

OFF THE BEATEN TRAIL

A Profile of Two Rural Colorado Private Schools

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My rental car revs loudly as it struggles to climb a steep slope into the Rocky Mountains outside of Denver. I can see Denver's skyscrapers and the urban sprawl of the city in my rearview mirror. Ahead of me lie miles of busy highway flanked on either side by soaring, snowy peaks and dotted with small towns. Even here, traffic is surprisingly heavy as city-dwellers seek the recreation and relaxation offered by the Front Range.

Traffic thins as I drive on. Slowly, the winding canyons and rocky pine forests of the Front Range give way to the open, arid landscape that defines the Western Slope. After passing through Grand Junction, I am joined by only a handful of fellow travelers on a nearly empty road that stretches to the horizon.

Eventually, a small town named Olathe emerges from the gathering twilight. Signs lining the road offer affordable housing options to migrant agricultural workers. Only a few minutes later, the small town once again gives way to open highway.

Eleven miles down the road, I enter the City of Montrose. This remote city of roughly 20,000 in southwestern Colorado is my first stop on a nearly 700-mile journey to learn about private education in rural Colorado.

POPE JOHN PAUL II ACADEMY

Catholic Education on the Western Slope

The following morning, I find myself ringing the doorbell of a small Catholic school called Pope John Paul II Academy on the outskirts of Montrose. The sun is rising over the mountains to the east—a strange sight for those accustomed to it setting behind the mountains in the west. I'm pondering this oddity when a smiling, bearded man in a suit and tie answers the door. His name is Patrick Gordon, and he is the principal here.

After some brief conversation and a quick tour of the school, Principal Gordon assumes his post at the front door of the school. There, he greets Pope John Paul II's 104 K-8 students. Most of the students are from Montrose, though some drive

here each day from remote regions of the county. These students' diverse parents—nail salon owners, construction workers, retail associates, lawyers, doctors, and police officers—have enrolled them in Pope John Paul II for a variety of reasons. Though the school offers an unabashed “education in the Catholic tradition,” it operates independently of its regional Catholic diocese. And because of the limited educational options available in the Montrose area—the city has only a small handful of public elementary and middle schools feeding into one traditional high school—many non-Catholic students come to Pope John Paul II in search of different educational options. Principal Gordon tells me that approximately one-third of the school's students are not practicing Catholics.

The school's centerpiece is a full-size gymnasium, with classrooms and a library housed in a smaller attached wing accessed through the gym. When I ask how the school secured such a facility, Principal Gordon tells me the building was provided by a generous anonymous donor connected to the Montrose area who saw the need for additional educational options in the city. Other donors from Colorado's Western Slope provided the resources needed to furnish, equip, and staff the school. As is the case for most private schools in Colorado—and many public schools—fundraising is key to Pope John Paul II's success.

As Principal Gordon prepares for the day ahead, I have the opportunity to speak with Theresa Hardin. Mrs. Hardin teaches fifth grade at Pope John Paul II. Her daughter, a seventh-grader, also attends the school. Mrs. Hardin has homeschooled all her children at various times, and is now a licensed educator in Colorado. She and her family live roughly 45 miles away from the school in Hotchkiss, a small town of fewer than 1,000 people that has been home to the Hardin family for more than 25 years. Every morning, Mrs. Hardin and her daughter drive to Montrose together for school. She likes the drive, she says, because it gives them an opportunity to say their morning prayers. Traveling

long distances for work or school is often simply an accepted part of life in rural Colorado.

When I ask why she and her daughter are at Pope John Paul II, Mrs. Hardin tells me she values the school's faith-based education and small class sizes. But she also tells me that she believes the school is meeting demand for expanded educational options in this rural area of the state. “Public school is usually the only choice we have,” she says. Because of the distance to available schools or a desire for a different type of education, many rural parents choose to homeschool their children. However, rural wages tend to be lower than those found in larger metropolitan areas, and not all families can afford for one parent to stay at home on a full-time basis. Other parents simply feel unprepared or unqualified to educate their children alone.



