

The Missouri **ADMINISTRATOR**

ISSUE 4 | FALL 2026

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE MISSOURI ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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On the cover: Dr. Adam Friga, 2026-27 MASA Executive Committee President.

Inside MASA

EDITOR'S NOTE

As I worked through this issue, one theme kept surfacing: intentional leadership. You can see it in MASA's new strategic plan. You can see it in district leaders navigating financial challenges, advocating for public education, investing in professional growth, and preparing for the future of their schools and communities.



This issue comes at an exciting time for our association as we prepare to launch MASA's new five-year Strategic Plan. Over the past year, I've had the opportunity to watch that work unfold through surveys, planning sessions, committee meetings, and countless conversations about where MASA should go next. What stands out to me most isn't the final document itself. It's the thoughtfulness behind it. Every discussion came back to the same goal: ensuring MASA remains a strong resource and advocate for Missouri's educational leaders.

As I reviewed the articles in this issue, I realized that same mindset extends far beyond the strategic plan. The stories you'll read are about leaders who are looking ahead, making informed decisions, and creating opportunities for those they serve. In many ways, they're all telling the same story.

Leadership isn't just about responding to what's happening today. It's about preparing for what's next.

As you read this issue, I hope you'll see what I saw: leaders who are approaching that responsibility with purpose, courage, and a long-term vision for the students, staff, and communities they serve. Their stories remind us that meaningful progress rarely happens by accident. It happens when people are intentional about the future they're working to create.

And if there's one takeaway from these pages, it's this: the future of Missouri public education is being shaped every day by leaders who are willing to think beyond the moment and invest in what comes next.

Happy reading,

Chelsea Blair

Editor
The Missouri Administrator

The Missouri ADMINISTRATOR

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Chelsea Blair

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MISSOURI ADMINISTRATOR

Missouri Association of School Administrators 3550
Amazonas Drive
Jefferson City, MO 65109
Tel: 573-638-4825
Email: communications@mcsa.org
Website: masaleads.org

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MOVING AHEAD

Dr. Mark Penny

2026-2031 MASA Strategic Plan

When I joined MASA as Executive Director on July 1, 2025, one of my highest priorities was to develop a new strategic plan that would help guide our association into the future. While MASA has accomplished tremendous things over the years, our last strategic plan was developed in 2015. The world our members lead in today is vastly different from the one they navigated a decade ago.

Today, our members are being asked to do more with fewer resources while navigating challenges that seem to grow more complex each year. In a profession where demands are constant and priorities can shift quickly, it is more important than ever to have a clear sense of direction. That's why developing a new strategic plan became one of my top priorities when I joined MASA.

Public education has changed dramatically over the past decade, and so has the role of the superintendent.

Over the past year, we embarked on a thoughtful and intentional process to build a plan that would reflect both the realities of today and the opportunities ahead. Last fall, MASA issued a Request for Proposals and ultimately partnered with Lori VanLeer and The Quality Coach® to help guide our work. We formed a Strategic Planning Task Force made up of members and business partners, alongside a Steering Committee composed of MASA staff members. Together, these groups dedicated countless hours to examining who we are, what our members need, and where our association should be headed.

Along the way, we gathered feedback through surveys, listening sessions, SWOT analyses, PESTLE reviews, and meaningful conversations with stakeholders across the state. We wanted this plan to be shaped by the voices of the people who know MASA best and rely on it most. The result is a roadmap grounded in member input, informed by data, and focused on the future. What emerged from this process is our 2026-2031 Strategic Plan, a five-year roadmap designed to strengthen MASA and ensure we continue providing exceptional value to Missouri's educational leaders. More importantly, it positions us to remain responsive, relevant, and effective in a rapidly changing environment.

I've always believed that successful organizations need more than good intentions. They need a clear vision, a shared sense of purpose, and a plan

that guides decision-making along the way. One of the things that attracted me to this role was the opportunity to help shape the future of an association that plays such an important role in supporting Missouri's school leaders.

Most importantly, I believe in the future of public education. I believe in the work our superintendents and educational leaders do every day on behalf of students, staff, and communities. And I believe in MASA's ability to continue serving as a trusted advocate, resource, and partner for those leaders.

As we officially roll out this strategic plan on September 30, I invite you to view it not simply as MASA's plan, but as our plan. It reflects the collective insight, experience, and commitment of the members who helped create it. The pages that follow provide a snapshot of where we're headed and the priorities that will guide our work over the next five years. Together, we will continue building an association that strengthens leadership, champions public education, and helps ensure a bright future for Missouri's students.

