

Paradox Valley Charter School

Twenty Years On, Choice Survives

by Peter Huidekoper Jr.





*A small rural community
where the charter option
provides “a pulse”*

“A town with a school is a town. A town without a school is not a town.” - Paradox Valley Charter School teacher

Drive through southwestern Colorado, beyond Montrose, then around the Uncompahgre National Forest and into the stunning Paradox Valley, and you will know why Hollywood directors have used this setting. As you continue west, look closely for the sign to tiny Paradox. If you miss the turn, you will be in Utah in another five minutes.

Roughly halfway between Cortez and Grand Junction, once home to the Ute tribe, the town of Paradox has fewer than 100 residents. Although hard to imagine in a town of this size, Paradox also has a school: Paradox Valley Charter School (PVS). I visited this charter school not long after it first opened, almost twenty years ago. Some would say reopened. Back then, PVS was housed in an old brick school, built in 1954, that had served the town for over three decades before closing. I was thrilled to return and to find how much had changed.

Declining Numbers, a School's Rebirth

What had not changed, in any significant way, was the sense that economic conditions in Paradox Valley and the region remain perilous. PVS is a sort of metaphor for the ups and downs of life in a small, resilient community where the uncertainties of the weather, the economy, and much more create challenges that require exceptional determination.

From the mid-1950s into the late 1980s, the three-classroom school building in Paradox survived as part of West End School District RE-2. For a few years, a resident told me, the town experienced “boom times” as a result of the vitality of the uranium mines, “Cold War and all.” By the mid-1980s, however, with the population in Paradox declining, Ron and Liz Steele were the lone teachers in the school. Liz taught grades 1-3, while Ron handled grades 4-6 and served as the principal.

The Steeles, who still live in Paradox, recall that as the number of students dropped into the single digits, Ron went to teach in Naturita. Liz stayed behind, until one day the district closed the Paradox school. That is when she and her students all began the daily 25-mile drive to Naturita. The school remained closed for most of the 1990s. But the dream that it might one day reopen had not died.

In 1998, West End Superintendent Phyllis Harrison and Renee Owen, a feisty and enterprising educator keen to resurrect a school in Paradox, joined forces to submit a charter application to the West End School District. The K-5 school was approved, and it opened in 1999 with 18 students. For the next eight years Owen led the school. Enrollment climbed. The school's academic performance earned a good reputation, winning a 2005 Colorado John Irwin School of Excellence Award. School leaders raised funds to add a new wing, a playground, and a tennis court. Jon Orris soon followed Owen, serving as the school director for ten years. An article in the *Montrose Press* (February 2013) captured why Orris initiated a two-year fundraising effort:

The school's ability to provide a good education, regardless of its surroundings, has caught the attention of parents from all over the West End, and its popularity has forced school officials to hold classes on the facility's stage, in the library and even in the cafeteria.

After the school won \$2.4 million from the Building Excellent Schools Today (BEST) grant program, the community needed to raise the required

11 percent match. It did even better, raising an astonishing \$357,000 in donations for the school of only 46 students. By the fall of 2014, the \$2.7 million remodel was complete: five classrooms, a kitchen and lunch room, and a 5,000 square foot multipurpose room/half-gym—the perfect setting for performances and community events.

It was this transformed school, now serving 41 students—35 K-12 and 6 preschool, with nearly 50 percent on Free and Reduced Lunch—that I was eager to see. However, while preparing for my visit, I learned of painful staff cuts. Moreover, I realized that the school and the larger community have been dealing with new economic challenges the last few years. Would these events, I wondered, threaten the survival of a school in Paradox, again?

Over two years ago, the *Telluride Daily Planet* (September 2016) delivered this devastating headline:

Company to close Nucla power facility and coal mine: Tri-State, the town's largest employer, says 83 jobs to be affected.

The population in Nucla and Naturita, where the West End School District's elementary, middle, and high school are located, suffered as families left for jobs elsewhere. These departures drove the population below 1,300 and, as a result, led to a fairly steady decline in the number of students in the district. This fall, the district serves a total of 285 students.



To make matters worse, a two-year drought in southwestern Colorado added to the worries for local ranchers. A part-time resident spoke to me of the economic stress he sees: “There’s a lot of nervous people in the valley.” Amanda Scott, a Paradox resident and a teacher at PVS, told me during my visit, “The drought here has been horrible. No water to grow the crops and no water for our livestock. My family has had to sell off half the herd. The drought has had a big impact on the ranching families. It’s been scary. It’s been very scary. And now shutting down the power plant, it’s had a huge impact.”