Mrs. Hardin and I are still chatting when students begin arriving at the classroom. I gather my things and head back across the gym to a separate hallway that houses the school's administrative offices. There, in a modest office, I sit down to interview Principal Gordon.

At only 27, the principal is several years younger than me. He grew up in Montrose, where he was homeschooled by his family until he finished high school. He converted to Catholicism at the age of 11 and long harbored dreams of becoming a Catholic priest. When he applied to a seminary in Denver, however, he was advised to spend a year considering whether that was truly the path he wished to take. He agreed to think about it during his first year at Ave Maria in Florida. Ultimately, he decided that the priesthood was not for him. Instead, he opted to pursue a long-standing desire to enter education.

After finishing his degree, Principal Gordon returned to Montrose. When I ask him why he returned to his hometown instead of pursuing higher-paying opportunities in more developed areas, he responds that he felt a particular connection to Montrose. “You feel more of a personal call to serve in your hometown,” he says. “You grew up here, the community formed you. Now you can give back.” He smiles as he remembers how his college friends reacted to his decision to return to Montrose. “A lot of people thought I was a hick,” he chuckles. “They figured I lived in a grass hut. They couldn’t

understand why I’d want to go back.” But being back in Montrose, he says, reconnected him with the community and people he knows best. He still remembers growing up next door to Jacinta Sheetz, now the third-grade teacher at Pope John Paul II, and helping on her family’s farm.

Principal Gordon started as a teacher at Pope John Paul II in 2012, four years after the school’s founding. The administration was impressed with his commitment to the school and its work, and he was offered the principal position by Pope John Paul II’s governing board in 2014. He accepted.

Asked why Pope John Paul II was created, Principal Gordon cites the same lack of options in rural Colorado Mrs. Hardin mentioned earlier in the day. He says his family chose to homeschool him and his siblings because they did not believe the education offered by local public schools was the best fit for their children. Many other families feel the same. He often hears families express concerns about bullying or academic rigor in the surrounding public schools. But far and away the largest reasons families come to Pope John Paul II, he tells me, are its small class sizes of roughly 10 students, its focus on differentiated learning, and a culture based as much on faith and character development as on academics.

Before I can ask more questions, Principal Gordon apologizes, gathers up a box full of teaching materials, and hurries out of his office.

I follow him to a classroom, where he seamlessly slips into “teacher mode” and gets his sixth-grade class started on mathematics. As in many rural schools, limited employment pools and tight budgets often mean that even chief administrators must wear multiple hats. Much like the surrounding community, Pope John Paul II is defined by a willingness to work together to accomplish a goal.



*Patrick Gordon,
Principal*

It Takes a Village...

Montrose is larger than many rural towns in Colorado, yet it is small enough to foster a sense of community that is rarely present in large urban centers. In the realm of education, the limited number of schools available—and the fact that those schools draw from the same small population of students—often defines relationships. One would reasonably expect those relationships to be primarily based upon competition for students and resources, and that is certainly the case at a basic level. But my time at Pope John Paul II taught me an important lesson: In rural communities, cooperation is often the key to success.

Despite the concerns some of its families have with the public schools available to them, Pope John Paul II maintains good relationships with the public school system in Montrose. Many school employees stress during my visit that most parents are drawn to something offered by Pope John Paul II rather than pushed *away* from something in the available public schools, and every teacher I meet expresses deep admiration for his or her colleagues in other area schools. They view themselves as members of the same community interested in achieving the same goals for students in the area, albeit using different educational models.

Most of Pope John Paul II's parents know their students will one day attend Montrose High School, the only traditional high school in the city. As a result, Pope John Paul II stays up to date with what is being taught in Montrose High School so its students can be successful there following their completion of eighth grade. The school also partners with the local school district to provide services for its students with special needs.

One of these students is a 10-year-old student with Down syndrome named Joey. I see Joey working on various activities—usually with his classmates, though occasionally with a paraprofessional hired by his parents—throughout my visit. His parents moved him to Pope John Paul II because they were concerned about the lack of integration with other students in public schools.