Thank you for the trust you've placed in this association and for the work you do on behalf of students, staff, and communities. I look forward to continuing this work together.

With deep respect,

Mark S. Penny

Executive Director
Missouri Association of School Administrators

The 2026–2031 Strategic Plan at a glance

Helping Missouri's leaders *lead well.*

Four priorities will guide MASA over the next five years. Here's what's in the plan, why it matters, and where you fit in.

Why leadership, why now

The superintendency keeps expanding – instruction, finance, HR, governance, advocacy, communication – while funding uncertainty, vouchers, open enrollment, and misinformation add pressure. Meanwhile, fewer candidates are stepping into the role.

2nd

only to classroom instruction in impact on student achievement*

*Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins (2020), *School Leadership and Management* 40(1).

500+

superintendents MASA serves across Missouri

3–5

years average tenure, against long-term mandates

Our mission

Engage, elevate, and empower public school leaders with the vision and purpose to positively impact the future of Missouri's children, educators, and communities.

Our vision

MASA is a trusted and enduring influence shaping the future of public education in Missouri. Through advocacy, visionary leadership, and strategic action, we strengthen schools and communities across the state.

Core beliefs that anchor every decision

Children first

Every decision and advocacy effort serves the success and well-being of Missouri's children.

Excellence through collaboration

Strong schools depend on district leadership grounded in trust and shared learning.

Innovation & improvement

Data-informed decisions prepare leaders for an evolving landscape.

Advocacy for public education

A unified, credible voice for all of Missouri's districts and communities.

Connection & service

Local, state, and national partnerships that influence policy and elevate practice.

Four priorities, thirteen initiatives

Each focus area has priority initiatives, each with a goal, named champions and a target date. Much of this work is already underway; the full plan has every action step.

Focus area 1

Advocacy & Influence

Target: 100% of members equipped with easy-to-use advocacy tools

1.1 Proactive advocacy strategy

A statewide network of trained member advocates, backed by MASA.

Ongoing–Jan 2027

1.3 Resource partnerships

Regional school finance committees, a Proactive Solutions Committee, and a formal partner network.

Fall 2026–ongoing

1.2 Awareness & communication

A monthly brief: what it means, why it matters, what to do. **January 2028**

1.4 Member-ready advocacy tools

District calculators that show funding and policy impacts. **2027**

Focus area 2

Membership Experience

Target: every member using at least one MASA resource or tool each year

2.1 Resource hub & member tools

A tool audit, a “Top MASA Tools” guide, and new member benefits.

Audit spring 2027

2.3 Presence, visibility & efficiency

A new membership portal and one-click links to resources.

Ongoing–July 2027

2.2 Regional peer networks

Training and monthly check-ins for regional presidents. **Ongoing**

Focus area 3

Talent & Leadership Development

Target: every first-year superintendent matched with a mentor; 90%+ satisfaction

3.1 Onboarding new superintendents

Support from point of hire through Sept. 1, and a first-year pathway.

Summer 2026–fall 2027

3.3 The accomplished superintendent

Tight Times Tuesdays, cohorts, and an Advanced Finance Academy.

Ongoing–2028

3.2 Early career support

A mentor in year one and a retired-superintendent coach in years 1–3.

Ongoing

3.4 Aspiring superintendents

A four-day cohort, workshops, and Women in Leadership recruitment.

Ongoing–fall 2027

Focus area 4

Strategic Communication

Target: a steady cadence of shareable content and thought leadership

4.1 Elevate communication

Curated district content, a campaign celebrating public schools, and social media guidance. **Ongoing–2028**

4.2 Thought leadership

This magazine, plus short reels, blog posts, and a podcast. **Ongoing–2029**

Where you fit in

Read the full plan at masaleads.org

Share your voice

Take the membership experience survey.

Advocate

Join the statewide advocate network.

Connect

Show up at your regional meetings.

Grow the pipeline

Mentor a new leader or refer a rising one.

