

Intervening for Success

A Profile of the Havern School for Children with Learning Disabilities



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Introduction

It's early January in Colorado. The world seems somewhat quieter as everyone slowly eases back into post-holiday life. Traffic is light, the sun is shining, and I am on my way to profile a unique private school of roughly 85 students in the southern reaches of the Denver Metro Area. Almost too late, I turn into an inconspicuous driveway and make my way up a steep hill to a parking lot.

A few moments later, I climb out of my car into the cold morning air. I pause for a moment to take in my surroundings. To the south, the sun glitters across the surface of Marston Lake, then flows westward through waking suburban neighborhoods until it splashes spectacularly against the foothills. Further east, the city stretches to the horizon. The low humps of the Denver Tech Center and the massive silhouettes of downtown Denver's skyscrapers rise from the urban sprawl in the distance. From the hilltop, it very much feels as if the entire world is stretched out before me—as if all I need to do is pick a direction and start walking.

Before me lies an unassuming door at the corner of an unassuming brick building. A sign next to the door welcomes me to the Havern School for Children with Learning Disabilities as I step out of the cold and into an experience I won't soon forget.

Welcome to Room 159

Inside, I duck into a small waiting room to take off my jacket. I am still trying to rub the cold out of my fingers when a smiling woman with gray hair and glasses enters the room. Her name is Cathy Pasquariello, and she has been the head of Havern since 1997.

Cathy greets me warmly, shakes my hand, gives me a printout of the day's schedule—which, terrifyingly, looks busier than my professional calendar most days—and ushers me down a long hallway to a staircase. On the second floor, she leads me past a life-size cardboard cutout of Peyton Manning into a large classroom. He and I exchange an awkward glance as I step through the classroom door.

The classroom is divided by a row of bookshelves and two computer terminals, with a walkway between the sections. On the smaller side of the room sits a kidney table nestled into a corner and a teacher's desk. A poster on the wall reads "Never, never quit."

The other, larger section of the room has another table, a small library area complete with a rocking chair, and a row of windows looking out over a grassy field where the last remnants of a snow-storm are evaporating. Not surprisingly given my

encounter with Peyton in the hallway and the growing excitement surrounding the Super Bowl, Broncos fanfare abounds. In the center of the room sit fifteen neatly organized desks. Each desk has a colorful nametag taped to the front, and many have rubber exercise bands stretched between their front legs. When I ask about the bands, I am told that they are there to help Havern's kids—all of whom have learning disabilities of varying levels of severity—cope with fidgeting brought on by anxiety or an inability to focus.

“Welcome to Room 159,” Cathy says as she heads back out the door.

As I take in my surroundings, I am greeted by Leslie Barth, Room 159's lead teacher. She is a tall, friendly woman with short hair who looks at home in a classroom. Mrs. Barth is soon joined by two other staff members, Sarah Freeberg and Penny Holston. Ms. Freeberg, a raven-haired, athletic woman with green eyes, is Room 159's assistant teacher.

Ms. Holston is a kind-looking woman with long, reddish-brown hair and glasses. She serves as a teaching assistant in Room 159. I briefly introduce myself to both of them before Room 159's 6th and 7th graders begin filing into the room one by one. All three adults are soon happily chatting with the students about their holidays, commenting on new outfits, and giggling about jokes I don't understand. It's clear that they know these children very, very well.

Noticing that I am not well suited to a small chair, Mrs. Barth directs me to the rocking chair in the library area. She briefly introduces me to the students, all of whom politely welcome me to the school, and then class is rolling.

Room 159's students begin by drawing out imaginary snowmen (and women) and writing short paragraphs about what they can do. One of them draws a “snowbot” named BB-8, another creates a Jedi snowman, and yet another creates a gentleman



Leslie Barth

snowman with a British accent who drinks tea, golfs, and lives in a toolshed behind Buckingham Palace. One student asks if he can give his snowman a weird name. He names him Bob.



