



## Colorado Charter Schools Annual Conference

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Denver Marriott Tech Center



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# Shredquity and Belonging: Driving school culture, enrollment, and student achievement forward

Philip Werline, Head of School  
The Juniper School

Larkspur  
February 26, 2026 | 1:30 – 2:30 PM  
Hot Topics



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# The Juniper School

# Shredquity and Belonging

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# The Juniper School

[Intro Video Link](#)

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# School Background

- The Juniper School was founded by a group of local parents and opened in the 2016-2017 school year in Durango, Colorado
- The school opened as a K-5 with plans to expand to a K-8 as a permanent location was found

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# Early Educational Philosophy

- Juniper early philosophy was driven by parent input and 100% parent board
  - Montessori (not a licensed Montessori school)
  - Mixed-aged classrooms
  - Community based electives—students spent much of the day walking to electives
  - Inquiry cycles
  - Individual student learning contracts

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# Early Educational Philosophy

- Daily parent welcome hour
- Individualized curriculum
- Student breaks were given as requested
- Authentic/ real life assessments
- Student choice

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# Early Challenges

Lack of a cohesive philosophy led to:

- High staff turnover
- Operating with a budget deficit-spending on random items
- Priority Improvement within one year
- Heavy advertising as an SEL priority school led to overwhelming mental health staff

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# Early Challenges

Lack of organizational oversight:

- Operating with a budget deficit—lack of equitable staff pay
- Office of Civil Rights complaints due to service minutes not being met
- Lack of permanent location

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# COVID Year Challenges

- New permanent location was found (former CenturyLink service building) but needed extensive renovation.
- Drastic drop in student enrollment
- Head of School and the school parted ways in September of 2020—new HOS hired in the spring.
- District concerns—what does Juniper do that other schools do not

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# Facility Challenges



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# What Did I Get Myself Into?



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# Community Feedback

Ask the community:

- What do we do well?
- What needs more support
- What can be cut?

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# Staff Feedback

- What do we do well?
  - **Knowing individual students**
- What needs more support
  - **Curriculum, all teachers make their own schedule, community electives not working, too many students requiring SEL support (product of the system), data**
- What can be cut?
  - **Parents have too much say, parent welcome hour**

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# Parent Feedback

- What do we do well?
  - **We know their child**
- What needs more support
  - **More field trips, new campus is all concrete, concerns with academics, lack of electives, student behaviors**

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# Using Feedback

- New mission and vision statement
- Select a curriculum that cohesively supports the school's vision
  - **EL (Expeditionary Learning) K-8**
- Rework the school budget to align with new vision

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# Initial Challenges

- Ending Parent Welcome Hour
  - **Parents and board members were VERY upset—some even pulled their students**
- Some teachers struggled with giving up autonomy with a standard curriculum and curriculum
  - **Most relied on TPT**
  - **Classroom teachers created their own schedule and specialists had to work around them**

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# Overcoming Challenges

Lean into the high leverage points:

- Priority Improvement
- OCR complaints
- Budget deficit

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# What do we do?

What is sustainable from a financial and HR capacity?

What is a strength of our community we can lean into?

What do parents want for their students?

Huge push to be a dual language school from the community.

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# Reframing

Staff were encouraged to see challenges as opportunities

- Industrial wall was turned into a bouldering wall
- Overgrown, weeded, “retention pond” area was turned into an area for walking trails and snowshoeing
- Carport was turned into a stage and outdoor gym
- Concrete parking lot became a skatepark









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# Look for Small, Organic Growth

- Students starting to skateboard and bike at recess
  - **Noticed not all students have bikes—students started to complain**
  - **Won grants for All Kids Bike and Gray Matter safety equipment**
  - **Featured in local paper**
- Outdoor field trips were the #1 request of parents on surveys
- Ft. Lewis College has an outdoor ed program—Juniper regularly hosts these students

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# Student Needs

Lack of engagement, avoidance of work, poor attendance, low confidence, social isolation, and a lack of agency.

Lack of a connection to a broader community.

Some do not feel comfortable or safe at home.

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# Teacher Perspectives

Sometimes the students who need us most, are the toughest to reach as a teacher.

