

Growing up, Ashley Schwarzbek never stayed in one place. Her family moved frequently, so she was always the “new kid in school.” Being the new kid isn’t easy for anyone, but it was especially hard for Schwarzbek because she had a learning disability. Because she had dyslexia, she found it hard to spell and read growing up, but didn’t know why. That was, until she met her fourth-grade teacher. Mrs. O’Hara would change her attitude toward school forever.

“Mrs. O’Hara was a big driving force in helping me get diagnosed with dyslexia and getting me additional support in school,” Schwarzbek said. “She helped me feel smart and valued in the classroom like no one else had.”

The support and love Schwarzbek received from O’Hara and other educators throughout her life inspired her. She wanted to show people the same level of care that they showed her.

So, she went into education herself. Schwarzbek graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in education and immediately started her first teaching job at Charlotte High School. During her time at Charlotte, she began to appreciate restorative practices and how they help resolve conflict in a healthier way than suspension. She received professional development training on how to utilize these practices in the classroom, and her interest was piqued.

“By the end of my career at Charlotte, I was spending half of my day as a restorative justice facilitator, which meant I was in the office helping students work through conflicts and then the other half of my day was spent teaching,” Schwarzbek said.

Having been an educator and administrator, Schwarzbek’s experience growing up battling a learning disability helps her to look through the perspective of a student lens.

She knows what it’s like to not feel provided for by her school, having had to take the SAT twice because her administrators failed to provide the proper accommodations.

“There are so many other facets that everyone is having to deal with. Some of those things are invisible. Some of those things are not just able to be seen. And that’s very much my experience,” Schwarzbek said.

PART 2: High structure, high support

In January 2020, Schwarzbek came to East Lansing to fulfill the associate principal position after then-associate principal Nick Hamilton accepted a job as the district’s Special Education Director.

She wanted to focus on teacher instructional leadership and restorative justice for students. This means teaching educators how to utilize effective teaching strategies and solve conflicts healthily. Her experience as a teacher made it easier for her to ensure all educators are provided for, and have all the tools necessary to help students.

“I’m not the world’s greatest teacher, but I learned some things in the classroom that helped me be able to provide all that instructional leadership to teachers,” Schwarzbek said.

Her ability to build meaningful connections with students has varied throughout her time. But even though COVID-19 protocols and the online school year affected her first two years, she has now been able to fully embrace the school’s diverse extracurricular scene, where she can participate and enjoy the many clubs, performance arts and sports games offered here.

But of course, everybody has their favorite, Schwarzbek’s is the theater department.

"I love theater. That's where I found my home, family and community when I was in school," Schwarzbek said. "While I love to attend all of our performing arts, whether it be band, choir, and theater and all of that, that's just something I love to go and see and engage with our students who are doing those things."

Overall, she highly values the culture of warmth and student voice that is present within the high school. She feels that the students inspire her.

"[I think about] students who I was working to support who moved or graduated and then I lost contact with," Schwarzbek said. Students who have left this world over the course of my career whose names will always be imprinted on my heart. I have tried to learn to be at peace with the fact that I am sometimes a small part of a student's larger life story so I try to focus on having the greatest impact I can when I can."

Schwarzbek also works to have a high impact on teachers. She believes that the best place to start improving relations in the classroom is to provide teachers with all the tools they need. She calls it 'high structure, high support.' It's focused on instructional leadership for teachers and how to incorporate small, but impactful changes.

Social studies teacher Emily Zann has seen this first hand, and she feels that Schwarzbek's leadership has led to cooperation on all levels of authority for the high school.

"It feels like we're blurring the lines from administration to teachers," Zann said. It's just staff. It feels more like we're all one. [Schwarzbek is] one of us. Mr. Lampi is one of us. Mrs. Q is part of us, you know, it doesn't really feel like it's admin versus teachers ever. It feels like we're just a full staff."

The unity that Schwarzbek brought when she was hired rewarded her strong support among faculty--support that she'd need during the events of the 2022-2023 school year.

PART THREE: "The straight line"

Two years ago, former principal Andrew Wells retired after 34 years in the district. The search began for a replacement, and Schwarzbek aimed to ascend in her leadership role. She applied for the position and became one of two finalists for the first round of interviews. After interviewing both finalists, Superintendent Dori Leyko decided to reopen the search for a new principal. After that round, former principal Shannon Mayfield was selected. He went on a leave of absence in January of the 2022-2023 school year, and Schwarzbek was named interim principal of ELHS in March.

Not only did she have to experience the stress of entering a new position halfway through the school year, but Schwarzbek also had to tackle security issues, strong criticism from the community and the responsibility to piece the building back together.

These challenges rocked schoolwide stability. Students felt unsafe, and teachers felt unsure. Twenty-year math teacher Maggie Moore felt that Schwarzbek was the glue that held the school together.

“I think Mrs. Schwarzbek is a very calming presence,” Moore said. Whenever there's an issue, whether it's a staff meeting or safety issue. She is a listener first, and she rolls with the tide. When the rest of us are all over the place, she is the straight line.”

Students and staff were impressed with the initiative and care Schwarzbek showed during her time as interim principal. After only one round of interviews in May of 2023, Schwarzbek was selected as the next high school principal.

Part Four: Keep the joy

Moving forward, Schwarzbek's goal for the future of ELHS is for it to be a place where all students feel seen, heard, safe, and valued. She doesn't exactly have a plan to change things about the community, but she believes that change and strength should come from us.

“I think changes should be driven by the voices of students, staff, and families, and centered around what all students need to learn,” Schwarzbek said.

Schwarzbek's goal outside school is to be a role model for her two daughters, Ella and Emilia. “It's just important to me that they see, especially as a mom and a woman, that you can have a job, a professional job, and still be a good parent,” Schwarzbek said.

She also wants to foster the same love for school in her daughters that her teachers did in her when she was their age. Their joy and enthusiasm towards their education inspire her to make learning enjoyable for all age groups.

“I try to harness some of their energy, they love school and I ask myself how we keep that in kids from this young age and translate it to when they're in high school,” Schwarzbek said, “How do we harness and keep that same joy with the things that we do?”