



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.

Via naesp.org.



KDE News

Assessment and Accountability Reimagining: The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) and the Kentucky United We Learn Council are reviewing updated drafts for Kentucky's future assessment and accountability regulation. Designed around flexibility and local innovation under House Bill 257, the proposed changes focus on balancing state-level accountability with vibrant, performance-based measures aligned to the statewide *Portrait of a Learner*.

Principal Leadership Development Initiatives: Under Senate Bill 4, KDE is preparing a structured four-year principal training and mentoring framework aimed at building leadership capacity, improving teacher working conditions, and enhancing talent management across districts. In conjunction with these efforts, KDE is rolling out a regional listening tour this fall to collect direct feedback from school leaders on how to best shape state-level administrative support.

Literacy and Numeracy Acceleration: In recent reports to the Interim Joint Committee on Education, KDE highlighted ongoing statewide efforts around early literacy and mathematics instruction.

Focus remains centered on high-quality instructional resources (HQIRs), evidence-based interventions, and coaching models to support elementary and middle-level academic recovery.

Save the Date: KAESP Fall Leadership Institute & Professional Learning Opportunities

Be sure to mark your calendars for our upcoming KAESP Fall Leadership Institute which is usually held in November. Registration details, purchase order guidelines, and event schedules will be posted soon.

Strength in Numbers: Getting Involved in KAESP

KAESP is only as strong as the leaders who step up to help run it. Whether that means serving as a regional rep or just inviting a colleague to join, your active involvement makes a huge difference for our profession. Shoot me a quick email if you are interested in becoming more active. We'd love to have your voice, your ideas, and your leadership.



Thank you KAESP Sponsor

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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.

Checklist for Special Education Decisions

Use this checklist to ground instructional, planning, and individualized education program decisions in presuming competence and expanding opportunity.

1. Assumptions About the Student

- Assume the student can learn, even if you don't yet know how.
- Focus on potential rather than limitations.
- Avoid decisions based solely on labels or past performance.
- Interpret behaviors as communication. Consider that understanding might exceed expressive ability.

2. Access and Participation

- Ensure access to grade-level content with appropriate supports.
- Provide multiple ways to participate and respond.

- Remove barriers before concluding a student "can't" do something.
- Prioritize general education placement whenever appropriate.
- Avoid restrictive settings driven by convenience or tradition.

3. Expectations and Opportunities

- Maintain high expectations for every learner.
- Offer challenging tasks with scaffolds.
- Provide adequate time and support before judging ability.
- Allow students to demonstrate competence in varied ways.
- Include students in all schoolwide opportunities.

4. Communication and Behavior

- Presume competence for non-speaking students.
- Ensure access to robust communication tools (augmentative and alternative communication, visuals, and gestures).

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- View behavior as a message, not a deficit.
- Ask what the student is trying to communicate.
- Avoid equating behavior with lack of understanding.

5. Instructional Supports

- Provide evidence-based supports before ruling out strategies.
- Embed supports in general education settings.
- Foster regular collaboration between general and special educators.
- Use data to adjust instruction, not justify exclusion.
- Ensure access to assistive technology that increases independence.

6. Family and Student Voice

- Ask families what they believe their child is capable of.

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- Listen to student preferences and goals.
 - Avoid assumptions based on culture, language, or socioeconomic status.
 - Share information in ways that build trust. Ensure families understand their rights and options
- 7. Decision-Making**
- Make decisions based on possibility, not probability.
 - Ask: If we're wrong, which assumption causes the least harm?
 - Choose options that maximize opportunity.
 - Avoid decisions driven by adult convenience. Document how decisions align with the least dangerous assumption.
- Each belief challenged, each barrier removed, and each opportunity created sends a message that every learner belongs.

By Erika Gunter via naesp.org.



From the Executive Director, Dr. Rosie Young

Rolling Up Our Sleeves This Fall

There is nothing quite like the first few weeks of a new school year. The hallways are full again, the energy is high, and the daily hustle of running a school is in full swing. Between getting bus routes smoothed out, organizing SBDM committees, and getting back into classrooms for observation cycles, your days are already packed. I want to start this season simply by saying thank you for the sheer amount of heart and grit you put into making your buildings work.

Being a school leader today means constantly balancing the big picture—like instructional growth and school culture—with the endless list of daily operational demands. That balancing act isn't easy, and you shouldn't have to figure it out alone. That's why KAESP exists. We're here to give you a strong network of peers across Kentucky who understand the job because they're doing it right alongside you, sharing real strategies that work in real classrooms.

As we settle into the fall routine, don't forget to pause and catch your breath. Take a moment to celebrate the small wins in your building this week, whether that's a great team meeting or a breakthrough with a challenging student. Keep supporting one another, lean on your KAESP community when you need a soundboard, and thank you for everything you do for Kentucky's students.

Rosie

As the initial rush of the school year settles into a daily rhythm, the real challenge for leaders becomes guarding our time and attention against the slow creep of initiative overload. Real improvement doesn't happen by chasing every new idea that comes along; it happens when we stay fiercely focused on two or three high-leverage priorities and do them extraordinarily well.

When we align our professional learning, our observation feedback, and our team meetings around those core goals, we create clarity for our teachers and stability for our students. This year, let's give ourselves and our staff the gift of coherence—saying no to the unnecessary distractions so we can deepen our impact where it matters most.



