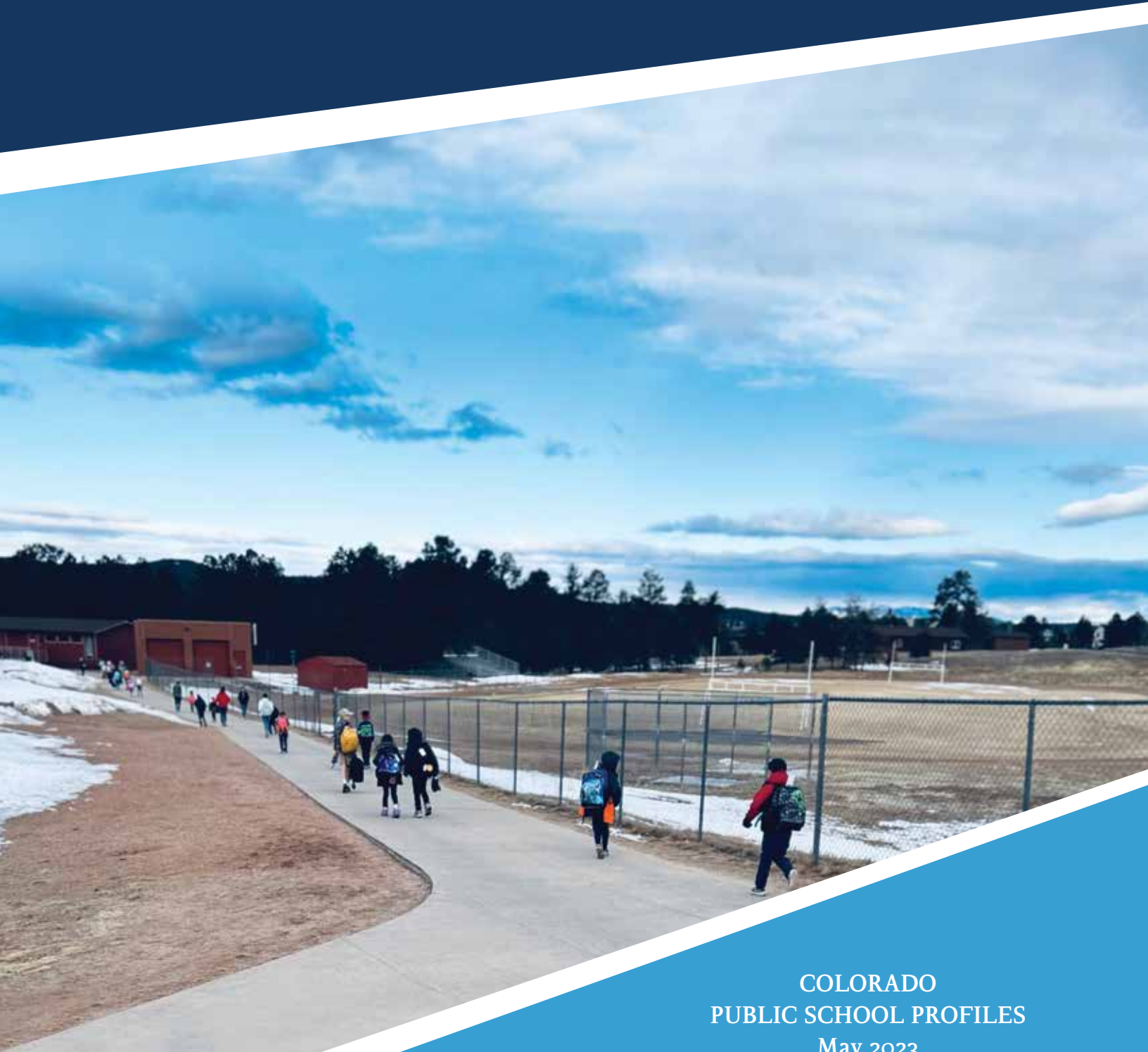


# MERIT ACADEMY: A Story of Perseverance



by Ross Izard, Senior Fellow in Education Policy  
Independence Institute



COLORADO  
PUBLIC SCHOOL PROFILES  
May 2023

# Introduction

Highway 24 rises out of the bustle of Colorado Springs before passing through the quaint tourist town of Manitou Springs, where the famed Manitou Incline rises straight up the mountain like a pencil line drawn on a painting. Beyond that, the highway traces Fountain Creek further into the mountains before leading into the heart of Woodland Park, population 8,000.

