

Altering Courses

A Profile of Crossroads School



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Introduction

Heavy Denver traffic gives way to wide-open highway as I enter the northern suburbs of the city. The looming skyscrapers, twisting interchanges, and general clamor of a typical Monday morning in urban Colorado are soon replaced by placid farmland, scattered towns, and the pleasant hum-rumble of tires on pavement.

The gridlock in the city has pushed me behind schedule for today's research trip to Crossroads School, a small, private alternative school for at-risk students in Longmont that is playfully referred to as the "island of misfit toys where everybody fits" by its leaders. I pick up my cell phone and call Barb Bulthuis, the executive director of Crossroads, to explain that I will be a few minutes late thanks to unexpected traffic. She graciously accepts my apology, then says, "We should learn to expect unexpected traffic."

She's right, of course. I sheepishly hang up the phone and press the gas pedal harder. Old farm houses and tractors and rows upon rows of freshly planted crops whip past me in a whistling blur of brown and green. Soon, I pull off a shady street in central Longmont and park in front of a large stone church with an administrative building attached.

I ring the buzzer on the front door and am greeted by Mrs. Bulthuis, Principal Connie Nourse, and a happy black therapy-dog-in-training named Rumba. Ms. Nourse and Mrs. Bulthuis are wearing earpieces, and both carry walkie-talkies that are chattering away with information about student movement through the hallways inside. Rumba licks my hand. It's going to be an interesting visit.

A Unique Approach

Ms. Nourse, a tall, athletically wiry woman with short hair and glasses whose frame once made her a force to be reckoned with on the basketball court, skitters off with Rumba in tow to address something more pressing than the late arrival of a policy analyst from Denver.



Connie Nourse, principal and founder

As I am repeatedly reminded during my visit, she possesses the terrifying principal traits of being both fast and silent as a ninja. She is gone almost before I can discern where she went. Mrs. Bulthuis, a tall woman with medium-length blonde hair who somehow looks at once deadly serious and refreshingly amiable, shakes my hand and escorts me up a flight of stairs to the school, talking on her radio as we go.

The school occupies two hallways split across the CentraLongmont Church building's upper floors. I am escorted down one of these hallways into a long, rectangular classroom to observe English class with a long-haired young woman named JamieLee Szalaj. She is wearing a Crossroads tee-shirt and jeans. The classroom is lined on one side with large windows, and late spring sunlight streams into the otherwise unlit room. A bedded dog kennel, presumably for Rumba, sits near Ms. Szalaj's desk with the door open. The first poster I see says, "Make an effort, not an excuse." Remembering my late arrival with some chagrin, I take a seat at a table situated toward the back of the room. A girl wearing a colorful purple beanie smiles at me and gives me a peace sign. I smile back, pull out my notebook, and begin to write.

There are six students in the room, many of whom are of different ages. Though Crossroads is ostensibly a

middle and high school, there are no "grades" per se. Rather, because of the school's focus on self-paced learning, students are grouped into classes on the basis of social, behavioral, and academic needs. There is no age limit at the school, and it has served students as old as 23 who need help completing school but were locked out of the opportunity to return to public school by state law. Some current students are well over 18.

Aside from the age differences, perhaps the most instantly noticeable aspect of Crossroads' educational approach is that, with the exception of a single faith-based course, it does not utilize lectures. In Ms. Szalaj's English class, students are all working on descriptive language and reading, but not through some overarching lesson plan projected on the whiteboard. Instead, Ms. Szalaj circulates among her handful of students, helping each with his or her individual work. One disruptive student is sent to work in "his office" outside the classroom door. Another sits on a large beanbag in the back of the room, and the remaining students sit at various odd angles in their desk chairs.

Ms. Szalaj dutifully makes her way to each of these students, coaching them to finish their worksheets, continue reading their chosen books, or work on their



JamieLee Szalaj, teacher

use of language. She continually checks on the student in the “office” and works to keep students on task. She pauses for a moment to introduce herself to me once she reaches the back of the room, then suddenly turns and jumps back into the fray when she somehow realizes a student behind her—a student she cannot see while looking at me—is not doing his work. She quickly sets the situation straight.

I am struck by Ms. Szalaj’s sheer quantity of movement. While many teachers are content to stand or sit at the front of the class for most of any given period, she darts rapidly around the room like a frenetic pedagogical pinball. If one were to watch a fast-forwarded recording of the class, the focal point of the video would likely be a vaguely teacher-shaped blur bouncing between desks.