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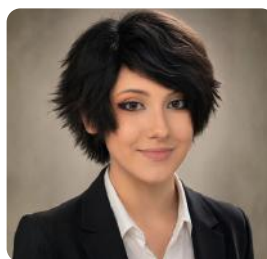
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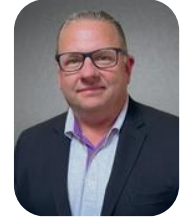
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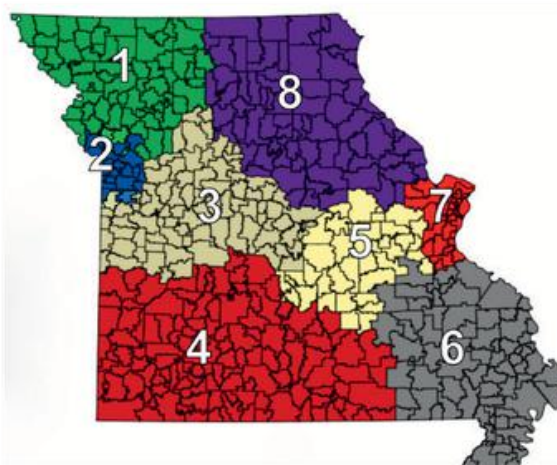
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Affton



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Why Relationships Matter the *Most*

By Dr. Adam Friga

Four years ago, when I was asked to serve on the MASA Executive Committee, I had no idea it would completely recharge and transform my experience as a superintendent. What began as another responsibility added to an already full plate has become one of the most meaningful chapters of my career.

As superintendents, we know that our title only hints at the full scope of the job. On the surface, we're charged with taking care of children, but underneath that, we're finance managers, instructional coaches, civic leaders, and motivators, often all before lunch. It's a role that demands everything we have, and it can be easy to lose sight of just how much good work is happening around us.

Serving on the Executive Committee changed that for me. It gave me a front-row seat to just how many high-quality leaders we have across the state of Missouri. Working alongside superintendents who care so deeply about kids, who show up ready to solve hard problems, share what's working, and support one another through what isn't, has been genuinely inspiring. When you put a room full of leaders together who care that much about kids, great things happen. Solutions get sharper. Ideas get better. And you leave energized instead of depleted.

This work is hard. Some years test us more than others, and we pour everything we have into it, sometimes at a cost to our own health and well-being. That's part of why I've come to value my time on the committee so much: the collaboration, the problem-solving, and the shared load of carrying this profession forward together. But if I'm honest, the best part of this experience hasn't been the strategic planning or the policy work, as important as that is. It's been the friendships. The relationships built over four years of shared challenges have become some of the most important in my professional life, and I expect they'll last well beyond my time in this role.



“Serving as a superintendent has taught me to be strategic and to always put people first. But serving on the MASA Executive Committee has taught me something just as important: when you hit a wall, lean on your network.”

The high-quality people and friendships I've gained through this work have energized me, helped me think through tough problems, and reminded me, again and again, that there is always a solution if you're willing to look for it together.

As we head into another year, I know it will bring its own set of challenges, as every year does. But I also know we have some of the best and brightest leaders in the country right here in Missouri. That gives me great optimism for another successful year in public education, and I'm grateful for the chance to serve alongside all of you.

Adam Friga

Dr. Adam Friga
MASA Executive Committee President
Superintendent, Oran R-III

EVENT CALENDAR

OCTOBER

- 1 MASA Advanced Leadership: 4 Disciplines of Execution
- 2 MASA Emeritus Reunion
- 7 Southeast Region Meeting
- 7 MASA Advanced Leadership: 4 Disciplines of Execution
- 8 Women in Leadership Virtual Book Study
- 8 Northwest Region Meeting
- 9 Southwest Region Meeting
- 10 MASA Closed - Columbus Day
- 13-14 Aspiring Superintendent Cohort
- 14 West Central & GKC Region Meetings
- 15-16 Missouri Superintendent Academy
- 16 South Central Region Meeting
- 19 Federal Programs & ePeGS Workshop
- 20 Northeast Region Meeting
- 20 State Board of Education Meeting
- 22-24 MSBA in Cooperation with MASA & MoASBO Fall Conference
- 23 MASA Business Meeting
- 30 GSTL Region Meeting

NOVEMBER

- 3 School Finance Workshop: Evaluating the Budget
- 4 School Finance Workshop: Evaluating the Budget
- 4 Southeast Region Meeting
- 10 MASA Long-Range Facility Planning Workshop
- 11 GKC Region Meeting
- 11 MASA Office Closed - Veterans Day
- 12 Northwest Region Meeting
- 12-13 MASA Executive Committee Meeting
- 18 West Central & Northeast Region Meetings
- 20 Southwest, South Central, & GSTL Region Meetings
- 23-27 MASA Office Closed - Thanksgiving Break

DECEMBER

- 1 MASA Public School Advocacy Workshop
- 2 Southeast Region Meeting
- 7 Women in Leadership Cohort
- 8 Student Transportation Success Workshop
- 10 Northwest Region Meeting
- 15 State Board of Education Meeting
- 16 Northeast Region Meeting
- 21-31 MASA Office Closed - Holiday Break