Throughout this simple exercise, the teachers circulate amongst the students, offering encouragement and laughs. When one student grows frustrated and says he isn't sure what his snowman can do, Ms. Freeberg leans down and softly tells him that he can do whatever he chooses to do. It's a small moment, almost trivial, but it nearly perfectly captures my experience at Havern.

Havern's Unique Students

Focused solely on serving children with learning disabilities, Havern is not a typical school. In Room 159 alone, the children's disabilities cover a wide range of conditions. Many students suffer from reading disorders like dyslexia. Others contend with dysgraphia or dyscalculia, learning disabilities stemming from brain disorders that make it difficult for afflicted children to write

or perform basic arithmetic. Many grapple daily with near-crippling anxiety. I am told during my visit that at least four children struggled to over-

come the anxiety of returning to school after winter break. Comorbidity, or the simultaneous presence of two or more conditions or disabilities, is common.

As part of my visit, Mrs. Barth sets aside a few minutes for the students of Room 159 to introduce themselves to me and tell me why they are at Havern. Each spends a few minutes preparing a brief statement. One little boy struggles to spell the names of his disabilities. Ms. Freeberg puts her hand on his shoulder and says, "Don't get too focused on labels. It's good to know your diagnosis, but you should never let it define who you are." Then, one by one, the students tell me about themselves.

I meet one student, a 7th grader, who experienced a heart attack that resulted in brain-related learning difficulties. Another student tells me that she suffers from Kabuki syndrome, a genetic disease that according to the National Institutes of Health occurs in 1 out of every 32,000 newborns. The disease can manifest in a variety of ways, including skeletal abnormalities, hearing loss, potentially severe developmental delays, and seizures. Wearing purple hearing aids, this little girl bravely tells me that in addition to seizures and physical problems, she also suffers from anxiety, autism, and dyslexia. Yet another student explains that he has hydrocephalus, a brain condition in which an excess of cerebral spinal fluid exerts high levels of pressure on the brain. The condition often leads to severe headaches, seizures, and difficulties with motor functions.

Sitting at the front of the room, I struggle to maintain my composure as I listen to the children's stories. I almost lose the battle when Mrs. Barth, who has been kindly coaching the children throughout the session, asks how many of Room 159's students experienced bullying in their old schools. Nearly every hand stretches upward. It is a heartbreaking sight.





Yet each child also finishes his or her presentation by expressing appreciation for Havern and the community it offers. Virtually all of them say they are grateful for the safe, supportive environment at the school, where they can learn in peace rather than live in fear of bullying.

Many others allude to the strong community bonds at the school, and say that they believe the school's staff understands them better than teachers at their previous schools. They appear to universally believe that Havern's small-group approach to learning allows them to work through difficult concepts more easily and effectively.

Despite the deep appreciation the students have for the school and their teachers, a number express a desire to return to mainstream schooling. For some schools, this would be a sign that something was amiss. For Havern, it is a measure of success.

Intervening for Success

Havern's mission is to "create confident learners who will leave Havern with the skills to continue to succeed far beyond our walls." The school's ultimate goal is to return its students to a general education setting. As such, Havern offers an "intervention model" for kids struggling with learning disabilities in other school environments. Intervention models are models of instruction developed to strengthen neurodevelopment functions and/or remediate academic skills and sub-skills. A complement to intervention is the concept of accommodation—strategies used to bypass a weak function or skill.

Havern's intervention model is heavily focused on individualized instruction and curricula, and on small-group instruction. The school works hard to maintain a 4:1 student-teacher ratio, which school leaders believe is required to adequately address each child's deeply unique learning disabilities, emotional needs, and learning style. Children are grouped into classrooms roughly by age and grade, but also based on their individual needs and temperaments. Room 159 is just one of a number of carefully designed classrooms at Havern. Once assigned to a classroom, students are further divided into ability levels by subject. These small groups of students rotate between teachers and subjects throughout the day.

Early in my visit, I follow Ms. Freeberg and a handful of Room 159 students to a small classroom on a lower floor for math class. An Albert Einstein poster in the corner of the room reads, "Do not worry about your problems with mathematics, I assure you mine are far greater." After chatting amiably with her students for a few minutes, Ms. Freeberg gets to work teaching them basic fractions.