When class ends, Ms. Szalaj instructs her next group of students to wait in the hall while she leads me back across the staircase, down the opposite hallway, and into a large room used for science class. There, I meet Allyson Damick, the school’s relatively new science teacher. Mrs. Damick assumed teaching duties in science after Ms. Nourse, who had been teaching the related subjects, became too busy with administrative duties to continue teaching full time.

Mrs. Damick greets me warmly, then gets to work organizing students into groups. One group of stu-

dents works through textbook-based problems in the back of the room while another dons safety glasses for a science experiment. Another student is told to finish his science test—a task he spends most of the period avoiding despite frequent reminders from Ms. Damick—and yet another goes to work in a quiet adjoining storage room containing a desk.

Once again, there is no lecture. With the exception of the students working in the experiment group, each student is engrossed in his or her own work. Many of them wear headphones, which I am later told is allowed because it has a calming effect on students who can otherwise grow disruptive. There is friendly banter between groups from time to time, but the students generally focus on their individual tasks.

About halfway through the class period, as I listen to a variety of chirping questions from different students, I realize something that takes me by surprise: The students in Mrs. Damick’s classroom are not just working on different aspects of the same subject, they are working on different subjects entirely. The students self-studying toward the back of the room are working on physical sciences, while the experiment group in front is working on chemistry. A few seniors who have already completed their required science credits are working to finish work in other subjects needed for graduation.



Allyson Damick, teacher



I am still pondering this strange development when I am ushered to math class with Konni Keuter. Inside the room, students of varying ages sit at a mixture of desks and high-top tables, their feet dangling and twiddling in the latter cases. Mrs. Keuter, a shorter woman with long gray hair and an authoritative voice, quickly assigns her students to various projects. Then, like the other teachers, she proceeds to ricochet around the room like the teaching equivalent of a rubber superball.

One student sitting at a high-top near me grows frustrated with his geometry work and drops his protractor in exasperation. Mrs. Keuter arrives at his desk quickly. She works toward helping him understand the math problem while he bites his knuckles in frustration. Simultaneously, another student across the room decides to stand up and wander around in an effort to avoid his work. With a hand on the frustrated student’s back, Mrs. Keuter fixes the other student with a gaze that stops him cold. A short exchange follows the standoff, then Mrs. Keuter picks up her walkie-talkie to inform

Ms. Nourse that a student is coming to do his work in her office for the rest of the period.

Mrs. Keuter soon returns to bouncing around the room, talking alternately about octagons and fractions and consumer math to students. When she eventually sits down at her centrally located desk, students come to her for help. She provides assistance while intervening in situations around the room from her desk and waving her pencil like a maestro.

By the time the third of my scheduled classes ends, I feel exhausted from simply watching Crossroads’ teachers work. And their day is far from over.

A Different Perspective

It is clear from the classes I attend that Crossroads is not a typical school. I have been practically bursting with questions all morning, but the hectic pace of the



teachers' work at Crossroads means that I do not have an opportunity to sit down and chat with them until after morning classes are finished. When I finally reach the interview portion of my itinerary and crack open my notebook, I expect to hear a great deal about the educational theory underlying Crossroads' "mastery" approach to learning, the ideas behind alternative education, or some other policy-minded endorsement of personalized learning.

There is indeed some talk of these things. I learn that Crossroads students are given placement tests to determine their academic levels in each subject, then assigned individual plans based on those levels. They work at their own pace through the relevant material, only advancing when they have mastered a concept at an 80 percent or better level. Students are given standardized assessments at the beginning and end of each school year that are used to evaluate their academic progress and inform interventions.

Yet underneath the academic work, deeper themes quickly emerge. As a school for at-risk students struggling in other school settings, Crossroads finds itself in the position of needing to provide not only academic support, but emotional, social, and behavioral support. The power of relationships and the very personal drive to serve challenging populations of students form the true core of the school's work, and are every bit as important as its pedagogical approach.

When I sit down with Ms. Szalaj in her now-empty English classroom, the morning sun is no longer cascading through the windows. The kinetic atmosphere and



Rumba, therapy dog



bustle of class has receded into a peaceful calm, and she sits at her desk facing me while I take my seat in a student desk clearly not designed to hold an adult male. I begin by introducing myself, butchering her last name (pronounced "shalay") in the process. I attempt to resuscitate my image as an erudite policy analyst at a think tank by remarking that her name must be Irish. She smiles wryly, and informs me that it is Polish. I shut up and listen.

