



Liberty Common Charter School: Excellence in Education

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Introduction

It is a crisp fall day when I arrive at Liberty Common School's elementary campus in Fort Collins, Colorado. This campus, which sits adjacent to a placid open space on the eastern edge of the city, houses all of the public charter school's kindergarten through sixth-grade students. Grades seven through twelve study in a building about a mile away.

From the outside, Liberty Common School's elementary campus looks much like any other elementary school. It does not occupy a chic, modern building. It does not project an aura of prestige or fame. The building itself used to be a toothpaste factory that, in its early years, still smelled of oral hygiene products and featured hallways marked by well-worn tracks where workers once moved carts and equipment.

It may come as a surprise, then, that this modest campus is the entry point into what many regard as the best public school in Colorado—a school renowned for elite academic performance, prestigious state and national awards, and a student lottery pool that reaches into the thousands. Here, in a small city about 60 miles north of bustling Denver, Liberty Common School is leading its own “revolution in education.”

Education leaders from across the nation come to Fort Collins to see Liberty Common School, hoping to discover the secret to its remarkable success. They want to know what new innovation the school has discovered that produces such incredible results. What most of them do not know is that Liberty Common's secret, if one can call it that, is that the school's success has very little to do with “innovation” in the traditional sense. Instead, Liberty Common relies on content, philosophies, and teaching strategies that have been in use for thousands of years—all of which are combined with a highly intentional approach to education.

For All Things, a Purpose

My first experience at Liberty Common School is a Character Education Assembly in the gymnasium, where neat rows of masked elementary students have been assembled to listen to a presentation from members of the Civil Air Patrol, an auxiliary of the United States Air Force. My visit to Liberty Common happened at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the school needed to take extra precautions for its assemblies.





At the end of the presentation, the elementary school's assistant principal, Sandy Stoltzfus, stands up to help the students process what they heard. "Why do they salute their officers?" she asks them. Several students offer answers, to which Mrs. Stoltzfus nods before driving home her own point: It isn't about ego or status, it's about showing respect to colleagues and leaders. Showing respect shows good character, she says. The students underscore this truth by shouting, "Good character is a choice!"

Mrs. Stoltzfus then proceeds to announce a number of "character awards" for students, each of whom stands up to be recognized by his or her classmates. There are awards for showing respect, being polite, demonstrating responsibility, and exemplifying good citizenship. Each student is applauded by the whole audience before the next award is announced.

When the ceremony ends, the students stand up, grab their own chairs, and place them on rolling racks before forming orderly lines and exiting the gym. The entire space is cleared in just over three minutes. This display of efficiency is my first introduction to Liberty Common's culture of efficiency, attention to detail, and intentionality of effort.

After the assembly, I join Liberty Common elementary Principal Casey Churchill for a tour of the elementary campus. Mr. Churchill is an energetic former teacher—he has taught both at Liberty Common and in Minnesota—who has been at the school for 17 years. He is a true believer in Liberty Common's mission and educational philosophy, and it shows.

Mr. Churchill takes me to a variety of classrooms where, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, students sit at a distance from one another behind clear plastic "desk masks" that wrap around the front and sides of their workspaces. Though most of the school's students have returned to in-person learning, each room includes a web camera for students whose parents would prefer for them to participate virtually.

Liberty Common is one of the only public schools in Fort Collins serving students in person at the time of my visit. Traditional public schools in Poudre School District remain virtual only, but such a model does not mesh well with Liberty Common’s approach to education—or with the expectations of most of its families. The school believes that in-person learning is best for students, and it is eager to show contrast between its approach to the pandemic and that of the much more bureaucratic school district.

Liberty Common’s intense focus on intentionality in education is on full display in its classrooms. Outside every room hangs a standardized schedule outlining exactly what students will be doing throughout the day. Inside, the classrooms are arranged in a typically classical style. Desks are placed in neat rows, all facing forward to receive the school’s brand of direct instruction from a “sage on stage,” the nickname given to Liberty Common’s diverse cadre of teachers. The goal is to create the best possible environment for information transfer from teacher to student.