Sarah Freeberg



Each student has an individual white board he or she uses to work through the math problems. As they scribble and erase, Ms. Freeberg watches each student's work intently. When a student makes an error, she gently corrects the mistake and guides him back to the right path. When another student who suffers from extreme anxiety declares that he simply can't do it, she responds by asking him a question about a part of the problem she knows he can do. When he hesitantly provides the right answer, she declares him a genius. The sense of victory he feels is palpable, and he is soon chirping out answers to all of her questions.

Ms. Freeberg later tells me that while the students in the group I observed are all on roughly the same level in terms of mathematical ability, other Room 159 subgroups are more fragmented. In those instances, she carefully designs individualized lesson plans for students, giving them individual problems according to where they are in terms of comprehension.

The same individualized approach is apparent in other subjects. After math class, Ms. Freeberg, takes the next small group of students downstairs while I join my small group of students back in Room 159 for language decoding with Penny Holston. We sit at the table in the smaller section of the classroom. Class begins with Ms. Holston working her way around the table to each student as they practice breaking down words into various phonetic sounds. Soon, the corner is awash in singsongy urs and ayes and aars. Then, we practice "nonsense words" like dorp and swurt and fodes—with a few giggles thrown in for good measure.

Ms. Holston uses the Wilson Reading System for this particular group of Room 159 students. For other groups, she uses entirely different curricula. And, as is true of Ms. Freeberg in math, she often finds herself working with and adapting her teaching to individual students with specific disabilities and widely varied levels of understanding.

As Ms. Holston works through the rest of her lesson, I wander into the main section of Room 159, where the third small group of students is working on reading comprehension with Mrs. Barth. Though I earlier observed Mrs. Barth leading students in a discussion on Cynthia Lord's *Rules*, a novel about a family's experiences with a child who has autism, this particular group is reading Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. Mrs. Barth sits comfortably in the rocking chair while students quietly follow along from cushioned chairs and pillows on the floor. Many are chewing gum, which Mrs. Barth later explains helps them cope with anxiety and inattention.

I suspect Mrs. Barth's ability to hold students' rapt attention while reading is due to more than chewing gum—especially because I have trouble not falling into the story myself. But whatever the explanation, the level of attention Mrs. Barth's reading inspires in the students—the same students who have rubber exercise bands tied to their desks to help with fidgeting—is remarkable. Occasionally, she pauses to interject a comment or a probing question, to which the students respond with genuine interest. At one point, the group launches into a detailed discussion about a character in the book that reminds me of discussions in literature classes I took in college. I realize quickly that I am out of my literary depth with this group, so I retreat before Mrs. Barth asks me to chime in.

In addition to their normal instruction, Havern students are pulled in groups of two or three throughout the day for occupational therapy (OT), speech and language work, or social skills instruction. During my time at the school, I see students discuss appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, work on vocabulary and writing, and practice weighing evidence while making real-life decisions. These sessions

go even deeper than the school's regular classroom instruction, and it is abundantly clear to me that Havern's team of professionals is intimately familiar with each student's story, disabilities, and needs—so much so, in fact, that I feel out of place observing the sessions, as if I were watching a private moment between confidants or friends. During one gym session designed to help students develop better motor control, I choke slightly while I watch the instructor and several other children encourage the girl with purple hearing aids as she struggles valiantly against her physical impairment and wheels herself slowly across the shiny floor on a flat cart. In another instance, a boy with severe anxiety hesitates to answer a personal question after glancing at me.

Eventually, I close my notebook and excuse myself. Learning disabilities and the emotional stress they cause are almost indescribably personal things, and I do not want to interfere. It is a testament to Havern's dedication to its mission that the school has built such



close relationships with its students. While many schools claim to know their students, Havern's commitment to each child goes far beyond something written in a marketing brochure. In a very real way, the school is at least as concerned with helping students address their underlying issues and win their behavioral and emotional battles as it is with teaching them to be academically proficient.