JamieLee Szalaj, known as Jamie to her friends, grew up in Boulder, Colorado. The passion to teach runs deep in her family; her mother taught in Boulder Valley School District public schools for 42 years before retiring. Jamie observed her mother's teaching in her youth. Eventually, she followed in her mother's footsteps, earning a degree in English literature from the University of Colorado Boulder and continuing on to earn her Colorado teaching certification through another CU-based program. As part of that program, she spent time in a variety of traditional public schools in the Boulder area.

While Jamie greatly appreciated the work of the public school teachers she met during this time in her life, she tells me that she also felt that they were too often restrained by systems, cultures, and curricula from offering truly personalized education. She recalls the kids she associated with during her time as a public school student in Boulder, kids who were often relegated to the background both academically and socially. She became a teacher because she wanted to serve "those kids," and her quest for a school that would allow her to do so eventually led her to Crossroads.

Now 29, Jamie tells me that she was drawn to Crossroads by the school's mission and the strong culture of support fostered between the school's leadership and its three full-time teachers. She loves teaching students who have often struggled to fit in about "the value of building relationships." Crossroads is, she tells me, "not just about reading and writing and math, but also about developing life skills. These kids need to make good choices. Our school is all about second chances."

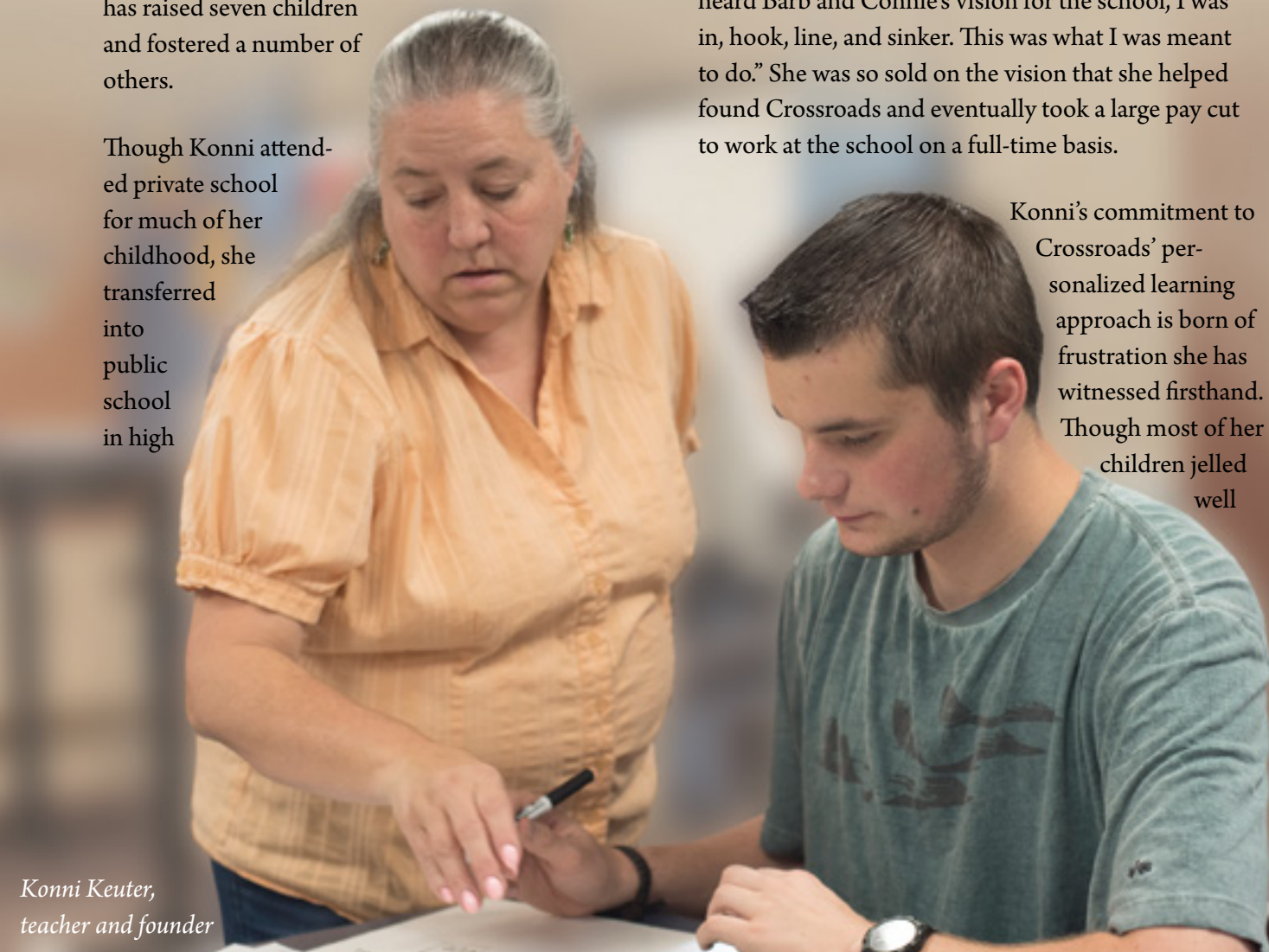
These themes are echoed in my interview with Konni Keuter, though she charted a much different course to Crossroads. Raised Catholic, Konni grew up in a large family. After seven children, her mother was told she could not safely have another child. But the maternal instinct is a powerful thing, and her parents soon began fostering a number of children. This practice continued for much of Konni's childhood. Today, she credits her parents' caring attitude toward helping children with instilling in her a desire to do the same. She herself has raised seven children and fostered a number of others.