NAESP News



Federal Advocacy Priorities: NAESP is actively pushing Congress to support its 2026 Legislative Agenda, focusing on whole-child education. Key federal priorities include advocating for the *RETAIN Act* (to provide tax credits for Title I educators and leaders), protecting full funding for Title I and IDEA, and ensuring federal K–12 education programs remain centralized within the U.S. Department of Education.

Key Takeaways from the National School Leaders Conference: Following this summer's annual gathering in Orlando, NAESP highlighted actionable strategies from leaders across the country targeting chronic absenteeism. Discussions focused on leveraging PBIS framework incentives, balancing responsible AI and ed-tech integration against community screen-time pushback, and building sustainable teacher-leadership pipelines.

National Principal Leadership Week & Recognition: NAESP is launching resources for National Principals Month to celebrate school leaders and highlight the

critical role principals play in student achievement. Keep an eye out for NAESP's updated digital media kit and advocacy tools to help honor administrators in your district.

Supporting Early-Career Principals & Pipeline Development: NAESP has expanded its mentorship and networking resources specifically tailored for assistant principals and early-career principals. These tools focus on executive function for school leaders, practical delegation strategies, and navigating first-year administrative challenges to help build a sustainable leadership pipeline.

Mark Your Calendars: National Principals Conference 2027

Save the date for next summer's main event! The **2027 NAESP National School Leaders Conference** will take place **July 22–24, 2027, in Denver, Colorado**. This annual gathering brings together PreK–8 leaders from across the country for three days of inspiring keynotes, practical instructional strategy sessions, and peer networking. Call for proposals opens this fall, and registration opens in October—making it a great time to start planning your professional development budget for next summer.

Navigating the Seasons of School Leadership

The principalship is defined by distinct seasons, each bringing its own unique energy and set of demands. In the fall, our focus naturally centers on establishing school culture, getting daily routines locked in, and making sure our teachers and students feel supported. But as the opening-week energy shifts into the steady grind of the semester.

It is easy to get consumed by the constant stream of urgent tasks that pull at our time every day. However, our most important job is stepping back to protect what matters most: high-quality learning in every classroom and positive relationships across our building. As you navigate the weeks ahead, lean into your support network, celebrate the small wins, and remember that you don't have to carry the weight of your school alone. The calm, steady leadership you provide right now creates the stability your entire community depends on.



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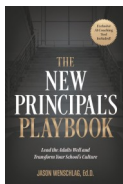


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The New Principal's Playbook: Lead the Adults Well and Transform Your Culture
by Jason Wenschlag

The New Principal's Playbook is a practical roadmap for new and emerging school principals (and any leader responsible for guiding adults) who want to build trust quickly, set a clear direction, and create a healthy, high-functioning professional culture.

This book will help you develop greater confidence, deepen competence, and foster a professional culture where faculty and staff thrive....and students do, too.



Special Education Ambassadors: How to Presume Competence in Every Decision

Use this checklist to anchor your school's inclusive practices in belief, evidence-based supports, and decisions that maximize opportunity rather than restrict it.

By Erika Gunter

Every child deserves to be seen, valued, and supported as a learner. As school leaders, our responsibility extends far beyond compliance. We are ambassadors for inclusion. The role of a special education ambassador is not an official title but instead a mindset rooted in advocacy, equity, and empowerment for all learners, including those with disabilities.

According to the Lead IDEA Center, 7.5 million students ages 3–21 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the 2022–23 school year, representing 15 percent of all public school students.

This tells us that we are not leading a small subgroup. Instead, we are shaping the educational experience of one in seven students, and the need for special education services continues to increase.

Presuming Competence and Leading with Belief

At the core of inclusive leadership is the principle of presuming competence, believing in a child's ability and potential even when evidence is incomplete. Anne Donnellan's concept of the "least dangerous assumption" reminds us that in the absence of absolute proof, it is essential to assume ability rather than limitation.

For young learners, the assumptions adults make about their potential directly shape the opportunities they receive. When we presume incompetence, we restrict access. When we presume competence, we create space for growth.

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Building Capacity Through Leadership

Serving as a special education ambassador means understanding and strengthening the systems that sustain inclusion. Leaders set the tone for collaboration between general and special educators, prioritize professional learning, and allocate resources equitably. They ensure that Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Specially Designed Instruction work together to provide early intervention, differentiated instruction, and data-informed decisions that support every learner.

Strong ambassadors also engage families as true partners. Families, parents, and caregivers are often the most powerful advocates for inclusion, yet many have never experienced it themselves. When schools communicate transparently, offer learning opportunities, and invite collaboration, families become allies in shaping equitable outcomes for their children.

Embedding Supports in General Education

True inclusion requires more than physical placement. It demands embedded supports that allow every child to participate meaningfully in the classroom. Effective inclusion includes co-teaching, collaborative

*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

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Want to join us? —Send an email to Rosie Young at kaespsy@gmail.com or ryoung@bellarmine.edu

planning, flexible learning environments, and access to related services within general education spaces. It also depends on ensuring that teachers have the tools, training, and confidence to meet the diverse needs of their students.

The National Council on Disability highlights that inclusion benefits all students, not just those with disabilities. It reduces fear of differences, fosters empathy, and supports social development. When implemented effectively, inclusive classrooms become thriving communities grounded in respect, curiosity, and compassion.

***Look for the bulleted checklist on page 2 to help with decisions.**

Erika Gunter is principal of Brandywine Early Education Programs in Delaware and serves on the Executive Board of the Delaware Association of School Principals. Via naesp.org.



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