

Building Bridges Where None Existed

Building & Inspiration: May 2026

As a teacher candidate majoring in elementary education, I spend a lot of time studying teaching practices, strategies, and innovative pedagogies. Teachers should strive to honor their students, bringing the whole child into the lesson in order to bridge what learners know to what they want to know. Teachers know that as the guide to new information, their relationship with students aids in their access to the content. All of these concepts that come up in my teacher preparation coursework, but I suppose I knew these principles before I entered my own classroom. These principles have been modeled to me profusely over the course of my rural education, and from the perspective of a future teacher, I look back to my educators and am blown away by the overwhelming evidence of my teacher's craft and care.

Julie Hoff is one of those teachers who consistently showed me what it means to be a powerful teacher. In name, Julie was my middle school science teacher, and she was my upper division math teacher in high school. In reality, Mrs. Hoff is a driving force in our rural community, a mentor, a safe place, a second mother to many, and much more. In short, Julie is very focused on building and maintaining relationships with students by paying mind to the holistic student experience.

Very often in rural schools, students get involved in multiple and various sports, clubs, activities, and leadership experiences. With a limited number of students overall, teams and organizations rely on student ability to multitask and work through overlapping schedules. In SoRoCo (the name of the school district I attended), the teachers were experts at adjusting the class to the needs of their students. Whether it be accommodating timing of tests for sports/band/FFA trips or trusting students to complete work outside of class and providing resources that would aid in that endeavor,

teachers supported students and encouraged them to be involved in our community.

Mrs. Hoff is exceptional at supporting students' extracurriculars, and she does not just show up physically. I remember once watching Julie do the statistics book for the basketball team while separately keeping track of the points students in her college algebra class had scored. After the game, she gave the class extra credit on their next quiz for all the points score outside of class. Another great example of Mrs. Hoff taking care of the whole student was during my senior year of high school when Julie had texted our group chat and said to bring workout clothes to class because a group of Army recruiters were visiting that day. Instead of our typical college calculus class, we met on the football field and participated in all the physical activity challenges. We got to learn from the recruiters and broaden our perspective while placing an emphasis on the value of our physical health; once again showing Mrs. Hoff's commitment to the whole student.

In my studies of education, the practices Julie displayed naturally are beyond the pedagogy we learn about. Julie is innovative, effective, and deeply committed to her relationships. Parents and administration trust her to teach their children the rock cycle AND how to solve derivatives. The community trusts her to fill in as a coach in a sports practice AND for her to make academic schedules. Parents trust that their kids can go over to her house and be safe, loved, and well-fed. Of course, the trust does not go one way; Julie consistently pours trust into her students. She makes her room a safe place; she is a trusted adult, and a fierce advocate for her students' experiences. In this advocacy and care for the people of the community, Julie weaves trust and belonging in and outside of her classroom.

As a weaver in the community, Julie showcases what relational leadership looks like in rural spaces. Julie leads through collaboration, working with the other teachers in the school to deliver a consistent and reliable teaching experience to students. Her relationship with other educators serves her students as she goes above and beyond to collaborate across disciplines. Another attribute of Julie's strong leadership is the way she balances pushing students to work hard with supporting them in meeting challenges. In 2020, when Julie was my 8th grade science teacher and we were all navigating

learning the foundations of genetics via a zoom call, Julie did not give up, give us an online simulation, or ask us to complete busy work. She pushed us, she collaborated with other teachers to create a comprehensive project we could work on, AND she mailed each of us our favorite gum as a motivator for working on the project. Julie encourages students to learn while maintaining an attitude of caring many educators strive for. This practice is built out of love for her students and is manifested in her unmatched qualities of relational leadership.

In the balance Julie creates by pushing her students while sustaining their individuality, something beautiful happens. When youth feel known, they thrive! I never thought I would be a student built for learning calculus, yet Julie scaffolded our coursework in a way that made the content accessible for me. Almost everyday Julie would say to our class, "we can do hard things." Although I agree with her, Julie made none of this look hard. She moves through her classroom and community with kindness and ease. As I look forward to my own teaching, I will look for ways to make people feel known, connected, and wanted in my classroom. I know I can take skills that I have learned from rural educators and apply them to my current world, and I invite you to do the same: take a page from Julie Hoff, a gifted community weaver.