Joey's mother, Tanya Dwyer, is a part-time teacher at the school. She teaches middle school science,

with a particular focus on life sciences. She draws no pay for her work—a condition she imposed on the arrangement herself. Mrs. Dwyer works at the local hospital as a nurse anesthetist when she is not at the school. Her husband, an orthopedic surgeon, also works at the hospital. Their incomes are such that they do not wish for the school to spend precious resources on her work. “The only way I’d teach is if they didn’t pay me,” she says. “I want this to be a service I provide to our community’s kids, not a job.”

The focus on the students of Montrose is pervasive at Pope John Paul II. The school's staff speak of their work not only in the context of the students currently enrolled at Pope John Paul II, but in the context of the wider Montrose community. Teachers at the school make significantly less than public school teachers in the area—teachers who themselves tend to make less than public school teachers in the larger Front Range districts. When asked why they chose to work at Pope John Paul II, nearly all of them respond that they see their work as meeting a need for students in their community.

The notion of meeting a community need is not simple jargon at Pope John Paul II. It encapsulates the school's roots in Montrose. Founded in 2008, the school began as a conversation between several Montrose community members who believed students in the city needed more educational choices. In particular, they felt there was a significant gap in private education options. Montrose is home to one other private school, but it had no Catholic schools.

One of Pope John Paul II's current board members is a woman named Amy Nelp. Mrs. Nelp has been in education for more than 40 years. She has taught every grade from preschool to





*Emily Bot,
Fourth-Grade Teacher*



twelfth across both the private and public educational sectors. Having lived in Montrose for decades, she keenly understood the need for more educational options. “So many people needed more options,” she says. “Not everyone can afford to homeschool.” Mrs. Nelp came to Pope John Paul II shortly after the school’s founding, serving as both a full-time teacher and the school’s principal beginning in its second year. She remembers how difficult the early years of the school were. The founding team and the school’s early staff had few ideas about how to get a new school off the ground—particularly in an area as remote as Montrose. “We knew that there was a lot we didn’t know,” Mrs. Nelp tells me. “But we also knew there was a need.”

The process of starting Pope John Paul II was long and arduous. Procuring a space—the school operated out of a nearby church before moving to its permanent home in October 2013—and staffing proved to be immensely challenging. “It was all hard,” Mrs. Nelp says. Then she smiles. “And it was all wonderful.”

Nelp’s fellow board members share her sentiments. Board member Chris Warren served for many years as a teacher and principal in Montrose public schools, where he often felt shackled in terms of what he could discuss or teach. But his passion for serving rural students remained. Mr. Warren has lived in Montrose since the 1950s and has become intimately familiar with the area in the intervening decades. “We don’t have the idyllic lifestyle people envision,” he says.

“We have all the same problems. You have to sacrifice to live here.” When I ask him what he means, he tells me that many Montrose families find themselves stretched thin by the local economy. “It’s hard to maintain a solid family when you are constantly stressing about finances,” he says. In recognition of this fact, Pope John Paul II strives to make the education it offers available to all students. The school has never turned a student away for lack of ability to pay.

Dr. Mike Brezinsky, the school’s founding and current board president, also remembers the difficulties of starting Pope John Paul II. “We had no money, no students, no teachers, no curriculum, no building,” he remembers. Today, however, he is proud of what he and his team have accomplished. The school is growing, and it hopes to add a high school in the next few years. Its academic results are impressive; the average Pope John Paul II student scores at the 85th percentile on nationally normed standardized tests. But the school’s growth and test scores aren’t the true root of Dr. Brezinsky’s pride. “People know we provide a superior education, but the kids who leave here are different,” he says. For him, the Pope John Paul II’s true accomplishment is character and moral development.

During my visit, I have the opportunity to meet with several parents who offer their perspective on the school and the education it offers. One of these parents, Stephanie Beshoar, has sent three children through Pope John Paul II. Born and raised in

Montrose, three of her other children went through the Montrose public school system before Pope John Paul II opened. She says she was drawn to the school partially because of its focus on faith and values, but also because she hopes it will help level the playing field for her children. She says, “Country kids are competing against kids who went to a high school set up like a college campus with a litany of specialized and advanced courses. Our kids need a great education to avoid being left behind.”