The bookshelves in each classroom hold many of the same books on the K-8 Core Knowledge curriculum and related pedagogical approaches. Unlike many traditional public schools, Liberty Common does not believe in constantly changing its teaching doctrines or curricula to accommodate the latest fad in education. Instead, the school relies on a tried-and-true set of books, teaching principles, and materials. As a result, each elementary teacher can develop and refine lesson plans from a stable set of curricular materials without needing to start over every few years.

We also visit the elementary school’s library, which a volunteer committee recently finished curating. The committee reviewed each and every book in the library to ensure that students are reading challenging, high-quality literature. While many schools review their books occasionally, Liberty Common undertook the task with a very specific goal of choosing literature that would supplement student knowledge and help them grow as readers and writers. The result is a thoughtful—and very, very purposeful—selection of





both fiction and nonfiction works designed to foster intellectual growth.

When it comes to capturing the essence of Liberty Common's intentional approach to education, however, the classrooms and library are far less illustrative than the hallways. Various pieces of art hang throughout the school, and the casual observer might be forgiven for believing that they are placed randomly as decoration. In fact, each has been strategically chosen and placed to reinforce the school's Core Knowledge curriculum.

"Absolutely everything you see on the walls is about Core Knowledge," Mr. Churchill tells me as I stare at a print from Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" series. He is not exaggerating.

The student artwork on Liberty Common's walls is comprised of student renditions of various pieces of consequential art from around the world. Students add their own personal touches and embellishments to these renditions, of course, but they are not drawing or painting purely for the purpose of expression. At Liberty Common, art class is a means by which students acquire knowledge about art, politics, and history—knowledge on which later lessons in a variety of subjects will build.

This focus on foundational knowledge is a key part of the Core Knowledge sequence, which is at the heart of Liberty Common's educational practice.

Foundational Knowledge: The Core Knowledge Sequence

Rooted in the educational philosophy of American educator and reformer E.D. Hirsch, the K-8 Core Knowledge sequence holds that knowledge, not skills, forms the foundation of a successful learning experience for children.

Many modern schools pursue a type of education focused far more heavily on what students can do than what they know. These schools seek to teach skills—critical thinking, computer work, and analytics, for example—that they hope will translate to a universal ability for students to tackle education and the world. They spend comparatively little time teaching the kind of knowledge Hirsch would call "cultural literacy." Names, dates, events, places, and vocabulary all fall into this category, although the Core Knowledge curriculum is about far more than rote memorization of facts.

Core Knowledge advocates maintain that foundational knowledge is the key to accurately interpreting the

world and developing the intellect. Conversely, deprived of the information needed to draw adequate context around an idea or concept, students may miss critical connections and relationships that could shape their thoughts, beliefs, and understanding of the world around them.

Mr. Churchill provides an example from a trip he took to the city of Bath in the United Kingdom, so named for the famous Roman baths in the center of the town. Visitors who lack basic knowledge of geography and history often miss the significance of the Roman presence on the British Isles, which sit far from Italy and the Eternal City. As a result, these visitors often fail to adequately understand why Latin heavily influences the English language or how the Romans' need to move people, equipment, and information across vast distances affected the development of modern transportation and communication systems. They may miss the cultural influences that Roman customs—like going to a communal bath house—have had on their own communities and society at large.

These missing pieces of knowledge can profoundly affect a student's ability to grow academically and intellectually. According to Hirsch, "The almost universal feature of reliable higher-order thinking about any subject or problem is the possession of a broad, well-integrated base of background knowledge relevant

to the subject." Without that background knowledge about the world, including the people, events, and ideas that shaped it, students will find it difficult to acquire additional knowledge or advance their understanding. This difficulty will dramatically limit students' ability to reach their full intellectual capacity. And this limitation will, in turn, perpetuate the inequality of opportunity that so often hobbles American society.

As Hirsch himself has said, "Only a well-rounded, knowledge-specific curriculum can ... overcome inequality of opportunity." Liberty Common has taken this statement to heart—the "Common" in the school's name is a reference to the common schools of old, which were created in part to level the academic playing field for all children.