This quintessential mountain town sits at the foot of the towering Pikes Peak. It is a simple place but still attractive in its own right. The town's main street is lined by western-style wooden buildings meant to make visitors feel like they are visiting the Old Western frontier.

Woodland Park is, in fact, on the frontier—albeit not the one the town planners were attempting to evoke. As unlikely as it may seem, this small mountain town has been ground zero for some of the most intense political battles over K-12 education in recent memory. At the center of that storm is a parent-founded public charter school called Merit Academy, the only charter school in Woodland Park School District and perhaps one of the clearest examples of the ways in which current state education policy intersects with parent demand when it comes to the founding of public schools of choice in new communities.

It is Merit and its unique story that have brought me to Woodland Park. And it is quite a story.

## The Merit Mile

When I arrive at Merit Academy—or, at least, where Google tells me Merit Academy should be—I'm confronted by a large school building with a sign out front welcoming me to Woodland Park Middle School.

Somewhat confused, I park in the main lot and make my way to what appears to be the front door. The door has a small, printed piece of paper telling me there is no access to Merit Academy through this entrance and instructing me to walk further around the building. I walk to the next set of doors, where I find a similar sign, and continue to repeat that process until I reach the end of the building. Every door is closed to those looking for Merit.

Confused, I continue down the ice- and snow-covered path as it curves behind the school. At the very end of that path, at the farthest corner of the rear of the campus from my parking place, I finally find the only entrance through which Merit Academy students, parents, and staff may enter the charter school. There is no permanent, official sign here, just a handful of printed signs hung in the window to let me know I've (finally) reached my destination.







Inside the building, I'm greeted by Dr. Gwynne Pekron and Jason Ledlie. Dr. Pekron, a former member of the Woodland Park Board of Education, serves as headmaster of Merit Academy. She's a tall, energetic woman who immediately creates the impression of someone who has mastered the balance between humor and seriousness. Jason Ledlie, who sports a well-kept beard and the quiet demeanor one might expect of someone who has made a career as a counselor, is vice president of Merit's board and one of the school's founders. I'm late, thanks to my hike around the school building, and I apologize to both of them for holding up a packed schedule of interviews and observations. Dr. Pekron chuckles when I comment about the long, cold walk from the front lot to the Merit Academy entrance.

"We call that the Merit Mile," she says. She then asks me where I parked. Apparently, Woodland Park Middle School does not take kindly to Merit

visitors parking in the wrong section of the school's lot.

I have been in hundreds of schools over the course of my career, and I've written extensively about many of them. Each of them has its own long history full of battles, challenges, and setbacks. But Merit Academy is the first school I have ever visited that so immediately and so starkly gives the impression of a school under siege by a hostile public system. Never before have I seen such a clear, ground-level example of an establishment at war with educational progress.

However, as I learn during my visit, Merit Academy's story is not really one of hardship but one of hope. It is the story of a small group of dedicated parents who were willing to stand against an entrenched and intransigent education establishment, persevere in the face of fierce political opposition, and navigate the complex world of school-authorization policy in Colorado in order to provide their children—and the children of Woodland Park generally—with a new educational path.

These parents wanted a school that offers a classical education program focused on academics. They wanted a school where their children would be held to high expectations and where they would be taught the importance of character. And they were willing to fight for it.

## Family Virtues

Merit's current facility largely consists of a single T-shaped hallway lined with lockers and student artwork of all kinds. Our first stop is a prominent display of the school's core virtues: valor, goodness, perseverance, responsibility, and friendship. These virtues are at the very core of Merit's work, and they are mentioned in virtually every conversation I have throughout the day.

After discussing the various ways adherence to the virtues is recognized and rewarded at the school, Dr. Pekron leads me to an empty classroom at the far end of the hallway where Merit's music teacher, Tiffany Basnett, is preparing for a Christmas

concert rehearsal later that morning. She's a small, enthusiastic woman who greets me with a warm smile that seems almost permanently affixed to her face.

