



### **What School Leaders Can Do Now to Clear the Biggest Hurdles in Education**

CoSN's 2026 report highlights the obstacles slowing innovation and the emerging tools and mindsets poised to transform learning.

K-12 education stands at a pivotal moment. The pressures on schools are intensifying, the expectations for student outcomes are rising, and the pace of technological change is accelerating. Yet amid this complexity, one initiative continues to offer clarity, direction, and a global perspective: CoSN's Driving K-12 Innovation series. This annual report is a collective intelligence effort of sorts. More than 130 education leaders—including NAESP Board member Ryan Daniel, principal of Fort Foote Elementary School in Fort Washington, Maryland—come together each year to identify the forces shaping the future of teaching and learning. Through surveys, structured dialogue, and consensus-building, the CoSN Advisory Board pinpoints the "Hurdles" that slow progress, the "Accelerators" that propel it, and the "Tech Enablers" that make transformation possible.

The 2026 findings reveal a sector grappling with profound challenges while also embracing powerful opportunities. They also underscore why strategic planning around technology adoption has never been more essential.

#### **The Hurdles**

The top Hurdles for 2026 paint a picture of schools under strain, yet poised for reinvention.

- **Attracting and Retaining Educators and IT Professionals:** Schools cannot innovate without the people who make innovation possible. Staffing shortages, burnout, and competition from other industries threaten the stability of both instructional and technical teams. This is not simply an HR issue; it is a learning issue. Without a strong workforce, even the most promising technologies fall flat.

#### **Ensuring Cybersecurity and Safety**

- **Online:** As digital learning expands, so do the risks. Cyberattacks on schools have surged, and students' online safety remains a constant concern. Innovation cannot

thrive in an environment where systems are vulnerable and trust is fragile.

**Critical Media Literacy:** Students are navigating an information landscape defined by misinformation, AI-generated content, and polarized discourse. Schools must equip them with the skills to evaluate sources, question assumptions, and participate responsibly in civic life. This is foundational to both academic success and democratic engagement.

These Hurdles are structural challenges that demand sustained, strategic action.

#### **The Accelerators**

Even as schools confront significant barriers, powerful trends are accelerating progress.

- **Building the Human Capacity of Leaders:** Leadership development is emerging as a decisive factor in whether innovation takes root. Leaders who understand technology, change management, and instructional transformation can create cultures where experimentation and continuous improvement flourish.

- **Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning:** Traditional assessments are giving way to more authentic demonstrations of mastery. Portfolios, performance tasks, and competency-based approaches are gaining traction, supported by digital tools that make learning visible in new ways.

- **Learner Agency:** Students are increasingly empowered to take ownership of their learning—choosing pathways, setting goals, and using technology to personalize their experiences. This shift aligns with broader societal expectations for autonomy, creativity, and lifelong learning.

These Accelerators reflect a growing recognition that innovation is not about devices or software—it is about people, culture, and pedagogy.

#### **The Tech Enablers**

Technology alone does not drive innovation, but the right tools make new models of learning possible. In 2026, three Tech Enablers stand out:

- **Generative Artificial Intelligence:** Generative AI is reshaping everything from lesson planning to student feedback to administrative workflows. When used responsibly, it can reduce educator workload, personalize learning, and expand

creative possibilities.

- **Data and Information Visualization:** Schools are awash in data, but insight—not volume—is what matters. Visualization tools help educators and leaders make sense of complex information, identify trends, and make evidence-based decisions that improve outcomes.

#### **Tools for Privacy and Safety**

**Online:** As digital ecosystems grow, so does the need for robust protections. Privacy-preserving technologies, secure platforms, and safety-focused tools are essential for maintaining trust and ensuring compliance with evolving regulations.

These enablers are foundational infrastructure for modern learning environments.

#### **Why This Work Matters Now**

Driving K-12 Innovation serves as a roadmap for navigating uncertainty and making informed decisions about the future of learning. By identifying the most urgent Hurdles, the most promising Accelerators, and the most effective Tech Enablers, the series helps schools prioritize investments, shape policy, and build capacity.

It also reflects a global commitment to collaboration. The initiative brings together diverse perspectives to illuminate shared challenges and opportunities.