Hub of the Community

Vision statement: “PVS is a place where the community and the school work together for the literacy and vitality of our rural culture.”

It is no small miracle that Paradox Valley Charter School is now celebrating its 20th year. As I heard what PVS means to the town, I realized the fate and well-being of the school and the community are intertwined. As Scott told me, “The school is kind of the town’s pride and joy because people drive or send their kids here from such a distance, because the teaching is strong, and because of the community programs. It’s a meeting place, it’s a gathering place, it’s something for the community to get behind and support.” I saw exactly what she meant during my visit on November 8, when the school observed Veterans Day.

At noon, over 40 men and women gathered in the school’s multi-purpose community room. Students served lunch to the gray- and white-haired folks (including me), then sat close to the stage and listened. They were remarkably quiet and attentive throughout the ten-minute talk by Jack Lee, a Navy veteran, who spoke with pride of his time serving the country as a member of the armed services. The ceremony honored 12 veterans, mostly from the Vietnam War. I found it a privilege to witness a community event combining themes of civics, patriotism, and sacrifice while bringing three generations together in a moving and important way.

This ceremony was an example of how the school is more than just a school. Several teachers shared a sentiment voiced by preschool teacher Kelly Bouwkamp: Along with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Paradox, “[The school] is the hub of this area. Other than the Mormon church, this is where the community gathers. Whether they have family here or not, they come in droves to our events.”

There are other examples, too. Early in the charter school’s existence, it began to double as the town library. It is now official: the Paradox Community Library, which is accessed through the first door on the right as you enter the school, is part of the Montrose Regional Library District. It is open to all on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons. Furthermore, librarian Raquel Schultz hosts a book club each month, a crafting group of eight or so women, and a healthy-living discussion



including recipes, tips for good health, and other information. Most of the citizens attending these events are not parents. Schultz emphasized that “It gets people out. The social life matters, it brings everyone together.”

The library’s primary purpose, of course, is to serve the students. The shelves are full. Schultz, now in her seventh year working here, lavishes praise on the Montrose and Naturita libraries that forward a number of their older books to the school. As evidence, she pointed to several boxes that she was still unpacking—more books to catalogue and add to the shelves.

Small Classes, Individual Attention – and a Parent Contract

The central role PVS plays in the community would not be possible if it had not become a successful school these past two decades, one that deserved its place in the West End School District. As principal Denise Perritt told me, “Parents like the small class size, the arts focus. And we have consistently strong academic data.” PVS has only failed to receive the highest rating on Colorado’s School Performance Framework (SPF) one time since 2010. On the 2017-18 SPF, the school earned an especially high 82.9 percent of the available points.

To guide instruction PVS depends most of all on STAR Reading, Math, and Early Literacy Assessments given each quarter. These are aligned with Colorado’s academic standards and provide immediate feedback on how students are doing. What is most striking is how PVS uses the data. According to teacher Sarah Cooper, “Following quarterly assessments, I meet with each student privately and show them their progress. We discuss where they are, and they make personal goals. Reports are sent home to families, but also discussed at

parent/teacher conferences. PVS provides an afterschool club called Power Hour. Any student performing below grade level is expected to attend Power Hour. With this expectation, students know at each quarter they can test in or out, depending on their STAR scores.”

I see this same commitment in the school’s Parent Commitment to Excellence Contract, which parents must sign when students enroll. It outlines the need to place a student on an “academic contract” if standards are not being met. For the first quarter this year, 19 students received after-school tutoring though Power Hour. By the second quarter, the number requiring this extra help had dropped to 10 students.

While PVS seems to follow no specific educational model, it features small, multi-age classes and exceptional individual attention. Teachers plan classwork around the needs of each individual. I saw this individualized attention on display in Mrs. Cooper’s classroom, where most students were working on separate assignments. As a guide for the curriculum, the school looks to Accelerated Reader for English and now uses Singapore Math. Teachers believe the new math program has already made a difference. In 2018, the school’s math scores on the state PARCC tests exceeded the state average.

Technology can be critical to a small rural school serving secondary students. For science, the handful of high school students at PVS take online courses. Amanda Scott, the high school paraprofessional, studies each course with the students and is present to make sure they are learning the material. “I feel the courses do meet their needs,” she says. “Every student taking the online course is getting good scores, high 80s and above.”