After introductions, Mrs. Basnett eagerly shares her story. She is a licensed K-12 music teacher with a bachelor's in music education who has been teaching music for more than a decade in the public school system. She's also a mother of three who pulled her children from the local public schools in order to enroll them in Merit Academy. She tells me she felt that the school district was not meeting their needs or her expectations. So, when the opportunity arose to move to Merit—the only public school of choice in Woodland Park—she seized it. And once she saw what the school was doing and how they were doing it, she followed suit and moved professionally.

I often find that teachers who have spent many years in the traditional public education system are resistant to the idea of educational choice and public charter schools, so I am excited by Mrs. Basnett's story and ask if I can schedule more time with her later in the day. Dr. Pekron looks confused by the request, as if she did not expect me to be impressed by the fact that a public school teacher

would follow her children to the hallways of Merit Academy.

At the time, Dr. Pekron's reaction surprises me. But as the day continues, I come to understand that at Merit, stories like this one are the rule rather than the exception. Merit seems to have a sort of magnetic attraction for both parents and highly qualified educators.

One example of that attraction is Jill Cole, whose path to Merit crosses both district and international lines. Mrs. Cole teaches history in grades six through nine and previously served as the school's fifth-grade teacher. She's an affable woman with glasses who speaks like a friendly professor—not much of a surprise when one considers the fact that she has a master's in history—and displays the telltale historian's knack for straddling that difficult line between high-level logic and ground-level human considerations as she tells me about her experiences at Merit.

Mrs. Cole started her career in education as a paraeducator on the Front Range, where she worked in both Denver Public Schools and Jefferson County Public Schools. She left the mountains of Colorado for the sands of the Middle



East when her husband took a job in Saudi Arabia. Once there, she received a call from the Ranco Village Compound. They were in need of teachers with educational experience, and they asked if she would be interested in a job. She said yes.

In the years that followed, Mrs. Cole spent time living and working in the school compound, where she taught students from around the world. It was there, in Riyadh, that she truly fell in love with education. When her family returned to the United States in 2012, she had become a seasoned educator who was able to look critically at the schools in which she would enroll her own children. Through that lens, she developed significant concerns about enrolling her children in Denver Public Schools. Even then, she said, those schools' curricula had become too slanted and too political for her taste.

Instead, she enrolled her children in Jefferson County Public Schools and returned to working as a paraeducator in the district. She continued to be vocal about her opinions on education during her time in Jefferson County, including a "desire to get back to the foundations of education, classical literature, and classical learning." Unsurprisingly, these statements caught the attention of her colleagues, one of whom suggested that both she and her children might fit better in a public charter school than in a traditional public school. She took that advice to heart and ultimately took a job at a charter school in Jefferson County.

Even there, though, she felt restless. She wanted something more for her children and for herself. So, her search continued. When she saw an employment ad for Merit Academy, she knew it was the school she had been searching for.

"This, I could do," she says. "They wanted to get back to primary documents, real history, and away from slanted media influence and politics. I was 100 percent behind what they were trying to do here."

When she was offered a teaching position at Merit, Mrs. Cole packed up her household and moved to Woodland Park. Her children, now older, unfortunately, missed the opportunity to attend



the school. Her youngest daughter attends a traditional public high school in Woodland Park, but only because Merit Academy currently only serves children through grade nine. Were it not for the mismatched timelines, she tells me, her children would have attended the school.

"I love the family feel of the school," she tells me. "We stand as one. It feels as like the staff is completely behind the mission. Everyone here is personally bought in and committed to seeing this [the school's success] through." As evidence, she offers the fact that so many of Merit's staff members trust the school to educate their own children.

Mrs. Cole's story, while certainly unique, is similar to many I hear from the professional educators that make up Merit's faculty. Allison Hanson, the current dean of Merit's upper school and a fourth-grade teacher, has spent 18 years in education. A resident of nearby Manitou Springs, her background is in English and special education, and she has taught in another charter school in a



neighboring school district. She's also spent time working with at-risk youth as an administrator and principal in various correctional facilities.

