

# SUCCESS STORY: Inspiring Future Teachers to Pursue Theatre Education



## Support Effective Educators and School Leaders

### Theatre Educator Training at the University of Northern Colorado

When Ty Eatherton graduated from high school in 2015, he had one goal: become an influential theatre teacher like his middle and high school mentors.

In a state saturated with higher education opportunities, one educator training program stands as the jewel of the Front Range. The University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in Greeley, Colorado. Eatherton states, “UNC was—and still is—the premiere institution for theatre education in Colorado. The reputation UNC has among the theatre community at large made my choice to attend a no-brainer.”

**UNC** is a special place for theatre education in Colorado. What began as the Colorado State Normal School in 1889 has blossomed into one of the largest educator training institutions in the country. A June 2023 [Chalkbeat](#) article revealed, “The University of Northern Colorado is one of several teacher prep programs in the state to earn top grades from the National Council on Teacher Quality.” For a time, UNC’s program stood apart in a field with few other theatre education training options. While the success of UNC theatre education graduates keeps the program relevant and attractive to future educators, the university strives to remain a leader of teacher preparedness by consistently assessing and re-assessing programming and exploring ways to partner with outside organizations dedicated to the same causes.

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While I was in high school, all the student teachers who taught me were in the UNC Theatre Ed program. When I finally knew what I wanted to do with my career, I knew I had to follow in their footsteps.

- Kiera Sweeney, a six-year educator and UNC graduate

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Enter **Colorado Thespians**, a state chapter of the national Educational Theatre Association (EdTA). Its mission is to foster a thriving, vibrant and equitable cultural landscape where all can embrace the transformative power of the arts. Now in its 61st year, the organization executes several annual events for their stakeholders, namely the Colorado Thespians Educator Conference (CTEC) and the Colorado State Thespian Conference (ThesCon). At each of these conferences, educators in every stage of their career find community and professional development opportunities that work in tandem with UNC.

## The Partnership

UNC and Colorado Thespians have been aligned for thirty years, offering college credit and recertification training opportunities to educators by reducing barriers to content specific professional development by tackling both professional development and recertification at the same time. Those who attend the CTEC are eligible for both re-licensure hours through Colorado Thespians and low-cost graduate credits through the university. Likewise, educators who prepare students to participate at ThesCon, a state-wide event focused on student immersion in theatre and film, are also eligible for re-licensure hours and may be eligible for graduate credit. This two-pronged approach offers content-focused and relevant learning opportunities to theatre educators without additional strain on their time. By removing one barrier to recertification and pay scale advancement, this aspect of the partnership speaks to the goals of both organizations to support longevity and maintain a strong, statewide network of highly skilled theatre educators.

In 2024, Colorado Thespians also began offering financial assistance to existing programming to both students and educators. Due to limited data collected by the Colorado Department of Education, it is unclear what access rural and Title I students have to arts programming. However, according to a 2014 statewide survey and a 2025 report from Think 360 Arts for Learning, urban districts tend to offer more arts programming than rural districts, and music and visual arts are the most frequently offered arts subjects across all grade levels. The Colorado Thespians financial aid program aims to provide more equitable educational theatre access to rural or Title I schools that often face financial barriers in attending events based in the Denver metro area.

The financial assistance program is funded largely through outside sponsorships and vendor partnerships forged by Colorado Thespians. Information regarding the financial assistance program and other opportunities reach underserved communities through our social media and newsletter. With help from arts leaders within the Colorado Department of Education, financial aid information reaches additional parties via



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an Arts E-Newsletter distributed statewide. And finally, instructions for applying for financial assistance live on the Colorado Thespians website, giving constant access to educators or administrators curious about engaging in the application process.

In honor of their partnership, UNC professors promote Colorado Thespians discounted offerings to current undergraduate or graduate students in the theatre education program. Students who register for the annual educator conference receive two-for-one pricing. This aims to support pre-service teachers in achieving their pedagogical goals.

As UNC and Colorado Thespians work together to reduce financial barriers to quality professional development programming, their differing positions in the educational theatre landscape provide tiered support that both organizations hope support teacher retention.

Perhaps the most important communication around partnership advocacy exists within the relationships we have built. Both institutions foster ongoing partnerships with arts leaders in urban and rural districts across Colorado. Arts leaders like Laurilea “Elle” McDaniel, a career theatre educator and current Dean at High Plains School in Thompson School District north of Denver, recognize and share the value and impact of the UNC/Colorado Thespians two-tiered support system. “We should do everything possible to remove barriers—financial, geographic, and informational—” McDaniel states, “so that all students and educators, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to benefit from this transformative experience(s). When we invest in access through powerful partnerships, we invest in equity, creativity, and the future of arts education.”

## Retention Through Ongoing Support

Financial aid packages and reducing barriers to recertification and graduate credits are just two ways UNC and Colorado Thespians partner to encourage retention. Another area of focus is ongoing skill building for emerging and experienced theatre educators.

A 2024 study conducted through the UNC Theatre Educator Program surveyed recent (last five years) bachelor’s level theatre education graduates now leading various school-based programs. The study included administrators who have hired and/or worked with novice theatre educators in recent years. Study responses helped inform UNC and other theatre education programs about strengths and weaknesses in curriculum and pedagogy. A main takeaway of the survey was educators feeling a lack of readiness in instructing technical theatre and effectively developing those skills in their students.

