



How Rural Colorado Parents Created A 'No Politics' Public School In Just One Year

These highly skilled parents came together to not just solve their own kids' education needs but offer a high-quality education to families in their glorious Colorado mountain town.



By Joy Pullmann
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Merit Academy of Woodland Park, Colorado, opened on Aug. 23 in a buoyant ceremony featuring American flags and a teenage rider riding a dun horse while waving the school flag.

The new public school went from idea to reality in just one year, opening K-8 with plans to grow into high school. As a classical school, it offers a low-screen, high-relationship environment and a focus on creative and critical thinking through careful attention to classic works and traditional approaches to math and science. These are things parents wanted that weren't available through the Woodland Park School District, which like many in the nation has become computer-centered over the last several years.

“Our mentors said, ‘You’re crazy, you can’t get this done in a year.’ We said, ‘Oh yeah, watch us,’” said Merit Academy founding board member John Dill, a retired Air Force Space Command lieutenant colonel who now works as a U.S. military contractor.

It surely has much to do with the school’s founding board. Its five members also include the wife of a couple who have started five rock-climbing gyms, a therapist father of five who treats PTSD, the wife in a couple of software developers who have also started their own companies, and the wife of a married pair of former Air Force judge assistant generals (JAGs) who now work in other legal posts. Dill and his wife are so committed to the concept of a great public school accessible to all in their community that they stopped homeschooling their twin eighth-grade daughters for it. So did others on their board, some hired as Merit teachers, and some who have enrolled their kids. The school offers Friday classes and other programming to homeschoolers as part-time students.

Homeschooling was working perfectly well for his family, Dill said, they just felt they could do more than take care of their own education needs — they could also help others. As patriots, they needed to.

“I’m a rural kid from the mountains of Maine looking at the rural kids in the mountains of Colorado and saying, ‘This isn’t right, they need to be educated too,’” Dill said. “If our nation is ever to get better, we need better schools.”



Image courtesy John Dill.

Gwynne Pekron, PhD, the school’s dean of development, is an organizational psychologist with expertise in project management. She estimates it’s taken 9,000 volunteer hours to get Merit’s doors open. It’s

been “a year with stress, strife, and frustration,” Dill said — and jubilation.

One day Dill received a text message telling him where to find everyone to join a teacher training session. The text said: “Follow the sound of the laughter.” To get to that laughter, and to hear it in their students’ voices, Merit’s community of parents and volunteers has hiked a rocky mountain trail.

The Pros and Cons of Living In a Rural Mountain Town

One of Merit’s challenges is also a strength: Woodland Park’s remoteness and small size. The town of 7,800 sits in Teller County, population 25,000. It’s adjacent to Pike’s Peak and nearly surrounded by 1.1 million acres of Pike National Forest.

Teller County is just west of Colorado Springs, population nearly a half-million. Colorado Springs constantly ranks on “best places to live” lists. Teller County residents love the gorgeous views and nearby city possibilities, combined with the lack of city congestion and taxes. Here’s a shot of the Rockies in Teller County between Colorado Springs and Teller’s Cripple Creek.



This glorious remoteness has also posed challenges for the town and school. One was finding a building for nearly 200 students plus teachers and support staff.

Merit eventually settled into a temporary location at a local church for its first month while a former hardware store and Quizno's storefront is remodeled to suit their needs. "Our dean is working at a desk in the hallway right now because there are no more classrooms," Dill noted.

When board members looked at the empty storefront— one of the few available buildings in town large enough for a school — they wondered where the kids could do recess. In the parking lot?

The local Catholic priest got wind and came over to offer his church's athletic field right next door. "The priest is from Poland. He said, 'The education of the youth is the only way we're going to save this country; you use my athletic field for your recess,'" Dill said. The parents got together to build a staircase over the school's retaining wall so kids could reach the field to play.

“Parents are like, ‘I don’t care where you have this, have it in a park, our kids are telling us they’re learning,’” Pekron said.

We Love Our Town and Want to Make It Better

Another obstacle Merit’s board and families also hope will come around is the local school board, which denied their application for opening as a charter school. Charters are independently run public schools, and in Colorado they have to get permission to operate from their local district, a common roadblock for charter formation.

Pekron was a member of the Woodland Park School District (WPSD) board before she resigned to work for Merit a few months ago. Her four children now attend the school. Because as a child she attended private school due to Saint Louis public schools’ chronic poor performance, she sees school choice as completely compatible with her many years working in traditional public schools as a counselor and school board member.

“Why not have options?” she asked. “I mean, everything has an option wherever you go. Why don’t we have options for schools?” She says community members have been voicing to her their desires for options for five or six years, especially as the local district increasingly moved students online.

Computer-heavy learning made school a struggle for Mary Sekowski’s eighth-grade son, Nolan, even before lockdowns: “You get a group of middle school boys together and they’re supposed to be on their Chromebooks watching YouTube videos on the solar system, they’re going to goof off,” she said. “So they goof off and they get in trouble.” She said while computer-driven instruction might be a great fit for some kids, her social son has been coming alive with the class discussions teachers facilitate at Merit.

The online platform WPSD schools use, called Summit, is also politically controversial. It is funded by leftist billionaires Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates and has been dogged with privacy, politicization, and screen-time concerns from parents nationwide. Keeping politics out of school is also important to many families who have chosen Merit.

