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Typically, students are in the same IA area for four years with one teacher as the primary advisor for the third and fourth year experience and another for the fifth and sixth year experience. The middle school (MS) is grades seven and eight. All students in the Middle School are encouraged to take on an increased level of self-responsibility and to learn to make healthy choices in the three domains—person, social, and intellectual. The teachers believe that every student is capable of learning and that the role of teacher is to facilitate the learning process in a caring manner. High School (HS) encompasses grades nine through twelve. The curriculum is reflected in the twenty-four "Graduation Expectations" and incorporates personal goals in an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). The IEP is carried out in mutually agreed upon programs, worked out between each student and his/her advisor.

When there is a waiting list of students interested in enrolling in the school, a lottery system is used for admission. Transportation is available through the school district. So what makes it special?

What's special is that this is a public school of choice by students, parents, and teachers who want an emphasis on self-directed learning

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and active participation in the learning process in and out of the school setting. Its roots are in democratic practices and beliefs, and it is a school community that is intentional in its belief that humanity must come first above all else. Humanity—individuals and community, their thoughts, feelings, and interests are center to education and everything else revolves around it or learning cannot happen.

Not a day goes by when, at any given moment, personal, social, and intellectual development are not the priorities for students at the Open School. Each priority is given equal value, and the emphasis is based on the student's individual needs. At the Open School, the focus is not on text, testing, and grades, but rather it is on the development of the child as a whole from prekindergarten through high school. This development is encouraged by giving students a voice in how to solve problems and in creating new learning opportunities in their school. It is through their own voices that the Open School students can see, hear and feel the democratic process take place in the school community. An eighth grade student expressed it this way:

The Open School offers me more opportunities than I would get at traditional schools, like trips, getting to choose my classes, learning at my own pace, and having a safe environment to learn. I think I learned about appropriate behavior faster and more in-depth than I would have somewhere else. We teach kids that being social and active is important even if you're shy.

During the last thirty years of its outstanding history, the Open School has been recognized nationally in books and educational journals as one of the unique public schools of choice. Unique because each of the approximately 650 students is given an individualized, challenging curriculum yet is not graded through traditional methods, which often involves reading texts and taking tests. In fact, the Open School learning program has been recognized in the April 13, 1999, edition of the *Christian Science Monitor* in their eight-week installment series on alternative education. In 1995, the school received the Governor's Award for Service and recognition from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the thousands of volunteer hours students gave to building an animal habitat. Perhaps the most integral and valued portion of the school curriculum involves travel, which is often worldwide in scope. Several students and staff appeared in a Canadian television documentary that featured their work with polar bears in Manitoba, British Columbia. Also, Maria Shriver invited Open

School students to talk about their educational development on the NBC public affairs show, *Mainstreet*. More than 80 percent of the Open School graduates attend colleges or universities attesting to the success of the ongoing balance of independence and support systems being in place.

At the Open School the goals are:

- to re/discover the joy of learning;
- to seek meaning in life;
- to deal with what is;
- to prepare for what will be; and
- to create the world that ought to be.

These goals are attained through a nurturing dimension added to the profession of teaching, where trust is established between the student and teacher, a basic structure of the Open School. Teachers are also advisors. Advising is done on a daily basis where time is set aside for students to talk about issues or concerns of individuals or the group. Beginning this process early creates ongoing relationships with teachers and others based on trust and understanding of the student's individual needs and goals.

A graduate of the Open School said:

The Open School has had a very positive effect in teaching me to be active in evaluating and interpreting my experiences in terms of who I am and who I want to be. The processes I went through there, in doing things like documenting passages, writing my own transcript, giving and receiving constructive criticism, and writing evaluations of my learning, have helped me to see that my life is something dynamic, synergistic, and important to examine.

A seventh grade student stated:

The Open School has taught me to be self-directed, and it's taught me to do work on my own instead of having a teacher tell me what to do and when to do it.

An Open School teacher explained:

I can learn through everyone, including my students. I love listening to their ideas and hypotheses on things. I learn the names of the

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dinosaurs, about Britney Spears, and even Pokémon. At other times, I tell them what I know. I model how to be a lifelong learner. I share my personal interests with them so they can see my passions. I really, almost above all, want to help them become passionate adults. I want my students to be able to achieve their dreams and to get out of life what they want. Most of all, I want them to want something out of life. To be engaged in life, to see life's mysteries and wonder about things. This is why I teach here at the Open School and will only teach in a place like the Open School. This is what the Open School gave me (as a student), and I hope I have given this gift to my students. That is what being an independent, lifelong learner is all about.

And a parent stated,

I chose the Open School for my child because the school focuses on the student being responsible for their learning, experiential learning, teaching students to think, sense of community, and on giving back to the community. They are open to all races, ethnicities, beliefs, etc. I like the staff's focus on accepting and respecting each student as themselves and allowing students to develop and embrace themselves.