Mrs. Hanson tells me that Woodland Park School District has a mixed reputation, both educationally and professionally, with educators in the area. That reputation—and the challenges underlying it—led to significant turnover among both students and educators, with many of them driving “down the hill” to neighboring school districts in Colorado Springs that offer more or better educational options.

A mother of three, she heard that Merit Academy was opening and began to research the school. “I was so impressed with their virtues and their

mission,” she tells me. She, like many parents, was looking for structure and high expectations.

When she approached one of the nascent school's founding board members through a local moms group about sending her own children to the school, her friend floated the idea of Allison becoming a member of the school's founding staff. Not long after those conversations, she and her two older children found themselves at Merit. Her youngest will start there soon.

While there are many parents of school-aged children working at Merit, even staff members whose children are long grown notice the family feeling at the school. Ryan Behr, the school's jolly P.E. teacher, is a perfect example. He spent 23 years as a special educator in the public education





system, primarily in Iowa and Montana. The father of four grown children, he tells me that he was always drawn to working with children. But as his years in the public system grew long, he began to notice a distinct shift in the culture of education.

“I felt like too many things were starting to seep into education,” he says. “I believe a math teacher should teach math, and a P.E. teacher should teach P.E. I wasn’t prepared for the government involvement and the need to come after educators for not doing things the way others think we should.”

He pauses, shakes his head, and looks at the table for a moment before looking back to me as my fingers hover over the keyboard. “Everyone was angry. I didn’t want to get involved with being angry. I just wanted to work with kids. My heart just wasn’t in it anymore.”

Mr. Behr left education and moved to Fountain, just down the road from Woodland Park. He took a job working with adults who have intellectual disabilities. He helped them schedule medical appointments, maintain the house they shared with each other, and generally navigate day-to-day life. It was, he says, good work. But when he saw an ad for teachers at Merit, he couldn’t resist applying.

“I saw parent involvement, I saw the focus on virtues, I saw their model, and I got excited.”

The Merit position was the only teaching job he applied for after deciding to leave the education field, and he got it. When I ask why he chose P.E. instead of continuing with special education, he just laughs. “I get to play games with little kids for a living. I’m probably five or six years from retirement, and I go to work and get hugs, laughter, and games. What a blessing.”

He tells me that he sees the school’s family atmosphere in action every day. People smile at each other in the hallways and speak to each other like human beings, he says. As parents and career educators, they spend their time and energy thinking about how to raise good kids who can connect with people instead of raising children to be stressed or angry.

This theme continues throughout the day as I meet teachers and staff members whose children already attend Merit or hope to attend the school once they are old enough. Even those whose children have long since finished school remark on the school’s family atmosphere.

When I see Dr. Pekron herself affectionately greet one of her own children during a classroom observation, I finally understand why she seemed so surprised by my excitement over a single teacher who moved her entire family to Merit Academy. Here, at this charter school in a small mountain town, exercising educational choice—both as professional educators and as parents—is a family affair.



## A Storm in the Mountains

Merit Academy's heavy foundation in families should not be surprising in light of the school's origins. First conceptualized by a group of community leaders and parents who had become concerned with the methods Woodland Park School District utilized to educate children, the school is the epitome of a parent-driven answer to the specific problems they faced in the public system.

Time and again during my visit, I hear from parents who wanted something different. Merit parent Tim Howe tells me that the school has finally provided his family with the option they wanted for their children. A father of four, he and his wife homeschooled their children in Ohio

before moving to Littleton and later to Woodland Park. There, they enrolled their children in their

local elementary school, which he says provided an "overall positive" experience during the pandemic.

However, he and his wife were concerned with the focus on technology and screen time in district-run public schools. Worried that this approach to education might hold their children back, they began looking for other options.

The Howes were not alone in their concerns. Katelyn Beevers, a parent and substitute teacher at Merit, expressed more severe frustrations. Her oldest of two children finished her last year of preschool and kindergarten at a Woodland Park public school. She describes the experience as "terrible," particularly with regard to how the school handled the pandemic and all of its related challenges. There was very little in-person learning, she says, and very little communication between the school administration and parents (she notes, however, that the teachers themselves were very caring and professional throughout the experience).