Though Konni attended private school for much of her childhood, she transferred into public school in high

school. She admits to me, straight-faced and without shame or reticence, that she went on to make some "very bad choices." These choices led to drug use and marital dysfunction that ultimately ended in divorce from her first husband. But at what appeared to be the bottom of her life's arc, Konni found an opportunity for reinvention. She took a job in the corporate energy world, and that job turned into a 20-year career. During that time, she trained executives, sold data systems, and eventually helped found and build several successful businesses.

One day, as Konni was feeling increasingly restless due to work-related pressures, her sister asked her a straightforward question: "What do you really want to do?" Shortly thereafter, Konni saw an article in the *Longmont Times-Call* about a new private alternative school forming in the area. She met with Mrs. Bulthuis and Ms. Nourse, who proudly explained their vision for the school to her. As Konni recalls, "As soon as I heard Barb and Connie's vision for the school, I was in, hook, line, and sinker. This was what I was meant to do." She was so sold on the vision that she helped found Crossroads and eventually took a large pay cut to work at the school on a full-time basis.

Konni's commitment to Crossroads' personalized learning approach is born of frustration she has witnessed firsthand. Though most of her children jelled well



Konni Keuter, teacher and founder

with traditional academic environments, others did not. In those cases, she tells me, their schools simply couldn't provide the level of assistance her children needed. The children would come home in tears, frustrated with and ashamed at their inability to keep up. The onus to provide supplemental learning or personalized help fell onto the parents, and school became something to dread rather than something to love.

Crossroads, Konni tells me, overcomes this hurdle through the use of individually crafted work plans that meet students where they are academically, which is far below grade level for many students when they arrive at Crossroads. More importantly, she says, the school's approach to learning allows her to foster relationships based on trust—the kind of relationships needed to work with struggling students like those Crossroads exists to serve. “I need them to trust me,” Konni says. “They come here frustrated and shut down, but we show them they can do it. There's no greater feeling than telling a kid we're going to get there together.” Given the proper foundation for learning and appropriate work, Crossroads students typically rise quickly to grade level.

Jamie's and Konni's stories are emblematic of the rest of the staff's. Allyson Damick, the school's science teacher and the mother of a child with autism, tells me that she, too, came to Crossroads because she has a passion for working with students who are struggling. In fact, she dreamed about opening a private school similar to Crossroads before realizing that Crossroads already existed. She explains during our interview that

she most enjoys the relationship-based aspects of the school's philosophy.

Similarly, Wendy Allen, the school's part-time remediation coordinator, was

first introduced to Crossroads as a parent looking for an alternative school for one of her three children who was struggling in traditional public school. Though her son has remained in public school, Wendy has gradually assumed responsibility for identifying and helping students overcome specific learning needs in reading and writing. She regales me with stories of teaching 16-year-olds who are functionally illiterate, and of the challenges and frustrations of overcoming both academic and behavioral obstacles with students who lack good role models or support structures at home. “They're so young,” she says sadly. “They have their whole lives ahead of them. And they think they can't do it.” She loves nothing more than seeing “last-chance kids” finally succeed in the face of steep odds.