A Ray of Hope for Families

Havern's relentless focus on individualized instruction and support works. Every former Havern student scheduled to graduate from high school in 2014 and 2015 graduated on time. And true to the school's mission statement, Havern students have gone on to achieve great things. One of Mrs. Barth's former students who suffered from debilitating dyslexia—and who moved from Florida to attend Havern—is now a fluent Russian speaker studying U.S.-Russia relations and international diplomacy at George Washington University. Another former Havern student is on a full-ride scholarship to Brigham Young University, where she plays collegiate soccer. Yet another attends the University of Denver on a four-year scholarship.

Many other Havern students have returned to public and private K-12 schools, where they often outperform children without learning disabilities—a phenomenon that Cathy attributes to the work ethic and confidence Havern instills in its students.

Havern's intervention model and the results it produces

draw students from far and wide. Students come to the school from public schools, private schools, and other specialty programs across the country. One family commutes from Frisco, Colorado—a daily round trip of 140 miles and two and half hours in perfect driving conditions. Another packed up their lives in South Dakota and moved to Colorado in order to enroll their child in the school.

Despite these diverse backgrounds, there is a unifying thread among the students Havern serves: Their needs are not being met elsewhere. They are struggling, grasping for any help they can find.



Often, families are referred to Havern by therapists or other developmental professionals after long, desperate searches for ways to empower their children to succeed. The children themselves are often frustrated, depressed, or demoralized after years of fighting to keep up. Because of these struggles, many families come to Havern after having endured years of breathtaking physical, financial, or emotional hardship for the sake of their children.

When these families finally find Havern, the relief can be overwhelming. Students take a number of diagnostic tests, and meet with school staff so they can be placed in environments and programs of study that will meet their needs. Then, before the start of every school year, Havern staff members sit down with parents to develop a comprehensive intervention program for their children. During my visit, several staff members tell me that it is common to see parents openly weeping the first time they sit down with Havern's teachers and begin planning pathways to success for their children.

As Ms. Freeberg puts it, "They just feel so blessed to know that their child will finally get the help he or she needs."

It is a testament to the school's reputation and effectiveness that many families make great financial sacrifices for their children to attend. With a 4:1 student-teacher ratio, the school's expenses can be difficult to cover. This year, Havern charges nearly \$22,000 in tuition. During lunch one day, Havern's business manager, David Stelloh, tells me that much of the school's cost is driven by its low

student-teacher ratio, the number of specialists on staff, and other instruction-related expenses. "As you can see," he jokes while gesturing around the room at the school's unassuming facilities, "our money is not going toward plush surroundings. It's going straight to students and instruction."

Yet Havern does not believe in serving only those who can afford to pay. As David says, "It's not part of Havern's mission to serve only the elite." That is why, based on his calculations, the school charges \$4,000 less in tuition per student than it needs to cover its costs. The school must make up the difference through its own fundraising efforts.

Havern also offers financial aid to families in need of assistance. Roughly a quarter of the school's families apply for financial aid each year, but the school's financial aid program only provides enough money to cover about half of their demonstrated need. Havern never turns families away because of their financial circumstances, but both

the school and its low-income families must save, skrimp, and sacrifice to make the arrangements work.

A handful of Havern's low-income students also receive scholarships from ACE Scholarships, a nonprofit K-12 scholarship-granting organization headquartered in Denver, but the organization is funded entirely by private donations. It can only provide so many scholarships with the current amount of dona-

tion money it receives. ACE has been forced to turn away thousands of low-income children because there is simply not enough money available.



David Stelloh

Dave acknowledges that accomplishing the school's mission to serve every student who needs help can be difficult from a financial perspective. Yet he says his commitment to that mission is renewed every time he sees a child leave Havern to return to mainstream education. "They're ready. We did our job. We succeeded. *They* succeeded."

A History of Dedication

Havern has a long, colorful history of serving children with learning disabilities. Though the school is secular today, its roots extend deeply into the history of the Loretto Community, a congregation of 168 Catholic vowed sisters and 213 vowed and lay co-members that serves across the United States and in countries like Ghana, Pakistan, and Guate-

mala. The Loretto Community is an outgrowth of the Sisters of Loretto, an order of Catholic nuns who "strive to bring the healing spirit of God into our world and commit ourselves to improving the conditions of those who suffer from injustice, oppression, and deprivation of dignity."