Her daughter, Elsie, struggled with the district's hybrid approach to education during the pandemic, which had students in school only on certain days. Elsie was terrified of the masks everyone wore and the plastic shields installed on desks. On her second day of kindergarten, she refused to let go of Katelyn during the school drop-off process. Katelyn asked to walk her into the school, but the principal refused. A staff member came and "peeled" her daughter away from her before disappearing behind the locking exterior doors.

Katelyn stood outside the school doors crying. Eventually, the principal came out and said, "There's nothing more you can do here. You can go home." She refused to leave until someone could assure her that her daughter had settled and was calm.

"Lack of compassion and caring are really hard things for me to deal with," she said. Only days into her daughter's kindergarten year, she knew it was time for a change.



Katelyn's frustrations are not unique or, sadly, even uncommon. Dr. Pekron, who had served as a member of the Woodland Park School District Board of Education for years prior to Merit Academy's charter application and still served on the board during the school's initial proposal, remembers parents coming to school board meetings to voice their concerns with the district.

These parents would come to the podium "shaking and crying," she recalls. They would express worries about the district's focus on digital education tools and general educational quality. They would ask why the district wasn't listening to them or responding to their concerns. In return, she says, they would be told in so many words that if they did not like the education being provided, they could leave.

"It was frustrating," she tells me. "When you have declining enrollment and families are telling you 'I don't like this, I want another option,' and all the district can tell them is 'tough luck'... that's just wrong."

Many parents, frustrated with the lack of movement, took the district's advice and left. Data from the Colorado Department of Education shows the district has lost more than a quarter of its student population in the past five years, much of it to homeschooling or other school districts under Colorado's open-enrollment laws. As a result, many of the district's current school buildings—including the middle school in which Merit Academy is currently located—operate far below capacity. The empty classrooms and darkened hallways serve as a reminder of the families who couldn't wait any longer for change.

When the supporters of Merit posted a "needs assessment" online demonstrating the need and demand for a classically oriented charter school in Woodland Park, anti-charter school board members dismissed it as "marketing." The political divisions surrounding the school—and surrounding educational choice more generally in Woodland Park—continued to deepen. The Woodland Park Education Association, the district's local teachers union, entered the fray to oppose the school and attack its supporters.

Anti-choice activist pages from school districts hundreds of miles away began to light up with posts about conservative conspiracies and thinly veiled attacks on Merit's founders.

The strife surrounding Merit Academy posed a significant challenge for families like the Howes and the Beevers. When they initially heard the proposal for Merit Academy, they were thrilled about the chance to enroll their students in a classically oriented school that focused on direct instruction rather than digital tools. Both families filled out "intent to enroll" forms to help the school demonstrate demand and, they hoped, reserve seats for their children. But as the battle over the school grew hotter, it remained unclear whether the school would ever actually open.

At the center of this uncertainty is an ongoing question of public policy in Colorado. Current law places the ultimate authority over whether a new charter school can open in the hands of local school boards like the one in Woodland Park through a concept called "exclusive chartering authority." As in Woodland Park, these school





boards and the districts they govern are often highly resistant to new schools opening that could create competition for enrollment—and, therefore, per-pupil educational dollars.

Perversely, this resistance can be especially acute in cases where prospective charters can demonstrate significant parental demand or where districts are already losing enrollment due to declining quality or other factors—precisely the scenarios in which expanded choice is clearly the correct solution for families. This scenario is one reason Merit has faced such stiff resistance in Woodland Park.

In late December 2020, the Woodland Park School District Board of Education denied Merit Academy’s charter application, citing a lack of clarity and funding regarding facility needs, criticizing the operational plan for staff recruitment and training (an especially interesting argument in light of Merit’s star-studded current staff today), and questioning access for various at-risk student populations. The vote was 4-0—Dr. Pekron, the board’s fifth member, had to recuse herself from the vote due to her involvement with the charter school effort.

The school’s founders responded that they were disappointed “that so many voices continue to go unheard.” But, undeterred, they began to research

the very few other pathways through which a public school of choice can be authorized without the approval of its local school district.