The school’s lone senior this year takes an online English class with Colorado Mountain College.

*Sarah Cooper,
Teacher*



She is also enrolled in an online Certified Nursing Assistant course with the Technical College of the Rockies, which includes labs and clinical rounds. In addition, she works at the Basin Clinic in Naturita. PVS has even begun to offer counseling online using a service provided by the Tri-County Health Network. It is called *teletherapy*, and it enables a student to “meet” with a counselor in private.

The culture of a school is key to its success. PVS follows a research-driven, whole child philosophy called Love and Logic. Popular among educators, Love and Logic courses train parents and teachers how to use tools and techniques that help adults achieve respectful and healthy relationships with their children.

Finally, PVS is true to its mission as “an arts-focused school,” even without the resources available in larger districts. On its limited budget and staff of 14, there is, of course, no dedicated art or music teacher, but the principal teaches piano and conducts both the bluegrass band and the choir of 11 students. The middle and high school bluegrass band meets and performs regularly. The school hosted a fall concert performed by professional musicians. After the concert, the musicians stayed to run workshops for the band students. One of the highlights for the bluegrass band (and the school) came in 2007 when it was selected to represent Colorado and play at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. That’s right, a band from a small charter school in a remote town, on stage, at the center of national power. Remarkable.

PVS designated the four school days before the December holiday to be “Arts Week.” Students rotated through art projects creating items they might wish to give as Christmas presents or donate to the school to sell for the school’s benefit.

The Intangibles of a Close-knit School

I would be remiss to speak only of academic programs in trying to reflect what you sense in the hallways, on the playground, or over meals at PVS. Equally important are the family atmosphere and the intangibles of a close-knit school: friendliness, respect, and trust. I felt these qualities strongly when I sat down to talk with most every adult in the building.

“I think the size of the student population is wonderful,” Amanda Scott told me. “We can relate to everyone and have conversations,” she said.

Deb Hughes, a math paraprofessional in her sixth year at the school, found it telling that a number of families in Naturita and Norwood now send their children out to Paradox each morning. “It makes for a long day,” she said. That may be an understatement. The first bus stop for the Norwood/Redvale Route is at 7:15 a.m. “The little bus,” as it is known, does not arrive at PVS until 8:25 a.m. After school, the bus leaves at 4:50 p.m. to reach its final stop at 6:00 p.m. Christina Wilt,



teacher for grades 2 and 3, is the bus driver. She is also a Norwood resident. The bus remains at her home each night.

Hughes pointed to three strengths that explain why the school is so well-regarded: “I feel like this school is a little more focused on ... respect for one another, and respect for the staff; a strong faculty; and for scholastic reasons. We do everything we possibly can to help our students succeed and feel success.” The small class size, she added, is a key to this success. PVS makes a strong commitment to the well-regarded Love and Logic model—another reason, I am sure, for the respectful behavior and close relationships I observe throughout my day at the school.

“Financially, it’s a tough place to be,” Hughes continued, “but people tend to pull together more to help each other.” Middle school teacher Katy Robertson echoed this, saying how grateful she is “to work in a school where everyone steps up.... We’ve developed a lot of trust.”

A school of this size is not for everyone. One factor behind the ups and downs in enrollment can be that at some point students feel the need for the larger school setting “in town.” And yet, that “social scene” is not appealing to all. For some, the academics, the arts, and/or the size of PVS create a better fit. As Denise Perritt

told me, “We have students who feel accepted here. [It’s] fun to see them come out of their shells and become their own person.”

Amanda Scott can walk her daughter to school (she lives across the street)—one reason perhaps that she is so impressed by the effort of some families to get their children to PVS. Parents appear to be choosing PVS even when they have closer options available. She believes they are doing so “because of the quality of education and the dedication of the staff.”

One of the Norwood parents is Brian Coker, whom I met at the school while he was spending the morning with his daughter. He and his wife brought her to PVS “because we heard good things about the school, its good reputation.” He was attracted to the school’s focus on the arts. He also likes its small size.

Several parents spoke of previous school settings for their children that had been disappointing. Teacher Kelly Bouwkamp’s two children attend PVS. “I wanted them to be met where they were at ... if they excelled in reading but needed extra help in math.” She was eager to find a school that could make those adjustments—and PVS does.