Riyanon Keep, another Pope John Paul II parent, took a different path to the school. Her son, then in first grade, was struggling to read in a local public school. When she tried to get him help, she says she encountered “bureaucratic red tape” that complicated the process. Her son stopped raising his hand in class, disengaged from his schoolwork, and settled into the sad realization that he was being left behind by his friends. As she watched her son stumble, Riyanon realized she would need to take matters into her own hands. “I have to be an advocate for my kids,” she says. “Even if no one else will.”



*Riyanon Keep,
Parent*

Aware of the importance of early reading skills—many students who cannot read well in elementary school will struggle to catch up later—Riyanon began searching for alternatives. That search led her to Pope John Paul II. Riyanon initially was

concerned about approaching the school because her family is not Catholic. But when she looked deeper, she was surprised to discover that school is home to many non-Catholic families. Reassured, she and her husband enrolled their son at the school. Today, he is thriving. “He’s a completely different kid,” she tells me. “I really don’t know where he would be if he had stayed at his old school.” She proudly tells me that her son’s two highest scores on the school’s annual standardized test were in reading. “I truly believe we’ve given our son the incredible foundation he needs to be successful,” she tells me as we wrap up our interview. “He isn’t just a number here. They really know him.”

BACK ON THE ROAD

Later in the afternoon, I file out of Pope John Paul II alongside the school’s students. Principal Gordon and several other staff members are at the doors saying goodbye. I shake their hands, load the rental car, and take to the road once again. It takes only a few minutes to reach the edge of Montrose, and the city is soon fading in the rearview mirror. I drive into the foothills on long, winding roads that crisscross rolling hills, idyllic valleys, and sparkling mountain lakes. Then I find myself once again in the mountains, the car chugging as it struggles to crest the high mountain passes between me and my next destination.

Eventually, the mountains give way to the legendarily beautiful San Luis Valley. Here, the highway stretches to the horizon as green pastures sweep up into jagged, snowy peaks that stand over the valley like sentinels. The road goes on and on, leading me past the Spanish Peaks and through a variety of small towns. The daylight has faded to a deep purple by the time I arrive in Trinidad, Colorado. Situated just north of the Colorado-New Mexico border nearly 300 miles from Montrose, this small town of roughly 9,000 is home to Holy Trinity Academy (HTA), a small school of about three dozen K-12 students with deep roots in the community.

HOLY TRINITY ACADEMY

Rooted in History

The following morning, I make my way through the shop-lined streets of old town Trinidad and up onto the hilly campus of Trinidad State Junior College. In the middle of the campus, which coexists with a large residential area, I find a nondescript multi-story building adjacent to a church. A simple sign outside informs me that I have reached my destination.

Inside the building, I am greeted by Andrea Jimenez. Mrs. Jimenez is a mom of former Holy Trinity Academy students and is now serves on HTA's board of education. She has also been the school's business manager since 2007. She is a small woman with short hair and a quick sense of humor. She has a reputation for being caring and funny but also direct and to the point. It doesn't take long for me to see how she developed that reputation.

Mrs. Jimenez leads me through a couple of small classrooms to the upstairs portion of the school. Here, a large room serves as a classroom, common area, and, in our case, meeting space. She directs me to a round table toward the back of the room where we can talk while watching a class of students work on English language arts.

Mrs. Jimenez was raised in Trinidad. She has seen the city grow and change over many decades, and she has a deep sense of pride in her community. When she was a student, she attended a local private school called Trinidad Catholic School. She tells me she was the fifth generation of her family to attend that school. Viewed as an integral part of the area's educational community, the Trinidad Catholic Tigers had a large athletic program and participated in activities with other local schools.