Access to knowledge and equity are perhaps best illustrated by the multitude of opportunities available for every student at every level, no matter their economic status, academic skills, or special needs. Middle school students take high school classes and intermediate and primary students can move back and forth across grade levels as their needs and interests evolve. High School Students have the opportunity to take college classes, and participate in apprenticeships and community service programs. Everyone travels near and far.

The Open School's central governing structure is known as Circle. A group of Circle members described it this way:

Circle's general charter is to review and/or establish the Open School's policies. They are responsible for defining and championing the philosophy of the school by reviewing the implementation of policies. Everyone in the school community is empowered and encouraged to participate in Circle discussions, and be accountable to the Circle and the community at large.

Circle is comprised of a core of staff, students, and parents selected to represent all areas of the school. The whole community is

part of the wider Circle, and all are invited to participate. Only non-staff members may serve as Chair/CoChair. Member terms are for two years, with half of the core group being selected at the beginning of each school year.

The Open School also has a parent-teacher-student organization (PTSA) that is the fundraising arm of the school. They have sponsored exchange programs and helped Open School families in need. Circle works closely with this group on the dissemination of funds for school projects.

In addition, the middle and high schools have their own student governance systems. Each week these systems, made up of and run by students, meet to discuss issues related to each level. They sponsor proposals that may go to Circle for review and feedback or resolve issues pertaining to problems within that particular level.

Overall, the Open School is a democratic school where everyone is involved as much or as little as they chose to be. Each person has a say and each voice is heard, respected, and honored. The goals of the school are clear and worthy; the outcomes are wholistic and lifelong.

Arnie Langberg, founder, principal, and parent of Jefferson County Open School wrote:

If you could attend the graduation ceremony at Jefferson County Open School you would “learn” most of what you need to know about this special place. Your first surprise would be that the person serving as the master of ceremonies is a student. You would also probably wonder who those people are, people of various ages that are seated on the stage across from the group of apparent graduates. I say “apparent” because those young folks are not all wearing the usual uniform of such ceremonies; although there may be a few that have chosen to wear caps and gowns.

Once the songs, poems, and speeches have been delivered by an assortment of students, parents, and staff members, you will discover just why those other people are on the stage. One of them walks to the front and calls out the name of a graduate who comes forward to receive the diploma accompanied by a hug from the presenter and cheers and applause from everyone else. The two then walk together back to where the presenter had been seated where a new seat has become available as the next presenter walks forward to present the next diploma. The second pair, upon completing the presentation of the diploma, sit together among the graduates. Each graduate will

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have received his or her diploma from someone who is personally significant to that particular graduate: a parent, grandparent, brother or sister, spouse, or perhaps a community teacher with whom that graduate had served an apprenticeship. And by the time the final diploma has been given, the graduates have been reseated together with their presenters in a manner that symbolizes their integration into the adult community.

I remember watching an early one of these ceremonies back when I was the principal of the school, and I was moved by many aspects of the occasion. The love that was evident, between those presenting diplomas and those receiving them, and also within the entire community was overwhelming. The fact that I knew each of these students personally, and that I had participated in each one's personal graduation ceremony prior to the group experience, made me feel privileged to be part of it all.

But what at first made me feel most proud also made me feel quite sad. The diploma that each of those students received was, in my mind, a recognition that that student had proved him/herself to be an adult, ready to take his/her place in the adult society. But shouldn't this be true of all young people as they complete their high school education? Then I pictured a graduation ceremony at a large high school, with all of the graduates dressed alike and receiving their diplomas from someone who probably does not know them, with the equivalent to our hugs being robot-like handshakes! I realized that their ceremony was consistent with the nature of their schooling, which prolongs their adolescence by making them dependent upon the school for all of their "important" learning. And I felt sad for all of those who were not lucky enough to get the kind of education our three children received at the Open High School.

One thing that did not occur at the graduation ceremony is also important in distinguishing Open from conventional schools. There was no listing of special recognition earned by individual students such as college acceptances and scholarships. Although the school community was proud of all such awards, we were equally proud of students who were the first members of their families to graduate from high school and of others who had overcome serious personal tragedies. The measures of "success" at Open are not easily quantified or communicated but they are all about human side of life. There is a quotation from the Bengali poet, Tagore, which we often cite: "The butterfly's wings leave no mark upon the sky, yet it has had its flight."



## **CREATING THE STORY**

As you read the chapters that follow, there are a few things you should keep in mind. This is a story told from the inside out. In other words, inasmuch as possible this story is told by the community through artifacts, short stories, student transcripts, and reflections. Even the introductions to each chapter were the result of taped conversations within the community. Teachers, administrators, and parents developed a set of essential questions from their own curiosities about the school, such as: What do students think about the advising system? How does travel influence students perspectives? When they take a trip, what do they learn personally, socially, and academically? Their role in the process was to examine their own question in their own way—interviews, group discussions, survey, student work, or their own reflection. As time went by, paper piled up.