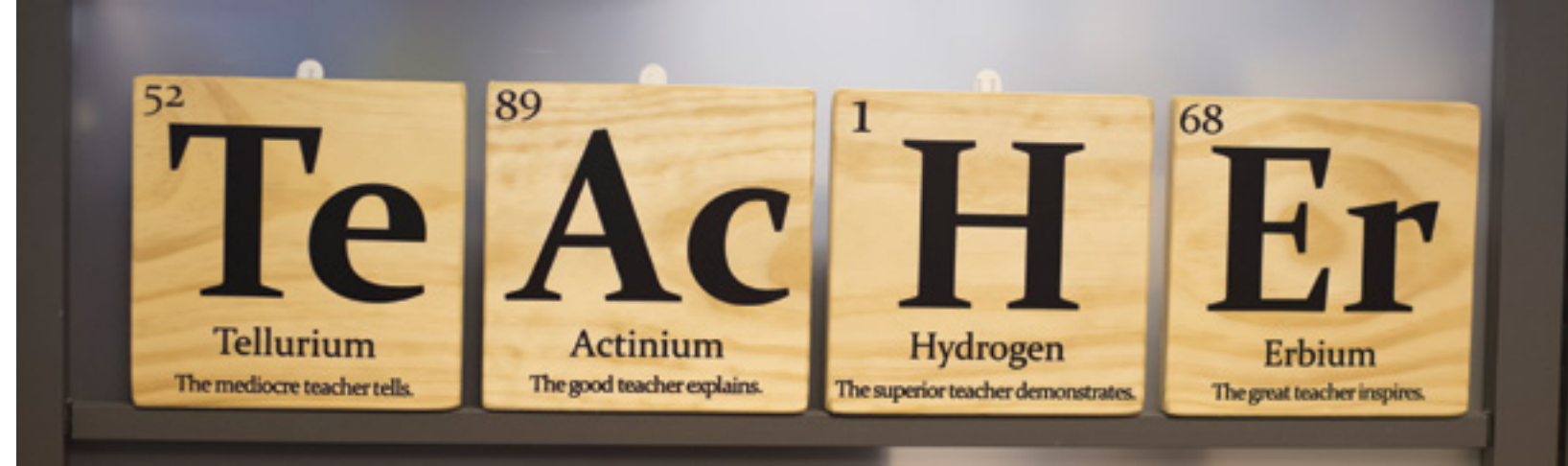
Focusing on the Mission

The commitment of Crossroads' teachers to serving at-risk students is not accidental. It is a reflection of a very specific vision crafted by the school's dynamic leadership duo, Principal Connie Nourse and Executive Director Barb Bulthuis.

Ms. Nourse is an energetic woman on a level not easily described. Throughout my visit, she mounts stairs so quickly that I practically have to run to keep up, speaks almost faster than I can listen, and zips up and down hallways in her Crossroads jacket like a red streak of lightning. At times, she simply appears, smiling, in a doorway behind me, only to disappear again before I can so much as turn around.

This vivacious energy is not a new development for Ms. Nourse. An avid basketball player for much of her young life, she has always been active and high spirited. But after suffering a severe knee injury, she was forced to find a new outlet for her enthusiasm. She turned her attention to teaching, graduating from Milligan College in 1990. Shortly thereafter, she was recruited to teach in a private Christian school in Florida. She worked at the school for 17 years.

While in Florida, Ms. Nourse adopted a three-year-old son from the foster system. The child suffered from



fetal alcohol syndrome and a number of behavioral and emotional issues. When he was three years old, she tells me, he attempted to stab her. Her son struggled greatly in school, and these struggles provided Ms. Nourse with intimate knowledge of the challenges faced by parents of children with special educational needs.

Ms. Nourse eventually found her way to Colorado, where she took up teaching at a local private school. As fate would have it, Barb Bulthuis was also working at the same school as an admissions officer.