Many of Trinidad Catholic's parents worked in the coal mines surrounding the city. Founded in 1862 following the discovery of large deposits of coal in the region, the City of Trinidad's history is deeply tied to coal mining and unionization. Just 15 miles north lies the site of the infamous Ludlow Massacre, in which the Colorado National Guard and others attacked a camp of roughly 1,200 unionized coal miners on strike from the Rockefeller-owned mines in the area.

Trinidad has changed much since those days. Most of the coal mines have been shuttered, and the city has struggled to adapt its economy to one divorced from the natural resource upon which it staked its initial claim. Those economic travails have trickled into the city's labor market. Mrs. Jimenez tells me that many of the shelves at a local grocery store are bare—not because there is no food available, but



because the store struggles to find enough workers to stock them.

It was against this backdrop of economic change that Trinidad Catholic encountered serious financial problems that ultimately led to the closing of the school in 2004 against parents' wishes. These parents, along with many community supporters, felt compelled to carry on the school's mission by founding Holy Trinity Academy, an indirect and nondenominational descendent of Trinidad Catholic.

Within three months of Trinidad Catholic's closure, Holy Trinity Academy opened its doors for the first time thanks to an outpouring of community help and support. "People came out of the woodwork to help," Mrs. Jimenez remembers. "And that included both public and private schools who recognized that they were losing an important part of the educational ecosystem in Trinidad."

When I ask why Holy Trinity Academy is such an important part of the community, Mrs. Jimenez displays her characteristic directness. "Kids are all different, and they do better in different situations. It's not good enough to only help inner-city kids in Denver. You have whole generations of families down here who live in poverty, who can't move away, who are surrounded by inadequate education options. If you want to help these people—and I mean really help these people—you need to give them options that allow for better educational outcomes."

Walking the Line

Like many rural private schools, Holy Trinity Academy faces nearly constant financial pressures. The school is fortunate that the neighboring church allows it to lease its current space for a very low amount, but serious financial hurdles remain. The school estimates that it costs roughly \$6,000 per year to educate one student. HTA families receive an average of \$1,900 per year in financial assistance toward the school's \$3,200 annual tuition. Families in need receive further assistance thanks to local business owners, Trinidad Catholic alumni, and Denver-based ACE Scholarships, which provides privately funded scholarships to low-income K-12 students who wish to attend private schools. Other

families volunteer at the school to defray some of the costs. Still, every family pays something. "There is nothing for free in life," Mrs. Jimenez says. "You've got to work for what you want. You've got to earn it."

Families are not the only members of the HTA community who sacrifice to make the school work. The average salary of an HTA teacher is just \$19,000 per year, and they often must wear multiple hats. Phyllis Massarotti, HTA's head teacher and a former classmate of Mrs. Jimenez's at Trinidad Catholic who also taught for 35 years at that school, jokingly tells me that she is both a teacher and the school's "refuse engineer"—a euphemism for the fact that she handles the cleaning and trash of the school. Mrs. Massarotti says that she is often asked why she does not leave HTA to teach in a public school for a higher salary. In response, she says that there are things more important than money. For now, she simply wants to "Finish what we started here."

Norine Hazen, another of the school's five full-time teachers who also serves as the president of the school's board of directors, feels the same about the importance of HTA's work. Mrs. Hazen has been teaching for an astonishing 54 years, 35 of which she spent in public schools. She has raised 15 children, some of whom were hers or her husband's and some of whom were adopted. When she notices the look on my face as I ponder how she survived from my perspective as a father of two, she laughs. "I just love kids, and I love educating kids," she says. She tells me that her experience in the public school system was enjoyable, and she understands better than most that she must make personal financial sacrifices to teach at HTA rather than a public school. But she believes more strongly in HTA's mission and approach to education. "I feel needed here," she says. "I feel like the kids need me."

Financial hardship is not the only issue HTA faces. Students come to the school for a variety of reasons, but the city's economic state often leads to particularly difficult family situations. Several staff members tell me that Trinidad's location on I-25, the gateway to Colorado from the south, makes the city a major hub for drug activity and trafficking, further complicating the situation for local families.