The Pursuit of Knowledge: Liberty Common High School

The formal Core Knowledge sequence ends in eighth grade, but Liberty Common views classical, knowledge-based learning as a journey that should last for the entirety of a student's K-12 career. As such, the school adheres to the same basic tenets in the upper school, which serves grades 7-12.

Founded in 2010, the high school feels immediately different. It radiates an almost university-like aesthetic,





with students gathering to study in grassy areas out front and trees dotted around the perimeter.

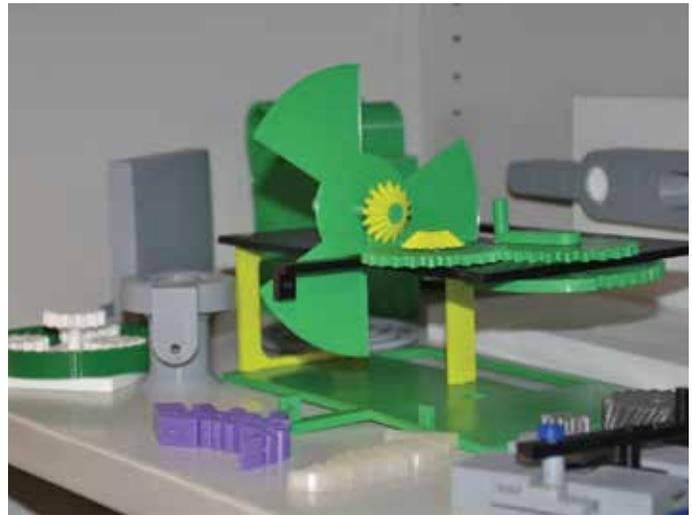
Here, students continue their learning from the elementary school in subjects like Latin, English, history, and mathematics. The knowledge they gained in the lower school serves as the foundation for new knowledge and deeper understanding in the upper school, where intellectual exploration, debate, and the competition of ideas are prized above all else.

When I arrive at Liberty Common High School after completing my work at the elementary campus, I am greeted by math teacher and principal Torgun Lovely. He introduces me to my tour guides for the afternoon, elected school captains Liam O'Malley and Parker Stern. The seniors meet me in the main office before ushering me out into the busy hallways for a closer look at the school.

It's clear from speaking with Liam and Parker that they have internalized the mission of Liberty Common.

Liam is what the school calls a "thirteener," or a senior who has been at Liberty Common since kindergarten. He is an expert at explaining the school's mission and philosophy. Parker, too, is able to clearly and accurately articulate exactly why Liberty Common does things the way it does. Being intimately acquainted with the school and its beliefs is a key part of their role as captains, which is designed to provide both leadership to other students and a public-facing example of the kind of young men and women Liberty Common produces.

Liam and Parker have much to say about the academic program at the school, but what I find most striking is how much they respect and admire so many of their teachers. There is hardly a classroom they show me where they do not instantly recall the teacher who calls that room home and the time they spent there as students. They know personal details about these teachers—hobbies, interests, and previous jobs—as well as small details about their personalities, teaching styles, and projects. Both Liam and Parker express how



grateful they are to the school's faculty for helping them along their academic journey.

Sages on Stages

Of course, many students at many schools remember their favorite teachers, and especially teachers who have taught professionally for their entire careers. What makes Liberty Common unique, however, is that very few of its teachers are teachers by formal training.

While the elementary school focuses primarily on foundational knowledge in core subjects, students at the high school are also exposed more heavily to hard sciences and more practical classes like physics, chemistry, and engineering. During our tour, Liam and Parker show me a variety of student engineering projects built with 3D printers—everything from gears to mechanical parts to a remarkably accurate replica of Iron Man's helmet.

Such a rigorous focus on knowledge acquisition in such diverse fields requires talented, knowledgeable teachers—teachers who do not always fit the mold or background one might find in many traditional public schools. While those schools often prize licensure and education degrees above all other credentials or qualifications, Liberty Common instead seeks out content experts who may or may not have any formal

background in teaching. These teachers hold less traditional teaching credentials—doctorates in their chosen fields, long and successful professional careers, and a desire to share the knowledge they have gained with the next generation of leaders.