The 2026 findings make one thing clear: Innovation in K-12 education is a necessity. Schools that confront their Hurdles, harness their Accelerators, and strategically deploy Tech Enablers will be best positioned to deliver extraordinary outcomes for students. Read the full CoSN "[Driving K-12 Innovation](#)" report.

---

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others." — *Jack Welch*



## KDE News

Kentucky's public schools are leading the nation in academic recovery. The [Kentucky Department of Education](#) (KDE) recently celebrated a major milestone after the national 2026 Education Scorecard ranked the Commonwealth **5th in reading and 8th in mathematics** for student post-pandemic recovery. Commissioner of Education Dr. Robbie Fletcher attributed this growth directly to statewide investments in literacy and numeracy, such as the [Kentucky Reading Academies](#) and targeted math initiatives. Multiple districts—including Marion County, Anderson County, and Perry County—were spotlighted nationally as "Districts on the Rise" for their exceptional local curriculum overhauls and content-driven coaching models.

Building on this literacy momentum, KDE officially announced that the newly revised **Kentucky Academic Standards for Reading and Writing** have been adopted into law. To support educators in executing these rigorous guidelines, the department has officially opened registration for Cohort 5 of the **LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training program**, with applications accepted through August 21. Alongside academic standards, KDE advisory councils have turned their focus toward future-ready student initiatives, particularly refining the statewide Individual Learning Plan (ILP) project to promote more vibrant, real-world learning experiences.

## 6 Courage Builders for Women in School Leadership

By Jessica Zimmer

In the world of leadership, courage has become a requisite skill for the growth and success of both leaders and organizations. Courageous leadership builds trust, improves decision making, strengthens resilience, enables change, and expands our influence.

### 6 C's of Courage

Courageous leadership is a commitment to using our core values to guide our work, despite potential internal and external challenges. As we serve ourselves and our school communities, we learn to navigate fear, resistance, and uncertainty as we reflect, build trust, improve competence, and mitigate risk-taking. This month, focus on the six C's of courage: collecting courageous models, cultivating an authentic voice, fostering connections, developing competence, deepening curiosity, and leveraging calculation.

**Collect Courageous Models:** Role models support the development of your own person-

On the administrative and policy front, KDE and the Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) are navigating a busy late-spring schedule. Following the conclusion of the 2026 legislative session, the department is actively breaking down the operational impact of key state education bills. Simultaneously, the Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB) has been convening to address critical infrastructure needs, specifically tackling **teacher retention and exploring new educator certification recommendations**. These collaborative efforts underscore KDE's focus on supporting the workforce behind Kentucky's ongoing academic gains.

**Principals can register their elementary staff and administrative teams right now for Cohort 5 of the LETRS professional learning program.** KAESP members have a timely opportunity to equip their teams with evidence-backed training aligned with the Read to Succeed Act. Registration is **officially open from May 4 through August 21, 2026**. The [Kentucky Department of Education](#) (KDE) officially opened the enrollment window for the [Kentucky Reading Academies](#), which provides this high-impact training at no cost. The opportunity comes at a perfect time, as recent data from the Kentucky Reading Research Center confirms that elementary schools with LETRS-trained educators achieved notable proficiency gains on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA).



al vision of courageous leadership. Studying the stories and behaviors of role models helps to understand sacrifice and perseverance while learning strategies for navigating challenges, resistance, and change. Seek a variety of role models, both in your daily life and from history.

**Cultivate an Authentic Voice:** Knowing who you are as a leader and communicating it to others is the foundation of courageous leadership. Authenticity is alignment among your values, beliefs, decisions, and behaviors. Knowing that conformity is the opposite of courage, seek to understand yourself at a deeper level. As leaders, we must ensure we do not lose ourselves in the busyness of our roles, but, instead, focus on active reflection.

**Foster Connections:** Problems are an inevitable part of leadership. Having strong connections increases our psychological safety, gives us the strength to do what is right for our school communities, and builds our confidence. Mitigate the isolation associated with school leadership by forging relationships with other leaders through professional networks like the NAESP Center for Women in Leadership, conferences, and social media.