More Details Online

*Events are current as of publication.
For the most up-to-date details, visit
masaleads.org/events or
scan the QR code.*



UPCOMING EVENTS

MASA 2026 – 27



OCT

EMERITUS REUNION

October 2, 2026 | MCSA Education Center, Jefferson City

OCT

MASA-MSBA FALL CONFERENCE

October 22-24, 2026 | Crown Center, Kansas City

FEB

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

February 8-9, 2027 | Margaritaville, Osage Beach

FEB

AASA NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION

February 25-27, 2027 | Atlanta, GA

MAR

MASA SPRING CONFERENCE

March 17-19, 2027 | Margaritaville, Osage Beach

JUN

MASA MASTERS GOLF TOURNAMENT

June 7, 2027 | The Oaks, Osage Beach

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Lance Massey
MET Executive Director
metexecutivedirector@gmail.com

Chance Wistrom
Alera Group Benefits Consultant
Chance.Wistrom@aleraigroup.com

Zach Harris
Alera Group Benefits Consultant
Zach.Harris@aleraigroup.com

Called to Leadership

Adam Friga has dedicated his life to education and service, transitioning from an office at Oran High School to his goal of becoming a public school superintendent.

— By Chelsea Blair

Before Adam Friga was Dr. Friga, before he was superintendent of Oran R-III or president of the Missouri Association of School Administrators, he was a high school senior helping in the front office at Oran High School. He stocked vending machines, collected attendance sheets, changed letters on the school's marquee and handled whatever tasks needed to be done. It was unremarkable work by most standards, but it placed him in an environment that would shape the rest of his life.

As he worked alongside school leaders, Friga found himself paying close attention to the high school principal. He watched the interaction with students, the problem solving, the responsibility and the service that came with leading a school. Somewhere during that year, he made a decision. "I think I'm one of the few people who can say that at 18, I knew I wanted to be an administrator," he recalled. "And it never changed."

For many educational leaders, administration is a destination reached after years in the classroom. For Friga, it was a calling recognized almost immediately. What attracted him was not authority or prestige. It was the opportunity to help others and shoulder responsibility in service of a community. He has long believed that leadership is ultimately about people. "I've always loved to help people," he said. "I've always liked the responsibility of it, I love for people to depend on me."

Nearly twenty-five years later, those same convictions continue to define his leadership. Today, Friga is in his tenth year as superintendent of Oran R-III and serves as MASA Executive Committee President. While his responsibilities now extend across Missouri, his roots remain firmly planted in the small Scott County community that shaped him. For Friga, leadership has never been about moving on. It has been about giving back.



Pictured below:
*Dr. Adam Friga and Dr. Mark
Penny inside Oran R-III*



A Career Built at Home

Friga attended kindergarten in Oran before spending several years at the neighboring parochial school and returning to the district in fifth grade. From that point forward, Oran became the backdrop for nearly every chapter of his life. "I've been an Oran Eagle since fifth grade," he said. The connection extended beyond the classroom. Long before he became superintendent, Friga wore an Eagles baseball uniform. He still speaks proudly about playing for Oran and helping the Eagles reach the state championship game in 1998.

The experience helped shape his understanding of teamwork, accountability and representing something larger than yourself, lessons that would later influence his approach as both a school leader and coach. After Graduating from Oran in 2001, Friga attended William Woods University, eventually earning three degrees from the institution. Determined to pursue administration, he entered the educational leadership program ahead of schedule and completed his master's degree by age 24.

His first job came at St. Henry School in Charleston. Like many young educators, he quickly learned that a career in education requires a willingness to do whatever is necessary. He taught algebra, coached girls basketball and often swept and mopped the cafeteria floor himself so players would have a place to practice. Looking back, he laughs and describes himself simply as "a guy who needed a job." The work may not have been glamorous, but it reinforced a lesson that would follow him throughout his career: meaningful leadership begins with a willingness to serve.

Not long afterward, an opportunity opened in Oran, and Friga returned home to teach American government while coaching baseball and basketball. The workload was demanding and the expectations were high, but the experience helped shape the work ethic that would become one of his defining characteristics. As Friga put it, "I was never afraid to work."