The Sisters of Loretto was founded in 1812 by three sisters devoted to teaching children on the Kentucky frontier. One of those sisters, Ann Havern, would become the Havern School's namesake more than a century later.

The Kentucky frontier was a harsh place at the best of times, but 1812 was a particularly difficult year for the state. After years of bitter European conflict with French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, the battle for supremacy among European nations spilled across the sea to the United States in the form of an escalating series of trade embargoes and agreements between America, Britain, and France. Combined with British encouragement of Native American resistance to American expansion in the west, these trade disagreements culminated in the War of 1812 between the United States, Britain, and Britain's Native American allies. Though most of the fighting took place well north of Kentucky, the state paid dearly for the conflict; some sources claim that more than half of the Americans killed in the war were from Kentucky.

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It was against this brutal backdrop that the Sisters of Loretto forged the mission and purpose that still drives their work today. No strangers to staunch support of those in need in the face of adversity, the sisters continued to develop and build upon their work over the decades that followed.

More than 150 years after the order's beginnings on the dangerous frontier, two sisters named Barbara Schulte and Dorothy Hurley were sent from Littleton, Colorado, to attend a master's degree program at Syracuse University in New York. There, they found themselves under the direction of Dr. William Cruickshank, a man who specialized in an emerging field involving the education of the "perceptually handicapped"—a field that would eventually develop into the modern study and practice of educating children with learning disabilities.

During their time at Syracuse, Dr. Cruickshank encouraged the sisters to open a school in Denver. After interning for a time at a Loretto school in Pennsylvania, they returned to Littleton and did precisely that with the help of two other sisters, Patricia Miller and Bridget O'Toole.

Havern opened its doors on September 12, 1966, on the same hilltop grounds of the Loretto Center where it stands today. It had 24 students between the ages of five and 12 and nine faculty and staff members, including the sisters themselves. A lack of available instructional materials at the time meant that the sisters, who both worked and lived at the school, taught during the day and developed their own instructional materials in the evenings.

Cathy Pasquariello

In 1970, the sisters incorporated the school and turned it over to a non-denominational board of trustees. Havern has continued to operate as a nonprofit, nonreligious, independent day school since then. The Sisters of Loretto, though retired, still own and occupy the building. The school leases its portion of the building from the sisters for a rate much lower than it would likely find anywhere else—an arrangement that allows Havern to maintain a very tangible connection to its rich history of helping children with learning disabilities. Even today, the Sisters of Loretto can be seen walking the hallways of the school and stopping into classrooms to check on students and teachers alike.

The Foundations of Success

Havern's deep history of serving children with learning disabilities has created a sense of community that nearly defies description. Though much of Havern's success has to do with its academic programs and individualized approach to learning, the school's true foundation is the family it has built over the course of five decades. And to understand a family, you have to understand its members.



As Room 159's kids bundle up and head out for recess, Cathy Pasquariello ushers me into a small, quiet room to talk about the Havern family. Full-length windows look out over the hilltop. The stillness of the early morning is replaced by laughing children rolling and running on the grass, though I find it no less peaceful. The muffled sounds of play drifting through the windows offer a fitting backdrop for Cathy's words.

A Denver native, Cathy graduated from Denver Public Schools and attended Colorado State University, where she earned an undergraduate degree in vocational education. She later earned a graduate degree from Regis University. During her time in post-secondary education, Cathy found herself researching why teachers choose to work in the emotionally and pedagogically challenging field of special education. She found that more often than not, these individuals feel called to do so because they have close personal relationships with someone who has learning disabilities.

Cathy's findings confirmed what she already knew from personal experience. She herself helped raise a younger sister with Marfan syndrome, a genetic disease that affects the body's connective tissues. In more serious cases, the syndrome can negatively impact the central nervous system, cause vision problems, and lead to potentially life-threatening heart issues. Throughout her childhood, she watched her mother fight hard to find compassionate, effective education for her sister. Little did Cathy know that this experience would come to shape much of her adult life.