As a public charter school, Liberty Common has the flexibility to hire and fire teachers on individual contracts without the rigid constraints of a district-wide collective bargaining agreement. Like other charters, the school also has a state waiver that allows it to hire teachers who are not formally licensed to teach in Colorado. The option to expand hiring to pools of experts who would otherwise be locked out of K-12 education by expensive and time-consuming licensing requirements significantly increases Liberty Common's ability to help students pursue knowledge under the direction of the best possible "sage on stage."

While hiring non-licensed teachers without formal education backgrounds may be anathema to many in the education establishment, most educators I speak with at Liberty Common credit the pedigree of their staff with Liberty Common's incredible success. School Headmaster Bob Schaffer, himself a former state senator and U.S. congressman rather than a career educator, tells me that the school takes great pride in "stripping the mystique of being a licensed educator



or going to teacher college.” Here, he says, “physics teachers are physicists, history teachers are historians, and English teachers are writers.”

In some cases, Liberty Common’s approach to hiring leads to some particularly unique additions. I have the opportunity during my visit to interview Cassie Auble, a bright, friendly Latin teacher who splits time between the upper and lower schools. Mrs. Auble does not hold a teaching credential, which at a non-charter public school would have excluded her from the teaching profession. After speaking with her, however, it is clear that such an exclusion would have deprived students of a talented educator.

Mrs. Auble started her career as a microbiologist. She worked for a time at the Centers for Disease Control before deciding that spending the rest of her life in a lab with various microscopic organisms was not what she wanted. She tried to return to school to pursue another passion of hers: history. Most universities, however, did not see the value of having a trained microbiologist undertake a graduate-level history

program. So, Mrs. Auble returned to college, completed a second bachelor’s in history, then turned her attention to earning a doctorate at the University of West Virginia.

Most primary sources for the time periods on which she focused were written in Latin, so Mrs. Auble’s academic work required her to become an expert in the Eternal Language. She also became a teaching assistant for one of her professors, which introduced her to the true love of her life: instruction. This winding path eventually led Mrs. Auble and her family back to Colorado, where she planned to work while writing her dissertation.

The resulting job search led Mrs. Auble to Liberty Common, where she was invited to participate in what she describes as “the most rigorous interview process I have ever seen.” Other staff members describe the school’s interview process in similar terms. Being selected to teach at Liberty Common is considered both an honor and a serious responsibility.

Mrs. Auble's interview consisted of several hours of questioning by numerous members of the Liberty Common administration, parents who serve on the school's Board of Directors, school founders, and a

member of the faculty. These questions were not the typical questions about where she earned her degree in teaching or her experience in the classroom. They were questions about the content she wanted to teach. Staff interviewers asked her about the period of history she studied, quizzed her on Latin grammar, and threw a variety of other inquiries at her to test her expertise in Latin. Classroom management, lesson planning, and other day-to-day aspects of teaching were only secondary concerns. Liberty Common believes that if a teacher knows his or her content area thoroughly, he or she will be able to quickly acquire the skills needed to succeed in the classroom.

Many prospective staff interviews occur in the same

library where I speak with Liberty Common staff throughout my visit. The room is lit softly and gives off a feeling of a sophisticated law library or a professor's

office. It includes Victorian furniture arranged around a large table meant to facilitate debate beneath a wall-mounted reproduction of Raphael's famous Vatican fresco, School of Athens. The fresco, fittingly, depicts history's greatest minds—Aristotle, Pythagoras, Ptolemy, Plato, Zoroaster, and more—engaging in a lively discussion. Even here, in a quiet room meant for study and discussion, everything at Liberty Common is intentional.

A House United

Liberty Common's high school is most notable for its rigorous focus on academic development, but the school understands that such an environment works best when students have strong support systems and relationships in place. To help create a better student life, the school has organized its students into six "orders" in grades seven and eight that feed into five "houses" in grades nine through twelve. These five houses are permanent fixtures of student life, and they play such a significant role that alumni often remember and feel loyalty to their houses long after they leave Liberty Common.