Ms. Nourse continued struggling to find a school that could meet her son's needs in Colorado. Public schools, homeschool, special needs schools—none of it seemed to work. Perhaps because of these challenges, her perspective on her work as a teacher shifted dramatically. The private school where she worked was not able to accommodate children with disabilities or behavioral problems, and she saw a number of families turned away. One day, she realized that her calling was not to serve students with more traditional educational needs. “Those kids didn't need me,” she recounts. “Those one or two kids in the back who no one wants, those are my kids.”

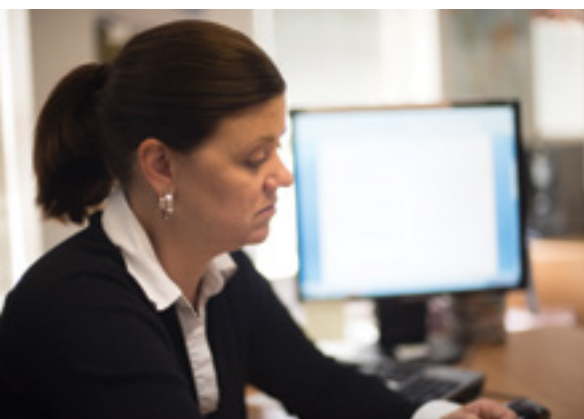
If Ms. Nourse is a bundle of energy, Mrs. Bulthuis is perhaps best characterized as a pool of calm passion and idealism. On one hand, she is an experienced, realistic, and savvy professional administrator, navigating mountains of requirements and paperwork while solving complex problems in organic and novel ways. She projects the friendly yet serious demeanor of a seasoned professional. On the other hand, it is impossible to speak with her for any length of time without being struck by the level of emotion and commitment she

has poured into her work at Crossroads. Perhaps this genuine devotion explains why nearly every staff member's story begins with “I met with Barb.” Her frequent interactions with students are not those of an administrator but those of a friend and confidant. Should you catch her conversing with a child in the hallway, you'd be hard pressed to tell she isn't a teacher by trade.

Mrs. Bulthuis's dual identities as an administrator and an idealist led to her waging her own internal war at the private school where she and Ms. Nourse worked. As an admissions officer, Mrs. Bulthuis often had to personally tell parents desperate for options that the school was not able to meet their children's needs. She characterizes the experience as “excruciating.” Sitting in her office toward the end of my visit, she says, “I recognize that not all schools can meet all needs. But it broke my heart to turn those kids away.”

Mrs. Bulthuis's pain had roots in something far deeper than her professional life. She herself adopted a nine-year-old, now 23, who faced enormous educational

challenges. Her daughter went through seven separate school placements, eventually landing at the private school where Mrs. Bulthuis worked. The school was ill equipped to meet her needs, however, and it was only through force of will, outside help, and sheer effort that her daughter eventually finished.



Wendy Allen, remediation coordinator



Barb Bulthuis, executive director and founder



When Ms. Nourse parted ways with the private school, she felt called to start a school for children who, like her son and Mrs. Bulthuis's daughter, had nowhere else to go. When she broached the subject with Mrs. Bulthuis, Crossroads School's future executive director enthusiastically jumped on board. She and Ms. Nourse thus began a quest to create a private, Christian alternative school to serve students who could not find help in either the public or private education sectors. Crossroads School was born.

Mrs. Bulthuis smiles as she recalls the early stages of getting Crossroads off the ground. Though she and Ms. Nourse managed to build a founding team, garner positive local media coverage, and locate a facility, fundraising remained a challenge. She remembers the stress of having only half the money calculated as "necessary" just a few months before opening. The school's founding team was expressing their anxiety to a colleague at an education conference one day when the colleague counseled them to take an enormous leap of faith. Open anyway, their colleague said. The money will come. The team did exactly that. The local paper wrote an article published on August 5, 2010, entitled "A Step of Faith."

Crossroads School opened in the fall of 2010 with four students. The school doubled its enrollment by the end of the year, then did so again in 2011. Enrollment continued to grow, and Mrs. Bulthuis went in search of a new, larger space that could accommodate the school's larger student body—an effort that culminated in the school's current location on the upper floors of the church. In 2013, the school had to establish a waiting list. Today, Crossroads has 25 students in 6th through 12th grades. Demand does not appear to be slowing. During my visit, I see numerous students and parents visiting the school, many of whom will join the waiting list.