*Amanda Scott,
Teacher and
parent*



Parent and PVS board president Veronica “Skitter” Jones listed three critical reasons why her son graduated the previous spring: “the small class size, the devotion of the team, the Power Hour.” She deeply appreciates how PVS made accommodations for her son. When he came to the school, she said, he could hardly ask for help. But teachers “made all the concessions he needed.” One of those components involved understanding how essential music had become to keeping him engaged with his studies. But it’s more than her child, she added. “I’ve seen other kids who were not at grade level, and they get caught up.”

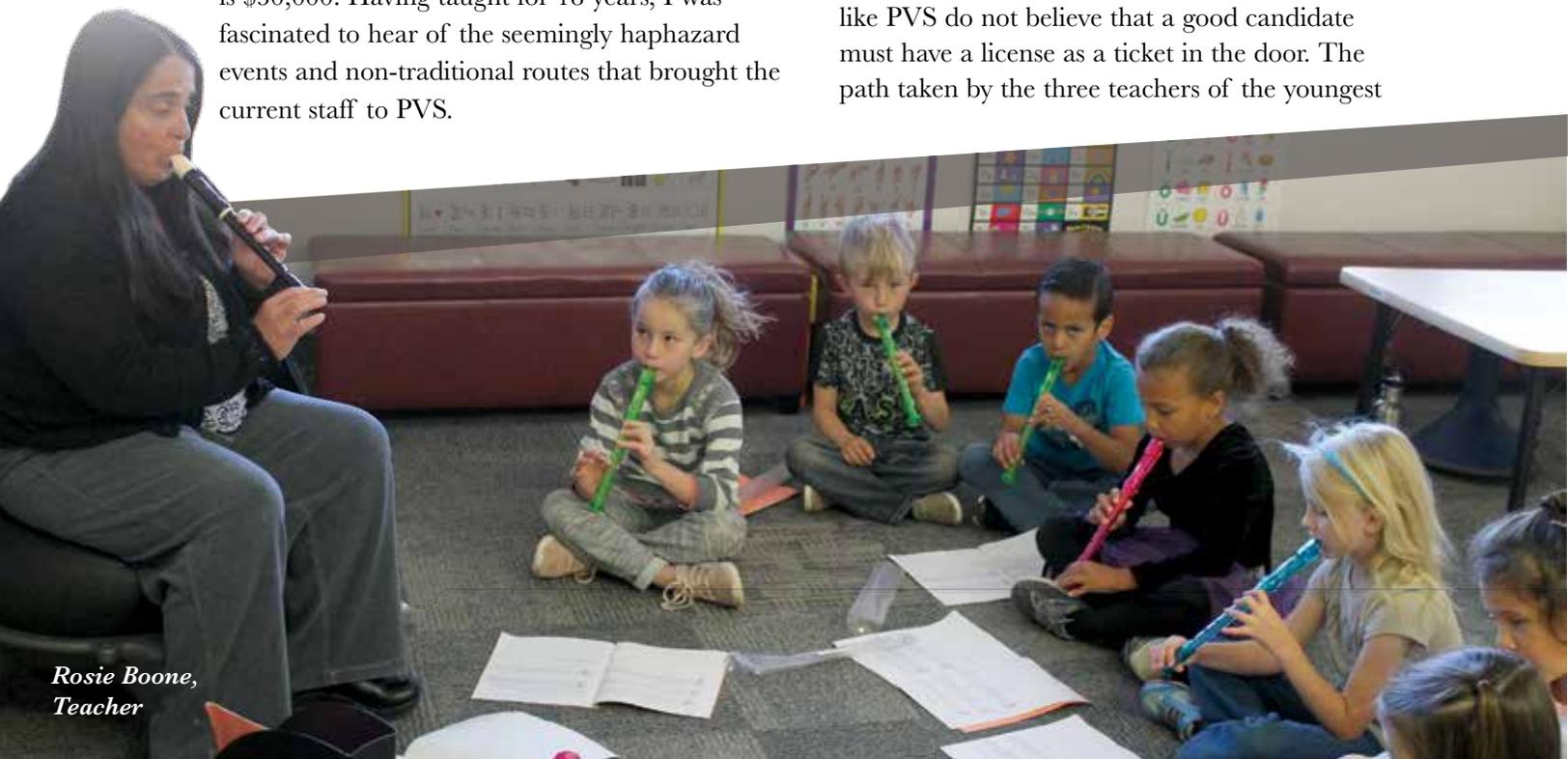
Attracting and Keeping a Strong Staff in a Small Rural School

As teachers and the quality of their work with students are the main reason for a school’s success, it is critical to ask what Paradox Valley Charter School has done to hire and hold onto its faculty. Understanding this component of the school’s work is especially important in light of the recent attention to the teacher shortage reaching “crisis” proportions in our state, most glaringly in rural communities. Starting pay at Paradox Valley is \$30,000. Having taught for 18 years, I was fascinated to hear of the seemingly haphazard events and non-traditional routes that brought the current staff to PVS.