What to include in each of the chapters was difficult, what to exclude even more so. As the leadership team, made up of the researcher, a few teachers, a parent, and an administrator, looked through the submissions, they found a common theme: humanity. Every question that was being answered had to do with perspectives, emotions, reflections, relationships, and interests. It became apparent that this attention to humanity was what was unique about the school. As the group looked at each “artifact” or evidence, we also had to ask whether it was a one-time story or whether this was a story that was indicative of so many stories in the life of the school. Included were stories and anecdotes that represented the deep structure of the school; the underlying motivation and culture of the school that give it its sense of place and pride.

This is not to say that there is no interpretation by the researcher; of course there is, but it’s kept it to a minimum. This provided an outside-in perspective to the work. The leadership team wanted to employ democratic methods and wholistic involvement in the project. It’s an impression of the school and a big picture of how teachers work with kids and build relationships. This school is not nirvana; there are flaws and blemishes, things that don’t work as well as they would like. This is not a school for everyone; families leave the school for a variety of reasons, and some families leave and come back later. However, those who have lived this experience over time have strong voices about their school and the dreams we should all have for all students no matter what school they go to. The Open School community

wanted to help others find humanity and think about what it takes to stay the course and not be misguided by the political pressures and structures that fail to recognize the complex nature of humanity.

Also, it is important to recognize that the chapters of this book are set apart for the purpose of applying some sort of logic to make the book readable. In reality, it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other and as you read particular artifacts, you might say to yourself, “Why didn’t they put this one in the chapter about . . . ?” Some of it was arbitrary, looking for the best fit and some was at the request of the writers themselves and where he/she felt it belonged and the element it most exemplified.

At the end of each chapter is a section called “Creating Humanity. . . .” These lists of ideas and suggestions came from teachers brainstorming what they do and the things others could do to bring a humane spirit to their school. These are only suggestions and ideas that this group of teachers feel have been important to their practice. These are by no means exhaustive lists, but they hope that others will read them, study them, and think about how to incorporate some of these ideas into their own context. There is also a “Final Thought” to each chapter. Each thought is from a member in the community who had some final words to say about the topic at hand and how it relates to humanity.

The community hopes that you will read this with interest and that it will inspire you to keep dreaming about what schooling can be and how, even in the face of tremendous change and pressure, doing what you believe can have incredible outcomes for our students. They also hope that as you read this book, you will be able to take the pieces that inspire you and use them wisely and ingeniously in your own community and school and create and learn how to preserve those things that you feel are sacred to schooling, life, and humanity.

They aren’t trying to define humanity for everyone or every school; every school must define humanity for themselves, think about what is humane, and think about the humans we deal with, whether they are other teachers, students, parents, or administrators. The school community hopes, however, that after reading the book, you think about what humanity is, what it looks like in your school or your community, and that you find your own way, in your own context, to help the next generation be better humans than the generation before.

**Figure 1.1** *The Organization of Jefferson County Open School: A Student's Experience*

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**Preschool**  
15-20 students  
3-4 years old plus  
afternoon Kindergartners  
2 teachers

**Early Learning Center  
(ELC)**  
Kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup>  
grade  
2 teams of 45-50 students  
2 teachers/team  
1 part-time aides/team  
1-2 teacher  
candidates/team  
Sometimes a "grandma"  
(elderly who assist in the  
classroom)

**Intermediate Area (IA)**  
3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade  
3 teams of 45-50 students  
2 teachers/ team  
1 part-time aide/team  
1-2 teacher  
candidates/team

**Middle School**  
7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade  
100-120 students  
6 teachers

**High School**  
9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade  
250-280 students  
11 teachers

**The History of Jefferson County Open School**

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- Fall 1969 A small group of Jefferson County citizens and educators meet to explore their mutual concerns about public education and their dreams of what it could be.
- January 1970 Proposal is submitted to the Jefferson County Board of Education; Board authorizes the establishment of an open school on a pilot basis.
- Fall 1970 The Open Living School opens in a series of cottages in Arvada, Colorado, with co-principals, ten staff members and 200 students ages three through twelve.
- Fall 1971 The Board of Education authorizes a second year and expands the school to two sites, Evergreen and Edgewater. One of the former principals goes to each school.
- Fall 1972 The Evergreen site moves locations to a more appropriate facility next door. Seventh grade is added at both sites
- Fall 1973 The Board of Education approves the Open School following three years of successful reviews of the charter. Eighth grade is added to both sites.
- Fall 1974 Ninth grade is added at both sites. Parents and staff from Open Living School and parents from the Evergreen community begin to plan a high school program and approach the School Board for a charter.
- Fall 1975 Mountain Open High School opens on a pilot basis.
- Fall 1978 Elementary and Junior High School programs at Evergreen and Edgewater are merged in Golden, Colorado, to become Tanglewood Open Living School. Mountain Open High School receives approval from the School Board following three years of successful reviews.
- Fall 1980 Walkabout program is instituted at Mountain Open High School, creating the first graduating class to complete Passages as part of the program.
- Fall 1989 Tanglewood and Mountain Open High School merge and move to Lakewood, Colorado, becoming a preschool through twelfth grade campus, Jefferson County Open School.