I hear multiple references to the houses from teachers and students alike as I tour the school, but it is not until I sit down with Becky Salehi, who serves as the school's House Director in addition to teaching pre-algebra and geometry, that I gain a better understanding of the system and how it ties into Liberty Common's educational philosophy.

Unlike many staff members at Liberty Common, Mrs. Salehi always planned to be a teacher. She taught at both private and public schools in California before returning to Colorado and teaching for a time at a local private school. Her desire to find a bigger school led her to Liberty Common eight years ago—after the intensive interview process, of course.

Mrs. Salehi enjoys mathematics because she always prefers subjects with concrete right and wrong answers. But she truly lights up when she talks about the House System she manages at Liberty Common High School, a system designed to foster friendships, build closer relationships between students and teachers, and inspire healthy competition within the student body. Students elect their own house leadership, appoint various officers, and plan themed events throughout the year as they compete for a chance to win the coveted



annual Neenan Cup. The cup is named after David and Sharon Neenan, whose design-build construction company generously helped Liberty Common with its early facilities needs.

Each of Liberty Common's houses is named after one of the school's "capstone virtues"—prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude, gratitude, and patriotism. Because everything at Liberty Common is intentionally designed to reinforce what students are learning in their classrooms, house names are, of course, written and spoken in Latin. For instance, the House of Fortitude is referenced within the school as Domus Fortitudinis.

Many house activities and events focus on teaching or exhibiting these virtues. For instance, students are responsible for holding themed assemblies called lyceums that often include guest speakers. These events, as well as various student actions throughout the school year, are awarded points that contribute toward a house's overall score. This score, in turn,

determines who goes home with the Neenan Cup at the end of the school year.

While many schools have moved away from competition between students, Liberty Common has openly embraced it. "This is a hard school," says Mrs. Salehi, "and we want students to compete." The school believes that true mastery of one's intellect involves an ability to take ownership of responsibilities, work effectively as a team, and engage in healthy, productive competition with others. Thus, under Mrs. Salehi's leadership, the House System serves as yet another way to intentionally reinforce student learning and growth.

Different Branches, Same Roots

Toward the end of the day, I join Headmaster Bob Schaffer for one final interview in the upper school library. The headmaster has just finished moderating his weekly "Hot Politics" discussion club, during which students debate pressing political issues and apply their knowledge to matters of policy and governance.



This week's meeting is particularly exciting—President Trump has announced his nominee to fill the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's U.S. Supreme Court seat, the New York Times has released a massive exposé on the president's federal income taxes (or lack thereof), and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to dominate national conversations.

After 30 minutes of lively debate, the students file out of the library and leave me alone with Headmaster Schaffer. A former state and federal legislator, former member and chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education, former board member at the Colorado League of Charter Schools, and a fierce advocate for educational choice, he is something of a legend in Colorado education circles. Today, however, he is hard at work running the school he helped found nearly 30 years ago.