Such as: You begin as a tutor at the school because Paradox is home, either through family or marriage. (Amanda Scott’s five hours a week soon became 27 hours.) You work in a corporate setting gathering data, and then you become an optician, before realizing, at a certain age, that tutoring is what you feel called to do (Deb Hughes). Or you discover, after searching for the best school for your child, that PVS is a good fit, and after you volunteer in the summer program, it becomes a good fit for you professionally, and you join the staff (Christina Wilt).

Equally important, these are teachers for whom *place*—attachment to the land, a sense of belonging to a beautiful part of the country, etc.—is vital. Rosie Boone, the longest-serving full-time member of the teaching staff, captured this sentiment for several colleagues in saying that “It takes certain kinds of people who want to be here, [who want] to live here. I get to live in a place like Old La Sal [just over the Utah border] and have a job. I feel so lucky that I get to do what I love to do, and I get to do it here.”

A charter school’s freedom to hire men and women without a state teaching license is a chief reason PVS has gathered such a committed and capable faculty. Perhaps equally important is the state’s alternative licensure program. Many charter schools like PVS do not believe that a good candidate must have a license as a ticket in the door. The path taken by the three teachers of the youngest



Rosie Boone,
Teacher

students are fairly typical for this school, though hardly the “traditional route.”

Kelly Bouwkamp said that “once we find someone” who can do this work and wants to be here, “we find a way” to help them stay, grow, and get that license. It was true for her. Bouwkamp graduated from Nucla High School, so this region is home. In 2013 she was “hired on the spot,” *with* an early childhood degree, but *without* a license. She became the preschool teacher (though like most on the staff, she has multiple roles). She is now taking courses through the University of Northern Colorado to earn her teaching degree.

Rosie Boone had a background in outdoor education when she began working for a school in Moab, Utah, with a strong outdoor and arts focus. In 2004 she met Renee Owen and learned of PVS. When a position opened up, she came to Paradox to teach. Boone has made the arts a vital part of her teaching. Visit her cheerful, colorful K-1 classroom and you believe it. She obtained her alternative license through the program managed by the Uncompahgre Board of Cooperative Educational Services (UnBOCES) in Telluride.

Christina Wilt was working full-time and was trying to homeschool her son, but saw that she “couldn’t do it all.” She “had heard a lot of really good things” about PVS, so she enrolled her son in the school. Over the next five years, she became involved with volunteering in his classroom, then substitute teaching, then helping with the summer program—and then to a full-time job teaching the 2nd/3rd grade class. Now she also takes part in the alternative licensure program through UnBOCES.

Principal Perritt notes that this year, four of five teachers with their own classrooms are either licensed or are in the process of earning their license.

Leadership, Staff Shake-up, and “Going Forward”

If happenstance or serendipity played a role in bringing this staff to PVS, that is also true for the new principal, Dr. Denise Perritt (PhD, College of William and Mary). For over 30 years, Perritt had been an educator in Virginia. She most recently served as an associate professor at James Madison University (JMU), where she taught graduate and PhD programs in leadership. She even wrote a PhD program in strategic leadership and opened the School of Strategic Leadership at JMU.

Perritt and her husband began to spend their summers in southeastern Utah. After she retired from James Madison in 2015, they moved to La Sal, Utah, permanently. Before long, Perritt had joined PVS. As vice-principal, she worked closely with Jon Orris and Debbie Irish, the school’s administrative assistant, for three years. This fall, when the board decided to let Orris and six other staff members go, Perritt was asked to lead the school. An uninformed observer might say that after such an impressive career in higher education, she is overqualified for such a role. My visit, though, told me that right now PVS needs all of Perritt’s

Dr. Denise Perritt, Principal



experience and skills as the school navigates a difficult period.