The impacts of these community problems are often keenly felt by staff and HTA. Mrs. Jimenez has taken a number of students into her home as they coped with major family upheavals. She tells me the story of one young student whose mother abandoned him to marry a man in another country. She also tells me of other students whose parents have run into legal or other trouble that prevented them from being present for their children.

Even in cases where parents are present and involved in their children's lives, students often need significant help. Larry French, another former teacher who now serves on HTA's governing board and offers free tutoring services for students, says that HTA often becomes an academic home for "students the public schools don't know what to do with." Many of these students come to the school far below grade level in critical subjects. Others have special needs or physical issues. In all cases, HTA is responsible for helping them grow and succeed.

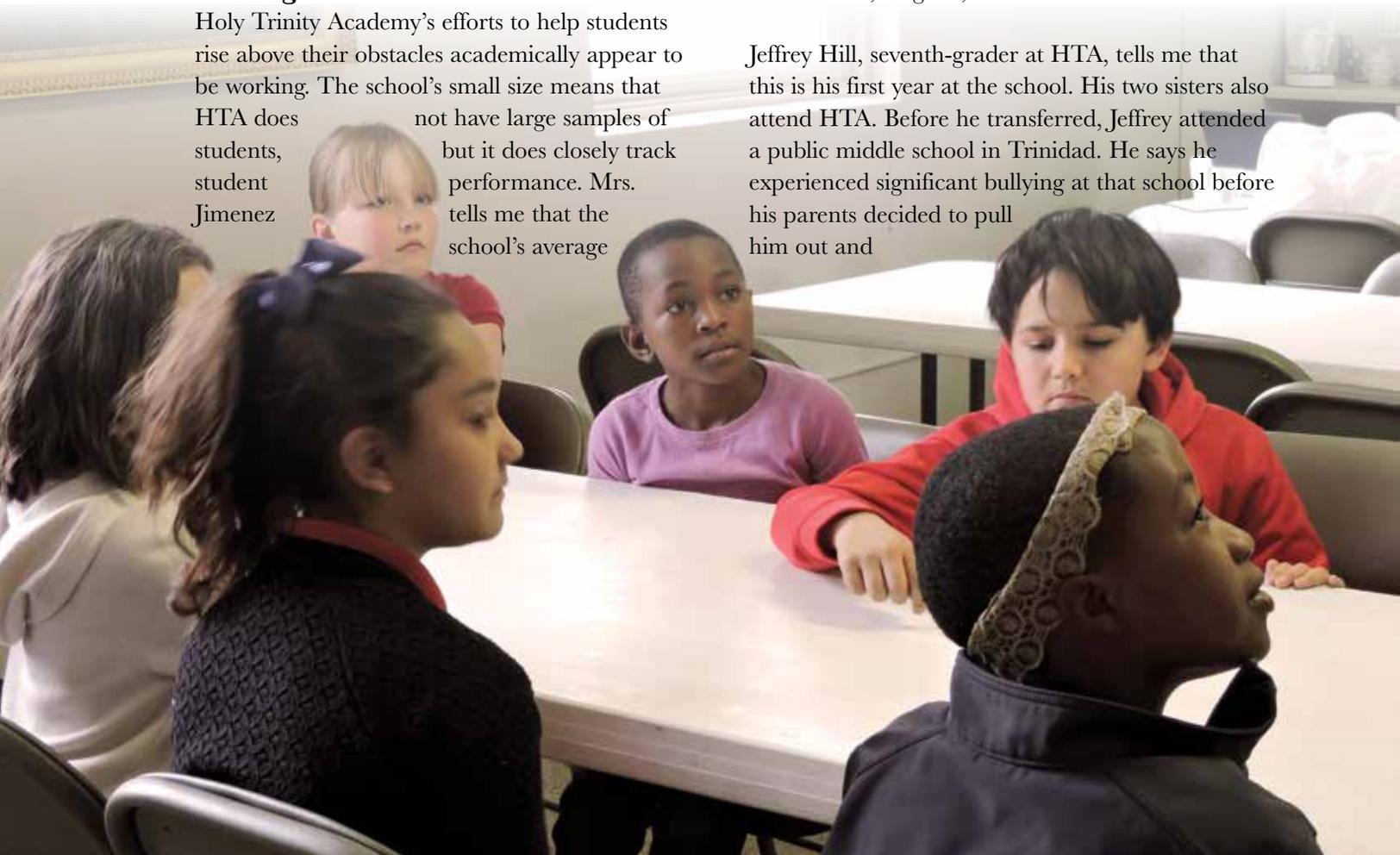
Building Success

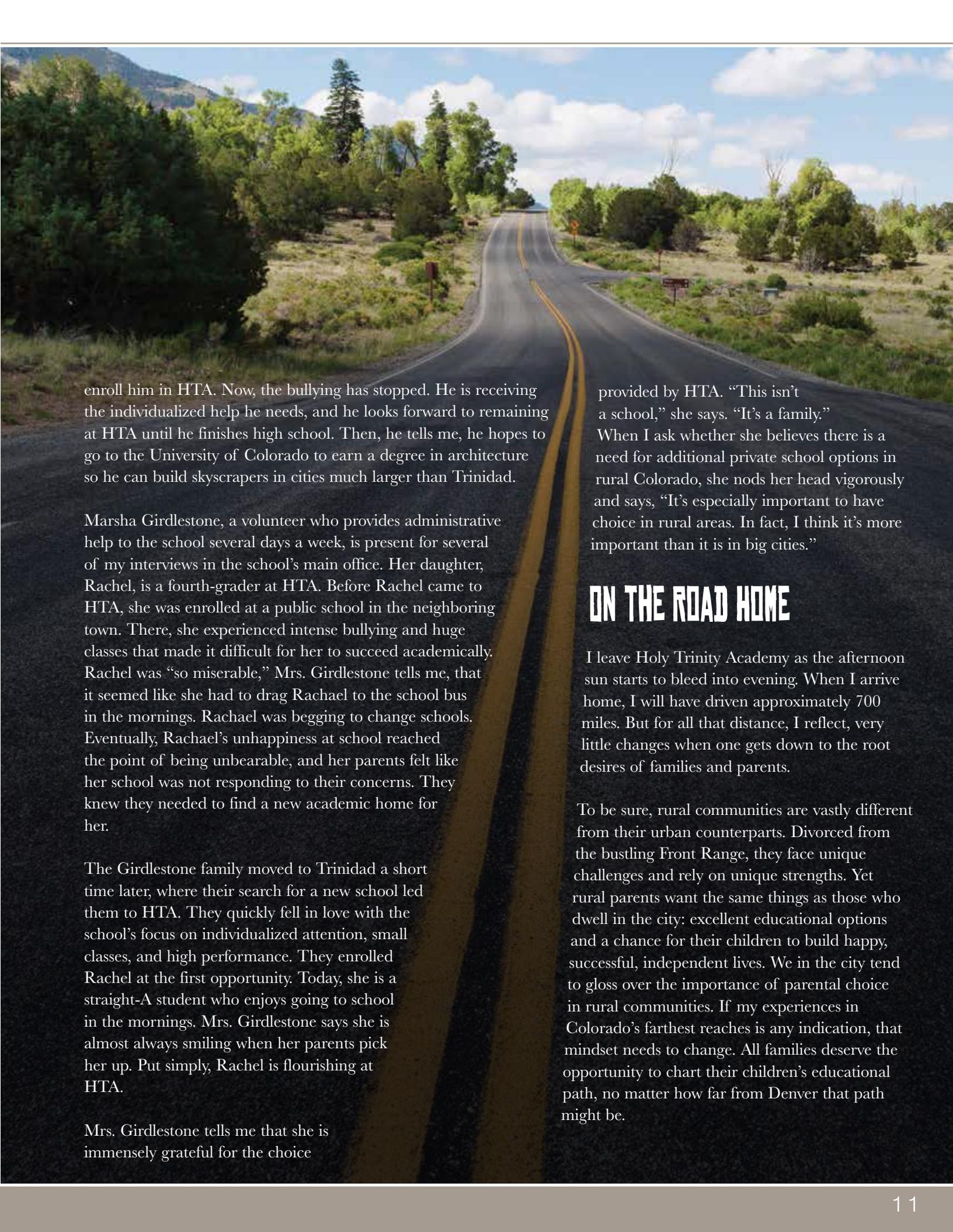
Holy Trinity Academy's efforts to help students rise above their obstacles academically appear to be working. The school's small size means that HTA does not have large samples of students, but it does closely track student performance. Mrs. Jimenez tells me that the school's average