**Develop Competence:** Courage develops as you build your competency. Through prepara-

## Thank you KAESP Sponsor

Hatch Early Learning is the trusted leader in early education, providing administrators and teachers with actionable data on student readiness in multiple domains. Their research-based solutions offer valuable insights into student progress, enabling informed decision-making and targeted interventions.

For more information on their wonderful products, please visit: <https://www.hatchearlylearning.com/>



## From Kentucky Department of Education

**Professional Learning Bulletin Board**  
The [Professional Learning Bulletin Board \(PLBB\)](#) is a great resource for exploring options for professional learning. Currently, over 70 professional learning offerings are posted on the PLBB, including sessions for administrators, counselors, certified and classified staff. A wide variety of topics are available in both virtual and on-demand formats and the site is regularly updated.

tion and practice you will become more skilled at tackling challenges with a positive mindset, tolerating discomfort, and making better decisions. While you cannot always have all the knowledge you need to lead, it is important to show others your dedication to continuous personal and professional growth. Develop your competence by reading, researching, and connecting with experts.

**Deepen Curiosity:** Leveraging curiosity is a powerful strategy for developing courage. Asking questions and reframing situations helps us reduce uncertainty and shift from reacting to investigating. Curiosity is a key component in creating sustainable change through challenging the status quo and encouraging others to speak candidly, both of which strengthen courage. As you engage in problem-solving and long-term planning, commit to staying curious.

**Leverage Calculation:** There is inherent risk in being a courageous leader, so leveraging calculation is key to your long-term success. Courage is not brazen; you must balance boldness with preparation. Not every battle is worth your bravery. Calculated leaders consider the opinions of and impact on all stakeholders, identify allies, and anticipate resistance. When making courageous decisions, ensure that you have both an open mind and a backup plan.

As you continue your leadership journey, commit to developing your cadence of courage through the 6 C's. Create a detailed plan for developing the courage you need to grow yourself and your school community. Most importantly, share your learning and experiences with others.

**Jessica Zimmer** is principal of Shelter Rock Elementary in Manhasset, New York, and a fellow in the NAESP Center for Women in Leadership. Via [naesp.org](https://naesp.org)



From the Executive Director, Dr. Rosie Young

## Finishing Strong Together

Reflecting on this past school year, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of pride in the resilience, dedication, and leadership of our KAESP members. We started this year facing familiar challenges, yet because of your unwavering commitment to your students and staff, Kentucky elementary schools are truly leading the national conversation in academic recovery. The incredible gains we have seen in reading and math proficiency are not accidental; they are the direct result of your deliberate instructional leadership.

As we look ahead to the summer and the upcoming school year, our primary focus remains equipping you with the tools and advocacy needed to sustain this momentum. Our strong partnerships with both KDE and NAESP ensure that Kentucky's elementary leaders have a seat at the table where policy decisions are made.

Before we dive into the planning sessions and professional development that the summer months bring, I urge each of you to take time for true rest and rejuvenation. The role of an elementary principal is beautiful, but it is also profoundly demanding, and you cannot pour from an empty cup. Use these next few weeks to disconnect from your emails, recharge your batteries, and spend uninterrupted quality time with your families. Thank you for your tireless service to Kentucky's children and for your support of our association. Have a wonderful, safe, and deeply restful summer.

All the best,  
Rosie

## Beware of the Summer Slide

The "summer slide" presents a critical challenge to our historic academic momentum. Research shows that students can lose up to two months of reading and math skills over the summer, forcing teachers to spend the first weeks of the fall reviewing old material instead of introducing new standards. For our elementary schools, which lay the foundation for all future learning, finding active ways to bridge this gap during June and July is essential to keeping our kids on the path to proficiency.

Combating this loss requires a unified strategy that connects the school, the home, and the community. Rather than heavy academic remediation, effective summer learning focuses on engaging, low-barrier opportunities like community library reading challenges, interactive STEM projects, and math-focused daily games. By partnering with local organizations and equipping parents with simple, actionable literacy toolkits before the final bell rings, we can transform the summer months from a period of academic decline into a time of discovery.

As elementary principals, your leadership sets the tone for how your community approaches the summer months. By prioritizing targeted summer outreach—such as book mobile stops, campus book swaps, or digital math challenges—you keep your school's learning culture alive even when the building is closed. Let's use these final weeks of the school year to empower our families with the resources they need, ensuring our students return in August sharp, confident, and ready to excel.