## A Narrow Path

As the battle over Merit Academy played out in Woodland Park, a separate battle was playing out in nearby Colorado Springs. There, an organization comprised of several school districts and Pikes Peak State College called the Education reEnvisioned Board of Cooperative Services, or ERBOCES for short, was exploring the boundaries of Colorado law governing the authorization of new public schools of choice. A BOCES cannot authorize a charter school, but they do authorize schools of choice.

Utilizing a plain reading of the statutory BOCES Act, ERBOCES had determined that it was legally able to authorize new brick-and-mortar public schools within the boundaries of non-member school districts, even if those districts did not grant formal permission to do so. Under that authority, ERBOCES had authorized Orton Academy, a school for children with reading disabilities, inside Colorado Springs District 11’s geographic boundaries without the district’s consent. This authorization triggered a lawsuit in which the district fought to maintain its veto authority over whether new choice schools could be authorized without its written permission.

That lawsuit over this experimental foray into school authorization was ongoing when Merit’s founders heard about it. They had already considered other options, including opening a private school, but none were deemed feasible. They had also considered appealing the district’s decision to deny their charter application to the Colorado State Board of Education, which constitutes the only true recourse for charter schools dealing with hostile local school boards. But that process was too long and too uncertain to immediately help interested families. So, one month after their charter application denial, the school filed an authorization application with ERBOCES.

In the spring of 2021, when an El Paso County judge sided with ERBOCES in the D11 dispute, the organization approved Merit Academy's application and gave the school the green light to open in a local church building in Woodland Park. The church's plan to open a preschool had fallen through, and it had unused space that Merit could utilize for its initial school year.

Just two months later, Governor Polis signed the 2021 School Finance Act, which included a statutory moratorium on ERBOCES' ability to open any further schools without the written permission of the local school district. Somehow, Merit had managed to squeak through an authorization window that was only open for a handful of weeks. This seeming stroke of luck was a theme that would repeat itself throughout the school's story. Many board members and others tell me during my visit that they felt that the right person or right opportunities always seemed to present themselves at precisely the moment they ran out of options and hope.

"It's absolutely insane how it all came together," Dr. Pekron tells me. She was still on the Woodland Park school board when Merit Academy won approval from ERBOCES. Shortly thereafter, she resigned from that position to help get the new school off the ground.

Many charter schools, and some other types of public schools of choice, have challenging first years of operation, thanks in large part to the fact that, unlike district-run schools, they are responsible for finding and funding their own facilities. Merit Academy's first year was even more tumultuous.

To ensure that they complied with state law forbidding religious instruction in public schools, Merit staff had to cover scriptures and religious iconography painted on the walls of the church classrooms. They also worked with the church to "flip" the classrooms at the end of each week so they could be used for church purposes over the weekend. The church would then flip them back prior to the start of school on Monday mornings.

It soon became apparent that Merit, which opened with 187 full-time and 80 part-time students, was too large to fit in the leftover space of a single church. With no room to expand inside the original facility, they began to send their younger students to empty classrooms in another local church. Then, at the end of the first semester of Merit's first year, the school moved into what they called the "Bear Den" in honor of their school mascot.

The Bear Den was an old ACE Hardware store that the founders had managed to lease and retrofit to serve as a school. The process took months thanks to supply-chain and funding issues—it ultimately cost three times what the school had budgeted and required some supporters to use personal property as collateral—but they eventually succeeded in preparing the facility for students to return to school in January 2022. They utilized movable temporary walls and sound-absorbing blankets to form the outline of classrooms.

Many teachers who were at Merit for the Bear Den chapter of the school's story tell me that it was hectic and challenging. However, the parents with whom I spoke specifically commented on the smoothness of the facilities transition and the remarkable job that educators did making that nontraditional space feel like a "real" school. If the pictures I was shown of the classrooms are any indication, the parents' memories appear to be accurate. I would be hard-pressed to say that the pictures were not taken in a traditional classroom in a formal school building.





In November of 2021, thanks in large part to the upswell of parents calling for change in the district, the biannual elections saw the Woodland Park school board majority flip to a more choice- and charter-friendly majority. Merit Academy reapplied for charter status following the change in board leadership and was granted official approval as a district charter school at a highly contentious series of school board meetings in May 2022 as it closed out its first year of operation. The school was subsequently granted access to the empty space in Woodland Park Middle School, where I found myself for my visit.