Find a Way or Make One

Though they have faced numerous obstacles, the Crossroads team has done a remarkable job of building organic community relationships to meet the school's challenges. Not designed to serve only those who can afford to pay, Crossroads charges only \$100

a month in tuition despite estimated yearly costs of more than \$10,000 per student. In some cases, families pay less.

In return, families must commit to a number of volunteer hours at the school. These volunteer services are combined with services provided by members of the community to fill critical gaps. During my visit, I meet an airline pilot named Frances Hanna who, after being grounded due to a medical issue, volunteered her time to Crossroads as a math tutor for students who need additional help. Other volunteers record entire textbooks into audio versions to ensure that students who struggle to read aren't left behind in other subjects.

Volunteerism certainly helps, but the school still works with a highly limited budget. Much of its funding comes from fundraising

efforts and from partnerships with organizations like ACE Scholarships in Denver, which provides privately funded K-12 scholarships to low-income students. The school still has limited resources for overhead expenses, so it entered into an agreement with CENTRALongmont Church under which it pays only \$5,000 per year for space that might otherwise cost over \$50,000.

The school's small size precludes it from offering the range of quality electives high school students desire, so it has entered into an agreement with St. Vrain Valley School District under which its students are funded as part-time students in their neighborhood public high schools. This allows Crossroads students to access elective courses through public online schools and vocational courses—welding, electrical, horticulture, veterinary medicine, etc.—at St. Vrain's Career Development Center (CDC). Attendance at CDC requires travel to and from Crossroads, so the school entered a partnership with Longmont Ford under which it was given a van. The dealership so believes in the school's work that it pays all maintenance costs on the van.

Crossroads is currently planning its next expansion and hopes to serve even more students in the near future. In the meantime, the founding team's leap of faith, strong leadership, and creative, community-based problem solving has resulted in an educational home for more than two dozen struggling students.

*Frances Hanna,
volunteer tutor*

Home at Last

Crossroads School's approach to learning imposes a limit on how quickly the school can grow. Space and personnel restrictions mean that staff must be selective about its admissions, though the school applies the word "selective" in a unique way. The school is private and faith based, but it does not screen applicants on the basis of their beliefs, lifestyles, or income levels. Rather, in keeping with its mission, Crossroads accepts only students who are in need of help. Prospective students and their families are required to visit the school, meet the staff, and tell their stories. Then, staff must make agonizing decisions about which students to accept. As Mrs. Bulthuis tells me, these decisions are based nearly exclusively on the staff's evaluation of which students most need their help.

As one might expect, Crossroads' selective admissions process has resulted in the creation of a challenging population of students in need of alternative education options. Mrs.

Bulthuis tells me that roughly half of the school's students are adopted. Just under 50 percent of them are qualified for special education services in public schools. Some have been expelled or otherwise turned away from the traditional public school system. One student, for example, immigrated to Colorado after attending school in the United Arab Emirates. When that school refused to release her transcripts, she was rejected by her public school district. Crossroads happily took her in. While situations vary widely across students, each student at Crossroads faces his or her own battle against academic, home- or family-related, or behavioral issues—sometimes in combination.

I have an opportunity during my visit to sit down with a number of Crossroads students to discuss what the school means to them. I speak first with a tenth-grader in thick-rimmed glasses and a purple shirt. She tells me that she was homeschooled until ninth grade, when her parents realized that her Asperger's Syndrome and dyscalculia, or brain-related difficulty understanding mathematical concepts, were becoming too much for them to handle on their own. Staring down at the table between us, she tells me shyly that she also suffers from social anxiety and struggles with eye contact. Crossroads' approach to education, she says, helps her grasp concepts she has never been able to understand before.



Dakota, student

As our interview draws to a close, I ask what Crossroads means to Dakota. She grows serious and locks eyes with me over the table. "They gave me hope. Without them, I wouldn't have any hope."

The school's relationship-focused work provides her with the support she needs to improve. When she finishes high school, she plans to become a botanist and an artist.

Similar thoughts are echoed by the students who follow. I meet a pair of high school boys, two of the school's first four students, who have become inseparable friends. Both agree that the school has helped them reach a better place than they otherwise would have, though in different ways. One loves the ability to work on his own and at his own pace, the other appreciates the school's other opportunities—opportunities that landed him an internship at Longmont Ford in his chosen field of automotive technology. Yet another student, now 18 and nearing graduation after struggling to find a school that could meet his needs, praises the level of one-on-one support Crossroads provides.