## Ending the School Year

The final weeks of the school year are notoriously hectic, but we can help our staff shift from "survival mode" to a smooth, celebratory finish. To keep teacher morale high and student behavior focused, consider implementing low-prep, high-impact energy boosters in your building. Host a "Jeans and Java" a "Floating Principal" hour where you take over a classroom so a teacher can pack or catch up on grades, or create a countdown calendar with simple theme days—like a school-wide sidewalk chalk hour or an outdoor reading day—that give everyone a structured, positive outlet.

Surviving May also requires giving yourself permission to streamline administrative tasks and protect your own energy. Prioritize your daily checklist by delaying non-urgent compliance paperwork until June, and keep staff meetings brief, celebratory, and action-oriented. Remember, the energy you project sets the tone for the entire building; by staying visible, calm, and focused on celebrating your school's wins, you will guide your team across the finish line with confidence.



## NAESP News



**The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is actively steering elementary school leadership through a period of historic transition.** In a major administrative milestone, the NAESP Board of Directors officially announced the selection of **Stephanie A. Morris as the new Executive Director**, effective August 1, 2026. Morris, who currently serves as CEO of SHAPE America and previously worked with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), succeeds outgoing director Dr. L. Earl Franks. This leadership transition comes at a critical time as the association tackles unprecedented professional burnout, using recent platform gatherings to call for increased structural investments to support elementary principals whose daily pressures are reaching a documented breaking point.

Simultaneously, NAESP is heavily emphasizing school culture and peer recognition through its national programming. The association recently unveiled its **inaugural class of 2026 National Gold Star Schools**, awarding the prestigious distinction to 57 elementary and middle-level schools across the United States. These benchmark campuses are being celebrated nationwide as models of excellence for cultivating sustainable learning environments, optimizing institutional systems, and empowering instructional staff. Alongside institutional recognition, NAESP has also shifted its publication focus to

to spotlight individual excellence, highlighting its latest class of **National Outstanding Assistant Principals** to map out how relationship-driven leadership and equitable systems are successfully transforming early-childhood and K-8 education.

### National Action Item: Register for the Re-branded Summer Conference

KAESP members can take immediate advantage of the national momentum by securing their spots for the **2026 National School Leaders Conference**. Registration is open, and NAESP is actively providing multiple ways for school administrative teams to save on attendance costs. Groups of three or more elementary leaders are eligible for a **\$50 discount per individual registration**. Furthermore, the association has officially awarded its annual Ann Henley and Board Legacy Scholarships to ease travel costs for first-time attendees. Elementary principals and assistant principals are urged to visit the official NAESP Conference Hub to lock in standard registration rates and reserve lodging inside the host venue before block spaces sell out for the summer event.

### The Power of Dual Alignment: Elevating Kentucky Leaders on the National Stage

By marrying the targeted instructional frameworks of the Kentucky Department of Education with the expansive professional network of NAESP, Commonwealth administrators are uniquely positioned to lead the nation in elementary excellence. This dual alignment ensures that Kentucky

principals are not just executing mandates, but are actively pioneering the modern standard for early-childhood and middle-level education. As you finalize your school improvement plans and staff development calendars for the upcoming school year, leverage both your state-level LETRS training pathways and your national conference opportunities to empower your team. Our collective voice and commitment within KAESP and NAESP remain the driving force behind Kentucky's historic academic turnaround—proving that when school leaders thrive, our students succeed.

Your feedback matters as we shape the future of our profession. To ensure your voice is heard at both the state and national levels, please take three minutes to complete the upcoming 2026 KAESP Member Feedback Survey dropping in your inbox next week. Your insights directly guide our advocacy efforts with KDE and dictate the professional development resources we secure through NAESP.

**Have a wonderful, rejuvenating summer break.** You have worked tirelessly all year to support your teachers and inspire your students, and you have earned this time to rest. Take these next few weeks to disconnect, recharge your batteries, and celebrate the incredible progress your school communities made this year.