“Elsewhere there is a lot of politics and the deciding of the classes and the curriculum,” said board president Nicole Waggoner, the rock-climbing entrepreneur. “People up here are sick of that. You have a community with a certain set of values that don’t feel like their values are being represented in their kids’ educational choices.”

Pekron called herself “a parent who prefers that education is not political, of any kind” and said that personal commitment is one of the reasons she supports the school.



A color sergeant prepares for the flag salute on Merit Academy's first day of school, Aug. 23, 2021. Photo courtesy John Dill.

An Independent Voice Saves the School

After WPSD denied their application in December 2020, the board made a Hail Mary pass to a Colorado school-choice lawyer who donated his

expertise. Brad Miller told them about a little-known Colorado law that authorizes boards of cooperative education services, or BOCES, to contract out education services. That means it could work like an independent charter school authorizer, which many states offer because local districts deny charter applications so often.

Independent authorizers and mechanisms like BOCES offer states multiple advantages, Miller noted, not least of which is parents more invested in public schools and therefore more willing to raise teachers' salaries. Parent choice is also a major driver of new school models, which also increase voter satisfaction and improve tax bases as states and localities compete for working families. "If we turn off that spigot and there's no more creativity, we all lose," Miller noted.

Despite years of a thriving charter school market in Colorado, increased Democrat control has cut charter approvals to a trickle, Miller said, not necessarily because Democrats are always against charter schools — President Obama is a famous supporter — but because Democrats reflexively consider school districts political allies and districts don't always align with parents. But school districts can move less muscle and money up to Democrat politicians if fewer families provide their children because they don't like the schools. Allowing the "safety release valve" of choice for families keeps more of them in the system. That keeps the money flowing.

The Merit board retooled their application, sent it to a BOCES, and at that board's next meeting in April 2021, they were approved. This gave them four months to hire everyone, find a building, and buy everything they needed: curricula, desks, books, computers, and more.

There's No Life Without Children

Approximately 2,300 school-age children attend WPSD schools, say federal statistics. That means in its first year, the K-8 Merit Academy attracted something like one-tenth of the district's enrollment, with about 186 enrolled students and 65 more on their waiting list.

Census data shows some 800-900 school-age children live in Teller County without enrolling in district schools. Some homeschool or attend Christian schools. Many also drive "down the pass" for charter and other schools.

That's because, said Sekowski, a local realtor, schools are the "first question" for moving families. In 2019, before lockdowns devastated achievement everywhere, 48 percent of WPSD students "met or exceeded expectations" on the state's English test. That number was 31 percent for math. Numbers like that make for "difficult conversations" for a realtor who loves her town and wants people to move there, she said.

"Communities are, they're complex building blocks, and if we have one key piece like this missing, the rest of it falls down," Sekowski said in a phone interview right after picking up her two kids from school. "If we get families leaving because they're tired of driving their kids up and down the pass every day, that's a problem. ... We all love our community, we want Woodland Park to be healthy and thriving. So if we're able to work together to offer the choices parents desire for their children's education, we're all going to be better off."

Federal data also shows Teller County facing demographic decline, also known as population aging, like the entire United States. The median age in the county is 48, ten years older than the national median of 38 and the Colorado median of 37.

All people are equally valuable no matter their age, but children and the retired both use infrastructure while lending less effort to its upkeep than working-age adults. That's just how the life cycle works. It's those in the

prime of life mostly keeping the lights on in a town: working as nurses and doctors; keeping roads, street lights, and water mains working; running the local hardware store; and teaching children. Good schools attract workers with these crucial skills, not to mention a strong tax base.

Merit is even attracting the unborn: Pekin said one family recently signed up for Merit's waiting list six days after their child emerged from his mother's womb.

A Real Investment in the Future

When lockdowns hit, the Waggoners' service-based businesses were entirely shut down. That plus her oldest son coming home for school "really put education at the forefront of things for me," she said, as she found her son doing things in kindergarten he'd already learned two years earlier.

Then a friend mentioned some people were discussing a classical school, and Waggoner sent an email through their website. They snapped her right up. At her kitchen table with her newborn — their "honorary board member" — these five couples spent countless late nights putting Merit together, experiencing despair and triumph. The climb isn't over yet. Not even close.

"Every day, we see the joy on people's faces, we see how hard our teachers are working, and it's all in the back of your mind you think, 'We still need money, we don't have enough money,'" Pekron said. Finding it is a big part of her job.

Unlike for inner-city charters, few startup grants exist for rural charter or private schools. For 200 kids, schools need something like \$100,000 just for curriculum. Throw in construction, furniture, computers for a language lab, and in year one you need at least \$400,000 and for year

two you need \$150,000, Pekron estimated. Their BOCES gave them a “very generous” startup loan, but so far, that’s about it.

With a goal to ultimately double to a maximum of 512 students — for two classes in each grade — Merit will soon need a larger building. And that takes even more mountains of cash.

“We are not in an urban community,” Pekron said, sighing. “We do not have philanthropists left and right who would bestow a bequest upon a small contract charter school. ...All the way from spring it’s writing to every foundation, philanthropist, donor, and it’s all, ‘Nope you don’t meet this requirement over here.’”

They’ve come this far. Can these social entrepreneurs make the impossible happen again to keep their dream alive? You can help by supporting Merit on their website.

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