Each of the students I interview has charted a different path to Crossroads. Toward the end of the day, the girl in a purple beanie who gave me a peace sign in Ms. Szalaj's English class walks through the door. Her name is Dakota. She is 14 years old.

Dakota opens by complimenting my name, telling me in the process that she holds an undying love for a pop star named Ross Lynch—a singer whose existence was unknown to me until that very moment. With me feeling suitably old, we embark on a deeper conversation. Dakota tells me she suffers from a medical syndrome that impacts her growth, and that she struggles to focus in school due to concentration and audio-processing issues. Having tried public, private, and homeschooling, she represents perhaps the starkest example I've encountered of a student for whom existing options are not adequate. Throughout these experiences, she felt misunderstood, rushed and unable to keep up, or deprived of the help she needed. Frustration, not joy, defined her educational experience.

Crossroads, she says, changed all of that. The school understands her in a way her other schools have not, and their special efforts to help her grasp tough concepts have done much to improve her academic perspective. Now a freshman in high school, she is nurturing an interest in raising animals and looking forward to pursuing a career—partially through courses offered at the Career Development Center—as a veterinarian.

As our interview draws to a close, I ask what Crossroads means to Dakota. She grows serious and locks eyes with me over the table. “They gave me hope. Without them, I wouldn’t have any hope.”

Dakota’s experience is given even more weight when, in a rare opportunity, I have a chance to speak with her parents. In actuality, 74-year-old Don and 70-year-old Marcy are Dakota’s grandparents. They adopted her as their own after her birth mother, whom they also adopted many years ago, made a series of bad choices that led to her losing custody of Dakota. Sending Dakota to her father was not an option, so Don and Marcy, then in their late 50s, took on the responsibility of raising Dakota themselves.

They describe in painful detail days on which Dakota simply refused to go to school. If they attempted to force the issue, she would physically hang on to door

frames and furniture to avoid another day in “that place.” Don and Marcy tried public special education, but the process of pulling Dakota out of class for special education services felt disjointed and prohibited teachers from ever truly gaining an understanding of her needs. They tried more traditional private schools, and although this arrangement worked for a time, it ultimately left Dakota feeling crushed under an academic burden she was not ready to bear. Finally, feeling that they were left in educational limbo with no other options, they tried homeschooling. Ultimately, this proved too difficult for them as parents.

They were, as Don puts it, “desperately looking everywhere, *anywhere*” for an education that could meet Dakota’s needs. A cruel, sad resignation began to creep slowly over them. Out of options and out of ideas, this was “the end of the road for Dakota.” It was during

this dark period that they happened upon a *Longmont Time-Call* article about the ambitious work of Mrs. Bulthuis, Ms. Nourse, and the Crossroads team on a private alternative school in Longmont. They decided to learn more about the school, which they did. But it was ultimately Mrs. Bulthuis’s and Ms. Nourse’s deep and unwavering commitment to helping kids like Dakota that sold them on Crossroads.

When Dakota came to Crossroads, Marcy says, her emotional and behavioral issues were “off the charts.” Now, she is thriving. Self-confidence and a vibrant desire to help others have replaced the deep, terrible frustration of earlier years. They also speak of her improvements academically. Beaming with pride, Don recounts a recent call on his cell phone. Dakota wanted him to come outside and “look at this cumulus cloud!”

As Don and Marcy speak, I am reminded of something Mrs. Bulthuis said to me earlier in my visit: While Crossroads takes in many students with histories of behavioral and emotional issues, they have few students who continue to experience them at the same level after arriving at the school. This is, she believes, because these issues are symptoms of fear, frustration, and anger. Eliminate the underlying causes, and you will eliminate the symptoms. For Dakota, at least, this appears to have been exactly the right approach.

I am still thinking of Dakota when I climb into my car and pull out of the Crossroads School parking lot. Soon, farmland is once again zipping past my windows at lightspeed as I rocket southward toward my home.

Somewhere behind me, 25 students have already found theirs.





Ross Izard is the Senior Education Policy Analyst at the Independence Institute. He has authored or coauthored a number of pieces on a variety of topics, including policy briefs, blogs, op-eds, and articles published by both the Independence Institute and media outlets throughout the Front Range. Ross frequently speaks to legislators, school board members, local media, and outside groups about school choice and education reform.

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