That’s when Colorado Thespians stepped up to help fill the gap. The Educator Tech Boot Camp is a multi-day program designed to give teachers at all career stages hands-on learning opportunities in shop safety, construction, sound and lighting. In additional partnership with Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado Thespians and UNC work

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together to both identify educators who may benefit from additional training and promote training opportunities to emerging and experienced educators.



The Educator Tech Boot Camp aligns with state and national technical theatre standards and acts as a model of what technical theatre instruction should look like in classrooms across Colorado. Educators access information about Educator Tech Boot Camp opportunities via the same channels as financial aid information. In addition, Colorado Thespians has prepared advocacy materials should an educator need support with their building administrators. Research based advocacy letters are sent to building and district level decision makers at an educator’s request. The advocacy letter, in part, elevates the impact quality arts education can have on an educator to feel well equipped in preparing students for workforce readiness. It also

highlights the use of arts education as a tool for student engagement. All of this is grounded in the foundational work theatre educator candidates receive from UNC’s undergraduate and graduate educator program.

Educators across the state recently identified the continuation of the technical theatre boot camp as a priority for the organization. To build on this idea, Colorado Thespians captured feedback from educators and identified additional future educator enrichment camps including curriculum development, planning interactive lessons and skill building to deliver full-scale productions.

## What the Partnership Has Taught Us

The partnership between UNC and Colorado Thespians has helped educator retention by removing some existing obstacles. But in the combined quest to support educator retention, perhaps the most important element is the community that is built and maintained through the partnership, providing a safety net for early-, mid- and late-career educators.

“ I see UNC faculty, alumni, and students actively involved in Colorado Thespians programming, adjudication, and leadership roles, which strengthens the growth of educators even more.

- Kiera Sweeney, a six-year educator and UNC graduate

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Eatherton, who began his journey with Colorado Thespians as a student board member, saw the opportunity to become an educator through his work in the Colorado Thespians student leadership program and appreciated the educator community that UNC fosters. “There’s quite a bit of camaraderie amongst UNC Theatre Education graduates, especially if you’re teaching in Colorado and participate in Thespians,” he shares. “It’s clear that once you have a job teaching in Colorado, the network is strong.”

Both Eatherton and Sweeney credit the professors of the UNC program for building and maintaining a connected community by giving students personalized attention post-graduation and implementing opportunities to connect.

McDaniel articulates the benefits of the Colorado Thespians and UNC partnership that helps create happier educators, happier students and healthier communities. “ThesCon offers so much more than just a chance to perform; it’s a space where individuals of all ages build confidence, develop leadership skills, explore careers in the arts, and connect with peers who share their passion.”

## Future Aspirations

Established in 1995, the partnership between UNC and Colorado Thespians has decidedly grown. Both organizations continue to return to the table with new ideas including a mentorship program currently in the works. This program envisions UNC identifying early career educators who desire mentorship (whether they are UNC graduates or students from other institutions) and Colorado Thespians connecting individuals to vetted late career or recently retired educators. In addition, Colorado Thespians will seek financial reimbursement for chosen mentors through additional sponsorships.

The partnership between UNC and Colorado Thespians stands as a solid example of innovation and support in theatre education. By offering robust training through UNC’s training program, coupled with professional development and community-building initiatives from Colorado Thespians, aspiring and continuing educators find and create nurturing environments in Colorado to achieve their goals. Together, they not only address current challenges facing theatre educators but also pave the way for a future where theatre education thrives statewide, ensuring educators are well-prepared and supported in transforming students’ lives through the arts.



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## Acknowledgments

### Authors:



Colorado  
Thespians

**Tami LoSasso:** Tami LoSasso is a veteran theatre educator who currently serves as the Executive Director for Colorado State Thespians. In her three years as ED, she has led her team in program expansion and increased accessibility to the organization's educational theatre programming for students and educators in historically disadvantaged communities.

As an educator, LoSasso received multiple honors for her leadership and direction including designation as an Outstanding School for Theatre Education from the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) and a Think360 Arts Outstanding Art School Award. In 2018 she was named Outstanding Volunteer for her work with the Advocacy Leadership Network (EdTA) and in 2023 was named the Educator of the Year by the Italian American Business Association. She has also received numerous artistic awards from the Denver Center Theatre Company Education High School Musical Theatre awards program.

LoSasso serves as part time Dance and Drama/Theatre Arts Content Specialist for the Colorado Department of Education where she focuses on educator support. Her passion lies in finding the intersection between education and storytelling. Born and raised in Colorado, she enjoys traveling with her husband and two adult sons.

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**Mary Schuttler:** Professor of Theatre Arts, Dr. Mary Schuttler, is director of the BA and MA Theatre Education programs at UNC. She chaired the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Academic Theatre Standards committee, co-chaired the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) Theatre Standards committee, co-wrote curriculum and assessment guides for CDE, NCCAS and the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA), and has been a board member of the Colorado Thespian Society for over twenty-five years. She has also served as both President and Vice President of EdTA and is was most recently an EdTA Board member. She earned her BA from the University of Michigan, her MA from Wayne State University, and her PhD in Theatre from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Before her UNC appointment, Dr. Schuttler taught high school drama and math for ten years in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Dr. Schuttler received the 2001 Higher Education Theatre Educator of the Year from the Alliance for Colorado Theatre, was inducted into the EdTA's Hall of Fame in

2005, and received the EdTA Founder's Award in 2019. Additionally, she has led many workshops and published several articles on theatre education initiatives and has directed numerous productions in her tenure as a theatre educator.



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## About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 200 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation's hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