During school year 2017- 2018, enrollment at PVS ballooned to 78 students—its highest ever, and nearing the maximum allowed (84) in the 2014 charter renewal contract with the district; however, the school opened this fall with 21 on staff and only 55 students. During the summer, two large families, including seven children, moved out-of-state; some students chose to return to a district-run school (for various reasons: the bus trip making it a long day; the desire to participate in competitive sports; and, the desire to have a larger school experience); and, still others chose homeschooling. Classroom enrollments varied from 7-12 students and the board had little choice but to make cuts. In such a close-knit community, the pain was deep.

Perritt was left with a staff of 14 to lead and a school serving 41 students. During my visit, I sensed acceptance of the new normal, although some resentments lingered. One community member said, “Quite a few parents ... are distressed.” Perhaps this stress stems from the departure of Orris, who was admired for his fundraising success and his ten-year commitment to the school.

The staff spoke with me of their resolve about going forward. Amanda Scott expressed hope that the upset over the cuts is receding: “Things are on the rise,” she told me. “At first there was a lot of pushback, but now

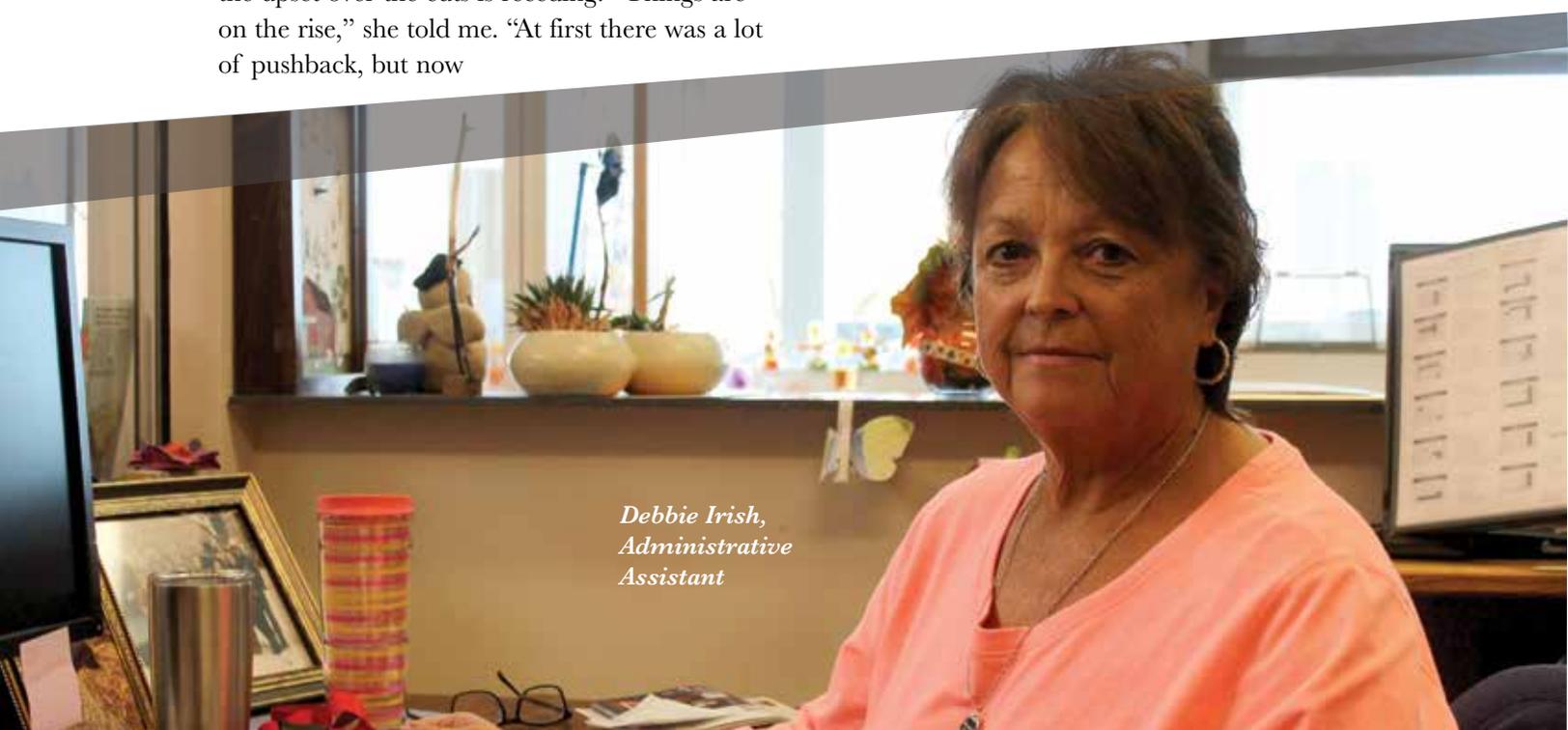
we’ve had a lot more dialogue.” Christina Wilt felt encouraged to see the way her colleagues “kept coming to work ... having their priorities in the right place.”