Cathy went on to build a successful career in fundraising and outreach. She was working in the University of Denver's advancement department in 1990 when a friend at Havern called her. The school was looking for a development specialist, and her friend wondered if she knew anyone who might be able to fill the role. One night, after spending several days thinking about which of her colleagues would be the best fit, she awoke with





the now-obvious realization that it should be her. She started with the school that same year, and became Head of School in 1997. Since then, she has become a leader who inspires what appears to be universal respect, trust, and admiration among her staff.

As our session draws to a close, I ask Cathy what makes Havern special. Her answer is fast and unequivocal: the people. No one who works here is doing it for the money, Cathy tells me. Most of Havern's teachers could make substantially more working in a public school district. Rather, Havern's teaching staff is made up of individuals who feel deeply called to work with disabled children. When the school interviews potential teachers, they are told that the only way to succeed at Havern is to be fully committed to the school and its unique children. "Everyone here understands that these kids deserve to be educated, not dismissed. And they deserve to be educated effectively," Cathy says to me as the children head back inside for class. "When they are, they do amazing things."

Cathy's words about deep commitment ring true in the case of Room 159's staff members. Mrs. Barth's husband was a member of Havern's very first class

in 1966. He came to the school after his family faced a long, difficult search for a school that could meet his needs. Having finally found a place for his son, his father—now Mrs. Barth's father-in-law—became the first chairman of the school's board, serving in that capacity for more than two decades.

After teaching on a substitute basis in Denver Public Schools and full time in Cherry Creek School District, Mrs. Barth took a number of years off to raise her children. She joined the Havern family in 1997 at Cathy's request. Now, nearly 20 years later, she still takes great pride in hearing from former students who have built successful, happy lives for themselves. The success stories, she tells me, provide inspiration, even when exhaustion and frustration begin to set in.

Ms. Freeberg's first teaching job was at a school for children with behavioral issues that she describes as the "last stop before juvenile hall." It was there that she forged her passion for working with challenging children. While her son, now two, does not have learning disabilities, being a mother has helped her further empathize with Havern's parents and the struggles they face. She tells me that while it breaks her heart to see students new to Havern struggle

with low self-esteem or feelings of helplessness, she loves sending them back to schools and life with the tools and confidence they need to succeed. Like other teachers at the school, Ms. Freeberg leans heavily on Havern's tight-knit staff support network to get her through the tough days. "I've never seen a community like the one at Havern," she tells me.

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of the strength of the Havern community comes toward the end of my visit, when I sit down with Ms. Holston, Room 159's teaching assistant. Originally from Kansas, Ms. Holston worked at a residential school for developmentally disabled children for six years. During her time at that school, she served as a paraprofessional, a member of a behavioral management team, and a supervisor. She tells me solemnly that she has worked with students so severely disabled that they require feeding tubes to survive.

Ms. Holston understands Havern's work on a very personal level. She cares for her two younger sisters in addition to her own daughter. Two of her girls have been diagnosed with medical conditions that require specialized care, and she herself has been through the struggle of finding schools that could meet their needs. Like Cathy, Mrs. Barth, and Ms. Freeberg, Ms. Holston's personal experiences have deepened her commitment to Havern and the



Penny Holston

children it serves. As she dabs her eyes, she tells me, "Havern is so special. What we offer these kids is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I couldn't possibly find anywhere else to work that would ever compare."

When my time at Havern comes to a close, I leave the building and find myself standing once again on top of the hill. The sunlight bouncing across Marston Lake is fading gently into the beginnings of a red sunset. Below

me, dozens of parents load up their children to head home for the day. It occurs to me that I will be settling in at home after eating dinner with my own children before some of them even arrive at their destinations.

For a moment, I stop to watch the cars make their way down the steep driveway and spill out into the world in a thousand different directions. Tomorrow, they will all come together once again in pursuit of the dream of overcoming their unique challenges and charting their own courses in life.

One day, each of them will descend from the hilltop one last time. Where they go from there will be up to them.





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