college entrance exam score is several points above the state average, and that roughly 80 percent of the school's students perform at or above grade level. Fifty-six percent of HTA students perform two or more grades above grade level. Ninety percent of the school's students enter college, with the remaining ten percent choosing to join the workforce.

During my visit, I have the opportunity to speak with a number of HTA students directly about their experiences at the school. One sixth-grader named Sofia tells me that her parents, who are immigrants from Finland, enrolled her in HTA because they wanted her to have the benefit of more one-on-one time with teachers. Sofia says she values this extra attention—so much so that she loves coming to school in the mornings. "I don't just sit here like I did in my other school," she says. "I'm challenged every day." Fascinated by the idea of medicine and helping others in part because of her work at her parents' physical therapy clinic during summer breaks, she hopes to one day build a career as a veterinarian, surgeon, or neonatal nurse or doctor.

Jeffrey Hill, seventh-grader at HTA, tells me that this is his first year at the school. His two sisters also attend HTA. Before he transferred, Jeffrey attended a public middle school in Trinidad. He says he experienced significant bullying at that school before his parents decided to pull him out and





enroll him in HTA. Now, the bullying has stopped. He is receiving the individualized help he needs, and he looks forward to remaining at HTA until he finishes high school. Then, he tells me, he hopes to go to the University of Colorado to earn a degree in architecture so he can build skyscrapers in cities much larger than Trinidad.

Marsha Girdlestone, a volunteer who provides administrative help to the school several days a week, is present for several of my interviews in the school's main office. Her daughter, Rachel, is a fourth-grader at HTA. Before Rachel came to HTA, she was enrolled at a public school in the neighboring town. There, she experienced intense bullying and huge classes that made it difficult for her to succeed academically. Rachel was "so miserable," Mrs. Girdlestone tells me, that it seemed like she had to drag Rachael to the school bus in the mornings. Rachael was begging to change schools. Eventually, Rachael's unhappiness at school reached the point of being unbearable, and her parents felt like her school was not responding to their concerns. They knew they needed to find a new academic home for her.

The Girdlestone family moved to Trinidad a short time later, where their search for a new school led them to HTA. They quickly fell in love with the school's focus on individualized attention, small classes, and high performance. They enrolled Rachel at the first opportunity. Today, she is a straight-A student who enjoys going to school in the mornings. Mrs. Girdlestone says she is almost always smiling when her parents pick her up. Put simply, Rachel is flourishing at HTA.

Mrs. Girdlestone tells me that she is immensely grateful for the choice

provided by HTA. "This isn't a school," she says. "It's a family."

When I ask whether she believes there is a need for additional private school options in rural Colorado, she nods her head vigorously and says, "It's especially important to have choice in rural areas. In fact, I think it's more important than it is in big cities."

ON THE ROAD HOME

I leave Holy Trinity Academy as the afternoon sun starts to bleed into evening. When I arrive home, I will have driven approximately 700 miles. But for all that distance, I reflect, very little changes when one gets down to the root desires of families and parents.

To be sure, rural communities are vastly different from their urban counterparts. Divorced from the bustling Front Range, they face unique challenges and rely on unique strengths. Yet rural parents want the same things as those who dwell in the city: excellent educational options and a chance for their children to build happy, successful, independent lives. We in the city tend to gloss over the importance of parental choice in rural communities. If my experiences in Colorado's farthest reaches is any indication, that mindset needs to change. All families deserve the opportunity to chart their children's educational path, no matter how far from Denver that path might be.



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