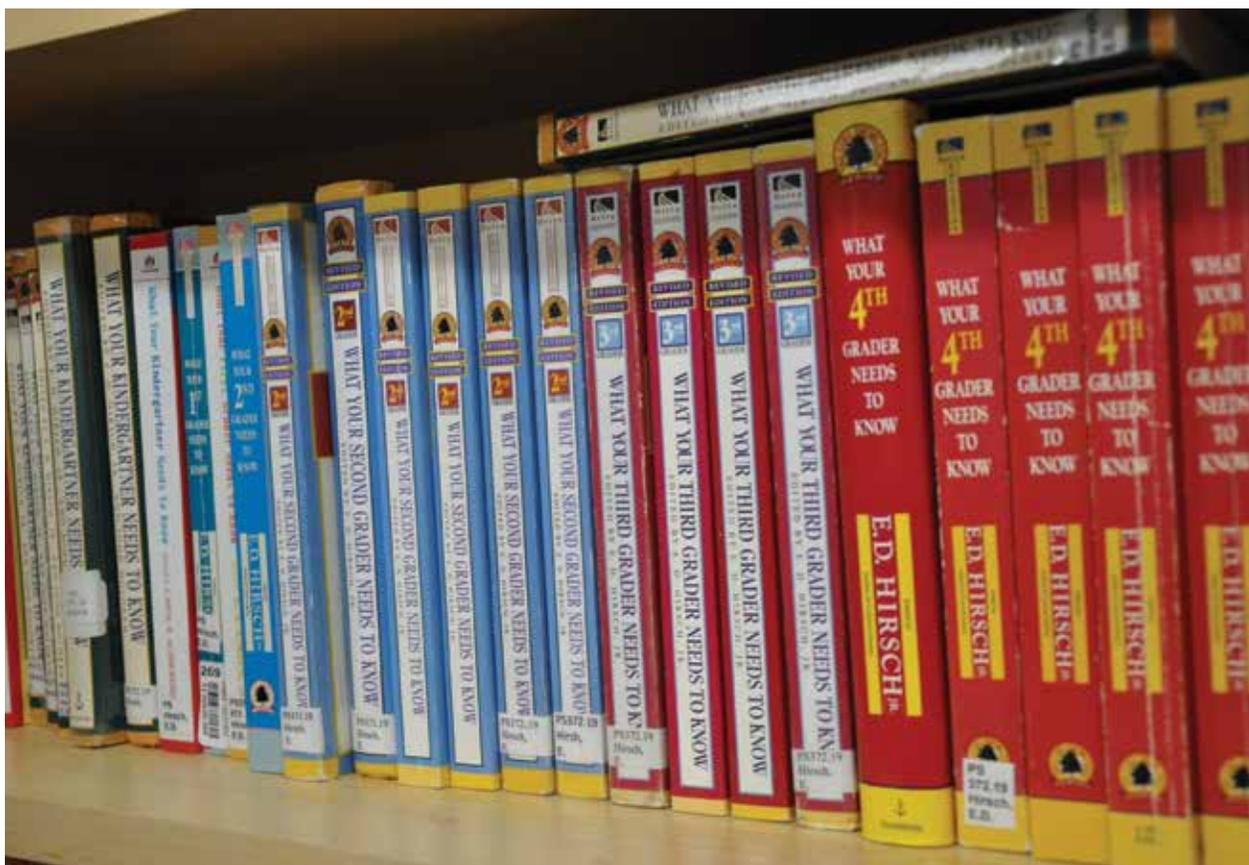
Schaffer stands as the students leave, then takes his seat again and smiles as a walkie-talkie chirps from his vest pocket. He has a story to tell.

Schaffer and his wife, Maureen, were among a small group of parents working toward starting a new school in the early 1990s. Educational choice was practically

nonexistent in Poudre School District at that time, and many parents, like the Schaffers, were unsatisfied with the quality and educational philosophies of their local public schools. They believed—rather audaciously at a time when charter schools did not exist and even the concept of parent-run schools was considered novel—that they could do better.

Schaffer and his wife worked closely with community leaders like Dr. Randy Everett and his wife, Ruth Ann, as they studied the most effective educational models available. It was during this time that they first encountered the idea of knowledge-rich, carefully sequenced classical learning—an idea to which they immediately connected. Schaffer tells me that “the evidence was overwhelming that these things worked.” Dr. Everett began running ads in local papers, one of which touted a “revolution in education.” They now knew what they wanted in a school, and they were going to build it.

Schaffer was a state senator in those days, and he thought he had seen everything that politics could throw at him. But the vitriol of local education politics caught him off guard. Poudre School District viewed their effort to start a school as a serious threat and,



according to Schaffer, became worried that this feisty group of parents would take over the district school board if left unchecked.

Apparently not having studied political history, the district opted for a strategy of appeasement. They gave the group of parents an old district building in which to start their dream school, convinced that this group of non-educators would quickly fail and recede into the background. The parents accepted the challenge and opened Washington Core Knowledge School in the fall of 1993 with around 125 students.

The school, which was so heavily based on E.D. Hirsch's teachings that he mentions it by name in one of his books, quickly found success. A huge waiting list developed almost immediately, which put neighboring principals on notice that, as Schaffer puts it, "they had a lot of customers who wanted to leave." The school soon outgrew its campus, and the district allowed leaders to move to an old high school right in the center of Fort Collins in 1995.