For all the upheaval, Merit Academy's base of enrolled families stayed remarkably stable throughout these battles. Facility moves are infamous for costing schools large percentages of their student population, especially when they occur mid-year. Merit, however, lost only a handful of families during the location hopscotch of its initial year of operation. In fact, it opened for its second year with approximately 330 students—nearly 17% percent of the total public school enrollment in Woodland Park School District.

Much of the school's ability to weather the storm in Woodland Park should be attributed to the focus and sheer amount of educational experience among its leadership staff. Rosie Hendrickson, dean of the Merit Academy grammar school, is a

perfect example. She founded a Catholic school in Florida, where she worked for eight years. When that school had to close for a variety of reasons, she took a job at a Florida charter school that faced heavy opposition from its local school district. She ultimately worked at that charter school as both an educator and an administrator for 12 years.

Shocked as she has been by the level of vitriol Merit has seen, the school's saga is not an entirely new experience for Mrs. Hendrickson as a seasoned charter educator. "It feels like *déjà vu*," she says. "But I know that if we continue to move forward and do good things, it will get better for us." So, she shows up each morning to walk the Merit Mile with her colleagues. And she does her best—as all staff members seem to at Merit—to encourage those feeling discouraged to carry on for the sake of the students.

Dr. Pekron is unashamedly proud of the scrappy school's success in the face of long odds. One of Merit's staff members gave her a gift to commemorate the experience: a vase with the words "Watch Me" inscribed on one side. It was, for Dr. Pekron, a joking reminder of her and the leadership team's stubborn refusal to give up the fight for Merit Academy's existence despite all the statements that they were attempting the impossible and the predictions that the school would fail.



When I ask if she would do it all again, she smiles and gives me a gruff laugh. “Yeah. I didn’t think it was that hard. I think it was right. And that’s just who we are.”

## New Growth, Old Wounds

Merit Academy’s victory in the authorization process marked an important step in the school’s journey. But as I speak with Merit Academy’s founding board members, it is clear that the school still has a long road ahead.

The staff and students have made peace with the Merit Mile, and they have made the hallways and classrooms feel like their own. But reminders of their status as outsiders in the school district remain.

Many members of staff, and even some parents, tell me that they often refrain from wearing Merit-branded clothing in public places for fear that an opponent might see it and create a scene. Some of them said that they consciously avoid telling others about their affiliation with the school. That reticence is not because most people in Woodland Park do not support the school—they do, and stories of whispered support and silent majorities are commonplace—but because those who oppose it have often proven to be highly aggressive in expressing their opinions.

While walking around the building one sunny day during their lunch break, two Merit teachers encountered a group of staff members from the district middle school eating lunch. When the Merit teachers waved to them, these other teachers turned their backs and went back inside the building. More than one person tells me several cars have been keyed in the portion of the school’s parking lot where Merit staff members park.

The facility itself also serves as a reminder of strained relationships. Merit Academy’s portion of the building is derisively labeled by several middle school staff as “the dark side.” In its first year as a district charter school, Merit Academy holds 45%



of the building’s student population—forecasted to grow even more over the next couple of years—but is only allowed daily use of 27% of the building. At the end of Merit’s allotted hallways inside the middle school, the district has installed walls complete with alarmed locking metal crash doors to separate the two schools’ students and staff. These heavy alarmed doors are ostensibly meant to serve as an amicable separation between schools. In reality, they function more as a reminder to Merit staff and students that they are outsiders.

While the building’s large cafeteria is typically unused except for the middle school’s 35-minute lunch period, Merit’s current space includes no cafeteria or other place to eat meals indoors, so students ate outside the building on the grass well into the fall. It was only a few weeks before my visit to the school that the district granted Merit access to a trailer near the rear entrance so students would not have to eat in the snow and ice.

Even as someone who has seen his fair share of difficult relationships between authorizers and charter schools, these pieces of Merit Academy’s experience are shocking. Remarkably, though, both Merit’s staff and leadership seem unperturbed.