What is needed is something beyond the classroom, where students can be in a learning environment that looks and feels different and that allows a fresh start.

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# Key Question

How can we increase attendance, engagement, and agency, such that students take risks on their own behalf to learn?

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# Shredventurecation

Skate Club emerged to connect with one student on the hypothesis that an emotional connection might increase the student's desire to come to school and to learn in the classroom.

A new school culture and language emerged.

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# Student Feedback

Some of these students have experienced significant life and family events this year that would derail the learning of most.

When in the flow of Skate Club, these same students described a sense of relief, escape, and joy. They certainly look that way to the researchers.

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# Student Feedback

- “It makes me feel so magical whenever you're at the top of the hill and you get on a skateboard and then you go down, it just feels like you're flying to me, like the air rushing past your face. It just feels so good...I feel when you go out to recess after class, you're kind of just down, but then after [skate club], I feel like you've just reset it. It's that perfect amount of energy stealing, and it's that perfect amount of dopamine in your brain. “

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# Student Feedback

One of the most powerful benefits of Skate Club is witnessing friendships emerge, even amongst students who previously were in conflict.

Seeing someone's talent outside of academics gives students who may be behind in the classroom a chance to shine. It breaks down the barriers of social cliques in young adolescents. It levels the playing field as everyone is 'new' and trying new things.

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# Student Feedback

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# New Student Driven Culture

- Show failure as part of the process to success
- When anyone crashes, rush over to support them
- Democratize the skating park feature set-up and design
- Encourage students to teach each other
- Have clear examples of low-risk skating skills
- Reinforce growth and prompt reflection

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# Financial Challenges

- \$500 starter fund from PTO
- Designed stickers that were sold in the community
- Skateboarding communities are everywhere, and everyone in the community knows someone who has a board they are not using.
- Grants—Lots of organizations are willing to fund ideas that are out of the box.



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# Managing Risk

- Injury rates for skateboarders are lower than for everyday sports like basketball, and below historical rates for common playground equipment
- Helmets and wrist guards are mandatory, even just to stand on the board.
- Thorough parent waiver that is screened by legal and insurance
- Common sense

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# Managing Risk

Once Skate Club norms and community have been established, it is possible to quickly train on-duty recess monitors to supervise skaters. They need to know basic safety rules and specific do's and don'ts especially related to the terrain features.

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# Managing Risk

Key safety protocol phrases are: 'Notice people's lines', 'Predict where they are going', and 'wait your turn'. This etiquette builds community - you have to see what everyone else is trying to do in order to remain safe. Waiting your turn leads to students witnessing each other's successes when landing tricks, which leads to cheers and smiles, which creates a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and shared success.

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# Continue Growing

Students build boards from parts, and design them themselves, can produce an incredible sense of ownership in the equipment and can spark pride in having their individual boards

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# Continue Building...

Skate Club grew and evolved into Shredventurecation

- Reworked schedule so ALL students had one outdoor ed block every third week
- Purchased our own 14 passenger activity bus and van so all classes could take impromptu field trips
  - All staff can drive
- Parents became more involved
- 5-8 grades have weekly trips



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# Continue Building...

Teachers began to make connections in academic work

- Field trips have become field work
- Student designed expeditions linked to text
- Lots of pictures of students engaged in outdoor ed through out the school drives parents' excitement on tours

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# In Conclusion...

- From Priority Improvement to Performance in one year
- Outstanding TLCC scores
- High staff and student retention
- Doubled enrollment leading to financial stability (purchased a new bus with cash)

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# In Conclusion...

Setting up a Skate Club is a low-cost way to provide a big impact. It builds community and helps establish a sense of belonging for a generation that is greatly at risk for mental health related struggles. It increases confidence. It motivates students to come to school, helping to address the massive issue of lack of attendance. Friendships are created and conflict avoided.

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# In Conclusion...

”It's fun and it's challenging, but it's not just physical movement, it's also mind movement. You got to focus on what you're doing, where you're going, making sure you don't wreck, and that kind of helps me calm down a lot...I just feel like skateboarding is one of the main things that, for me personally, it clears my mind and if I'm ever upset or sad or angry, skateboarding and knowing that I can skateboard just makes me be able to calm down and focus more on one thing and it just clears my mind from everything else.”

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