Rosie Boone, like Wilt, is proud of how teaching and learning have not suffered. She was struck by the level of intense feelings in the community over the changes. But with optimism she said, “No matter what their feelings are they care about the school and want it to be here... I think most people are glad it’s here.”

I heard a shared hope for fewer big swings in the student population. The school has had under 50 students before, a couple of teachers noted. To find over two-dozen students in one classroom last year felt uncomfortable for some, as if something was being lost from the earlier vision of the school.

Resolve

As principal, Perritt exhibits a similar resolve. She is fully aware that in a small town she is still, to most in the community, a late arrival. As a result, she makes every effort to respect how the community carries a sense of ownership. “It’s basically *their* school,” she says. She and Debbie Irish work with the staff on ways to improve communication and, they hope, trust with the community.



*Debbie Irish,
Administrative
Assistant*

Perritt needed to create a new 2018-19 budget in light of the smaller-than-anticipated enrollment. At the Paradox Valley Charter School board meeting on the evening of my visit, that revised budget was approved. It showed a \$40,000 deficit—one the school board and Perritt believe they can cover through fundraising and reserve funds. For such a small school, of course, it will be a tough challenge to balance the books by year end.

Another challenge was recently met: In January families, staff, and the Paradox community were thrilled to learn the PVS high school was renewed by the West End School District. Back in 2014 grades 9-12 were added on a five year provisional basis; now, PVS is chartered as a PreK-12 school for the first time in its history. Prior to adding the high school, once 8th graders graduated from PVS and headed off to Nucla High, younger students in the family often left too, enrolling at Naturita Elementary. As Rosie Boone put it, “[The high school] has created more options for families to stay if they want to.” Perritt and her staff, now confident the school can continue to serve students in all grades, expect this will lead to greater enrollment stability.

Heart of Town

Paradox is surely not the only small town in Colorado trying to hold on to its school. It is also not the only community eager to offer families another option, even inside an already small district. Some will say the numbers and finances do not work. The PVS story reveals both the trials, and the possibilities, when choice comes to a rural area.

As I reflect on my visit, I think again of intangibles—of the *pride* in what a little school has done to enrich life in this remote community, of the men and women in town finding a way to pull together for the benefit of the kids. And of the *determination* that brought this school back to life. All these things came together to create a school where we see kids deeply engaged in learning, teachers who know their students well, and an exceptionally warm and positive school climate.

I am convinced this pride and determination will endure, as will the school.

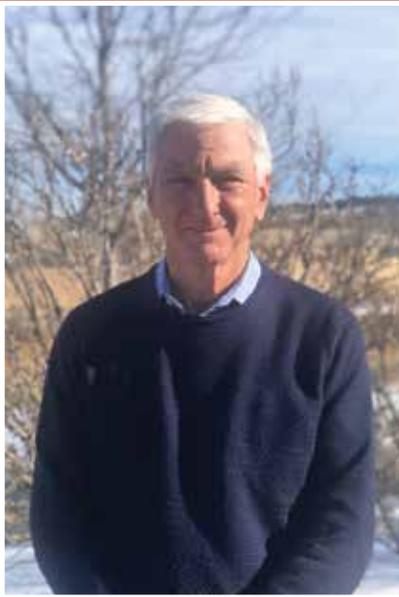
During my stay at a hotel in Naturita, one man described PVS as “an economic and social anchor for the community. It’s the only pulse they’ve got going.”

The metaphor again seems apt.

What will keep a tiny school alive and well? Perhaps more importantly, what would be lost without it? It is the same question we ask of our small rural communities struggling to survive.

I felt the town’s “pulse” during my day at Paradox Valley Charter School. What a pleasure it was to be back again, to see a new generation coming together each morning to laugh and learn, and to hear the happy sound of children’s voices as they stepped through the front door—there in the heart of town.





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Photos provided by William Perritt.



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