Showing me the crash doors, board member Jason Ledlie simply shrugs and says, “We just do what we do over here.”

Dr. Pekron shares Jason’s lack of concern, saying that the facilities issue has been discussed for over a decade when there was talk of shutting one of the elementary schools because of declining district enrollment. She shrugs when I comment on the doors. “Both schools’ leadership teams collaborate well. It’s very respectful, and I appreciate that.” After pausing to nod at students passing in the hall, she adds, “It’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

When I speak to teachers about their experiences facing discrimination or animosity due to their role at Merit, every single one of them reaffirms their commitment to the school, its mission, and the ways in which it serves the Woodland Park community.

Rachel Priest, who teaches upper-school math, tells me that she has no plans to leave. Drawn to the school’s focus on virtues and traditional education, she is another public educator and mother of two young students whom she plans to enroll in Merit. The school was willing to work with her schedule as a mother, which requires her to be available at certain times to care for her young children, and she tells me that “every concern I’ve ever had is concerned and addressed.” She says the school’s leadership “exceeds anything I could

ever have asked for.” In particular, she feels grateful that the school’s leadership helps screen staff from hostility and politics outside the building.

Mrs. Priest acknowledges that the first year at the school was hard. In fact, she says it was the biggest professional challenge she has ever navigated. Her first classroom was in the church facility with walls painted “red like blood,” and she recalls challenges ranging from having to share a single, tiny copier among all staff members to various instances of hostility in the community. In response to the criticism and rumors she heard about Merit, she did her own research. Upon discovering that many of the claims against the school were untrue and that Merit Academy is actually supported throughout much of the community, she leaned further into the school’s work.







“I am bought into what Merit is, and I am committed to it. Everyone in this building has a common vision and does whatever it takes for the kids, like we’re a family. I would never leave here.” Merit’s board members share this sentiment, and it is on full display when I sit down with founding board members Nicole Waggoner and John Dill. Nicole, the president of the board and the woman who many credit with pulling them into the Merit fold, tells me that she believes Merit’s founders and staff have built something truly special.

“This is exactly what I wanted for my kids,” she says—and she knows she is not alone. “Roughly a third of school-aged kids are opting to something else in Woodland Park. Why do you think that is?”

Nicole says she has dealt with personal attacks, harassment, and other concerning behavior. But sitting in front of me as a mother of three (and pregnant with her fourth), she seems entirely unbowed. “We just have to bring it back to what’s best for the kids,” she says. “As long as that’s your focus, everything else will work out.”

John, another founding board member at the school, feels the same. A career officer in the U.S. Army, he is numbers-oriented, intelligent, and

methodical—the kind of man who quotes military strategist Carl von Clausewitz and talks in terms of military concepts. He was a homeschool father before he was recruited to help lead Merit, where his children now attend.

He says that coming into the school “is uplifting, rejuvenating to our souls.” Asked about the challenges they have faced, he simply smiles. “There is joy here,” he says. “Everything else we can solve as long as there’s joy.”

He pauses for a moment after that statement to think. “Or maybe,” he says as he glances over at Nicole with a smile, “we are just too crazy to quit.”

Nicole chuckles. “Or too stubborn.”

## Virtues in Action

The sun has sunken behind the outline of the mountains when I leave the school building and trudge back down the Merit Mile to my truck at the end of the day. The students and parents have already navigated the complicated pick-up process, where they must compete with school buses from the middle school in the carpool line.

I start the engine and buckle up for the long drive back down the hill to my home. As I set my briefcase down on the passenger seat, I notice a sheet of paper sticking out where I have scrawled some hasty notes. I pull it out and find a reminder of Merit Academy’s core virtues: valor, goodness, perseverance, responsibility, and friendship.

As I reflect on the conversations and experiences of the day, it occurs to me that while the main characters are all too humble to say it directly, there could be no better example of each of those virtues in action than the story I have just heard. And I suspect that story is just getting started.



Thank you to Shelbie Elzas  
for her photo contributions



**INDEPENDENCE  
INSTITUTE.ORG**

727 East 16th Avenue  
Denver, CO 80203  
[www.IndependenceInstitute.org](http://www.IndependenceInstitute.org)

Copyright ©2023, Independence Institute