When it became clear that Washington Core Knowledge School would not be going quietly into the night, Schaffer says, the district became agitated. They informed school leaders that their experiment in education was coming to an end and began taking steps to make good on that threat. In an effort to bring down the school's astonishing academic results, district officials began forcibly placing "excess-capacity teachers"—or teachers removed from their previous positions due to low performance—into the school.

Then-Senator Schaffer's experience with starting Washington Core Knowledge School in the face of district hostility was, in part, responsible for his decision to join other state legislators in co-sponsoring Colorado's charter school law. That bill passed with bipartisan support in 1993. As tensions with Poudre School District reached their peak in 1995, that law created the opportunity for Washington Core Knowledge School to remove itself from direct district governance in favor of an independent, parent-led governing board as a public charter school.

The option to create a charter school set Washington Core Knowledge School on the course to become Liberty Common School, but the road was not easy. Some parents and school leaders preferred the safety of

district oversight to the relative risk of free governance as a charter and opted to keep the Core Knowledge sequence in the traditional public system. The resulting school still exists today as Traut Core Knowledge School.

Other leaders, including Schaffer, opted for the harder path of becoming a charter. After a series of bitter fights with the local school board and subsequent appeals to the Colorado State Board of Education, they finally won charter authorization from Poudre School District. But the school still needed a building, so multiple founding families borrowed against their own houses to secure the necessary funds to acquire the old toothpaste factory where Liberty Common's elementary school still resides. With a great deal of help from Neenan Archistruction, the school first opened its doors in September 1997.

Liberty Common has succeeded in its goal of "providing some rational contrast and creating an education market that did not exist." It opened with stellar results, and it has continued to outperform nearly every school in the state year after year. It consistently ranks first in student performance on college-entrance exams and excels on state achievement tests despite the fact that the school makes no effort to "teach to" these tests and, in fact, strongly disagrees with their existence.

This success predictably spawned massive demand. Schaffer remembers that desperate parents would attend information nights at the school and scream at school leaders to add capacity.

To help cope with the overwhelming demand, Liberty Common leaders and supporters helped a separate group of parents start nearby Ridgeview Classical School with the intent of helping more students



access the high-quality education offered at Liberty Common. Even with that release valve, however, Liberty Common still maintains a lottery pool that stretches in the thousands because so few students ever leave the school.

Today, Liberty Common and Ridgeview Classical maintain a healthy competition with one another. Schaffer views this (and all) competition between education providers as a positive force because it drives consistent improvement. He credits the competitive pressure imposed by Liberty Common, Ridgeview Classical, and Traut Core Knowledge with helping to improve the local public schools in Fort Collins.

When I ask Schaffer how he feels looking back on all the school has accomplished with his help and the help of many others, he stops and thinks for a moment before saying, “At this point, I have done everything there is to do in education. Here we sit in what I would call the best school in Colorado, but to the bureaucrats, I have no credentials to be here.”

He smiles as he finishes. “There is some sweet justice in that.”

The Constant of Education

If you ask Headmaster Schaffer what makes Liberty Common so different and so successful, he will tell you that it has nothing to do with innovation. The school has not discovered a new trick to education, nor is it pursuing the latest reform trend. In fact, Schaffer says that “the notion that there is some new strategy to help a child learn is sort of nonsense.” Instead, he will tell you, Liberty Common has simply adopted a craft that stretches back almost 3,000 years to Socrates and the Greeks. “The business of transferring knowledge from one generation to the next is not new,” he says, “and there is not much innovation needed.”

Having finished my time at the school, I consider that the true magic of Liberty Common is not newfangled pedagogies or curricula but is a knowledge-focused, highly intentional education. The school has distilled every aspect of the student experience to facilitate the purest possible transfer of foundational information. And while this intentionality may not be new or innovative, it is certainly unique among the schools I have seen.



Like so many things in education, the simplest solutions are sometimes the most effective. Liberty Common School is a testament to that truth, and one that other schools across Colorado and the nation should look to as they seek ways to help the next generation of students succeed.





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