"The true value of a leader is not measured by the work they do. A leader's true value is measured by the work they inspire others to do." — *Simon Sinek*



1801 Echo Trail  
Louisville KY 40245



Phone: 502-272-8447

### Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership

by [Sharon I. Radd](#), [Gretchen Givens Generett](#), [Mark Anthony Gooden](#), [George Theoharis](#)



This timely and essential book provides a comprehensive guide for school leaders who desire to engage their school communities in transformative systemic change. Sharon I. Radd, Gretchen Givens Generett, Mark Anthony Gooden, and George Theoharis offer five practices to increase educational equity and eliminate marginalization. They suggest "disruptive practices" to replace the status quo in order to achieve full inclusion and educational excellence for every child.

### Supporting Principals, Strengthening Retention

By *L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE*

Strong schools don't happen by accident. They are built by school leaders who understand that people are the heartbeat of every school community. I see it when I visit with principals and assistant principals in schools and at conferences across the country.

Despite growing student needs, rapid shifts in technology, and funding constraints, school leaders remain firmly rooted in building a strong culture, empowering their people, and optimizing systems that ensure their school communities thrive. These three pillars are the practical foundation for recruiting and retaining the talented educators every student deserves.

We know that a healthy school culture is the most powerful recruitment tool a principal has. When teachers feel valued, supported, and encouraged to grow, they stay because they feel safe to innovate, collaborate, and bring their full selves to work.

We also know that retention gets stronger when leadership is shared. Distributing leadership across the school community builds capacity and deepens ownership. When teachers lead committees, mentor their colleagues, and shape instructional priorities, they see themselves as essential contributors to the school's success.

Hiring and retention also depend on strong systems. Principals who strategically manage their faculty, staff, and resources ensure that hiring decisions align with long-term goals. Clear onboarding processes, thoughtful role design, and data-informed staffing plans help create stability. When systems work, people thrive.

At NAESP, we understand the importance of recognizing schools for their hard work, often in the face of adversity. In October 2025, during National Principals Month, NAESP launched the National Gold Star Schools program to honor schools that exemplify excellence in cultivating sustainable, supportive learning environments. Stay tuned for the announcement of the inaugural cohort of honorees in May; an in-person recognition will be held at the [National School Leaders Conference – Powered by NAESP](#), July 13–15, 2026, in Orlando, Florida.

Behind every successful school is a principal who is equipped to lead with clarity and compassion. NAESP continues to provide professional development that helps principals build supportive, stable environments where educators want to work and stay. Through mentorship, professional learning communities, and research-based resources, NAESP ensures that school leaders have the tools they need to strengthen culture, empower people, and optimize systems.

No leader can do it alone. I invite you to grow your network of support by participating in one of our Centers for Advancing Leadership or joining an NAESP Community of Practice. We have a place for you, no matter your career stage or interests. Join at [naesp.org/cop](https://naesp.org/cop).

*L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE, is executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Via [naesp.org](https://naesp.org).*



*The mission of the KAESP, the collective voice of Kentucky's elementary and middle level principals, in partnership with other education leaders, is to **develop citizens that can succeed in a global society**, by delivering to our members a network for support, professional development, visionary leadership, and by pro-active involvement in shaping education policy.*

### KAESP Leadership



Dr. Rosie Young, Executive Director

Dr. John Ansman, Treasurer, JCPs, Retired, Louisville, KY

Sarah Williams, NAESP State Representative, Principal, Luhr Elementary

Lara Krill, NAESP Membership Committee, Principal, Gabriel School, Louisville, KY

Want to join us? — Send an email to Rosie Young at [kaespky@gmail.com](mailto:kaespky@gmail.com) or [ryoung@bellarmine.edu](mailto:ryoung@bellarmine.edu)

### Make Reading a Daily Routine (Not a Chore)

- **The 20-Minute Rule:** Encourage parents to set aside just 20 minutes a day for reading.
- **Let Kids Choose:** Comic books, graphic novels, audiobooks, and magazines all count. If they pick it, they are more likely to read it.
- **Be a Reading Role Model:** Children who see their parents reading for pleasure are far more likely to become lifelong readers themselves.

"Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish."

— Sam Walton

"A good leader takes a little more than his share of the blame, a little less than his share of the credit."

— Arnold H. Glasow

### Follow and like us!



@kaespky

Kentucky Association of Elementary School Principals



Follow us!!