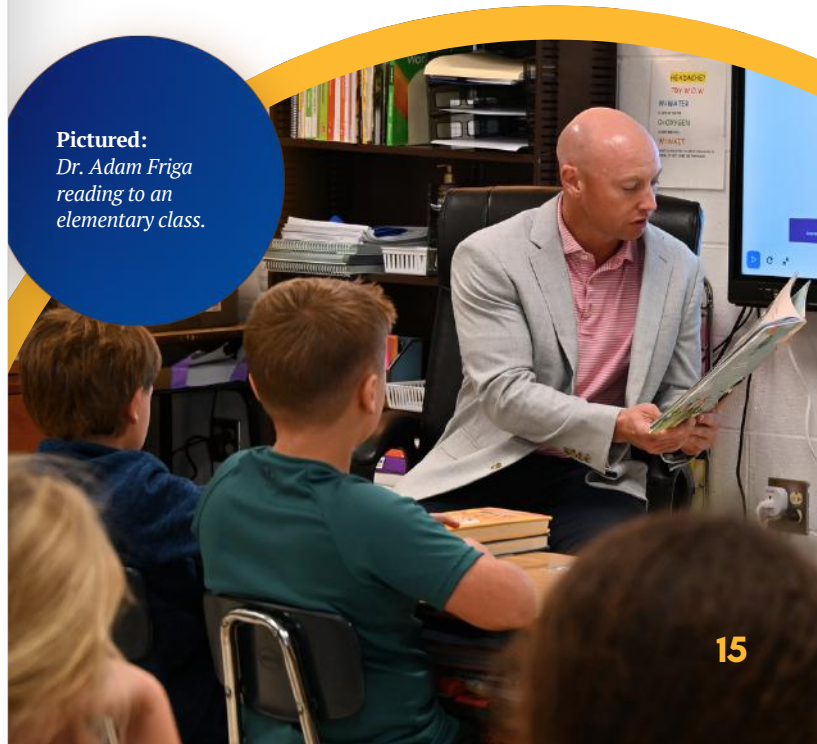
At age 28, he became principal of Oran High School. The promotion came with immediate challenges. He was the youngest person in the building, responsible for leading educators with considerably more experience than he possessed. Building on the school's strong culture and traditions, Friga focused on creating greater consistency across the campus. He worked with staff to align expectations, reinforce structure and establish systems that helped students and teachers succeed.

He responded by focusing on fundamentals. Each morning, he greeted students and staff at the front door. Expectations were clearly communicated and consistently reinforced. Accountability became the norm. As he recalls, "It was a little rough for about six months." Over time, however, the culture began to change. Students who initially resisted the new expectations grew into leaders who reinforced them. By his third year, upperclassmen were helping younger students understand the standards and traditions that defined the school. "We built the culture," Friga said.

The experience taught him one of the most important lessons of his career: sustainable improvement happens when people take ownership of the culture they are helping create.

Six years later, Friga stepped into the superintendent role earlier than expected. He assumed leadership just as the district was advancing a major bond project and navigating important financial priorities. While the transition came more quickly than anticipated, it reflected the trust placed in him and the kind of responsibility he had spent his entire career preparing to accept.

Pictured:
*Dr. Adam Friga
reading to an
elementary class.*





A Town That Shows Up

Ask Friga what makes Oran special and he does not begin with test scores, graduation rates or championship banners. Instead, he talks about people. "They're just good people," he said, answering the question without hesitation.

For Friga, the district's greatest strength has always been the character of the community surrounding it. Some staff members graduated from Oran themselves. Others arrived years ago and chose to stay. Together, they have built a culture rooted in hard work, relationships and a shared commitment to supporting students. "This community believes in hard work," Friga said. "They believe in doing the right thing."

That mindset reveals itself in countless ways. Neighbors help one another through difficult times. Community members answer the call when the district needs support. Staff members routinely take on responsibilities beyond their formal job descriptions because they care deeply about the students they serve. As Friga describes it, "If something hard is going on, we'll pull together and help each other out."

One example is the district's food pantry program, which quietly serves local families while protecting student privacy and dignity.

Community donations, staff initiative and student-led food drives help ensure families receive the assistance they need throughout the year. Students collect canned goods while trick-or-treating each fall, and staff members continually find new ways to support families through take-home meals, summer food programs and other community partnerships.

What makes the effort remarkable is not simply the program itself, but the commitment behind it. "Everybody does a lot," Friga said. "A lot of the same people do a lot of good work." That same commitment is reflected in the district's Portrait of a Graduate initiative. Developed through collaboration with parents, staff, students, community members and the Board of Education, the initiative identifies five characteristics every Oran graduate should possess: hard work, resilience, caring for others, communication skills and critical thinking. Taken together, the qualities feel remarkably similar to the values Friga sees every day in the community around him.

Pride in the Eagles

Community pride runs throughout Oran, perhaps nowhere more visibly than in its athletic programs. The district's baseball tradition is one of the most successful in Missouri, with numerous Final Four appearances

and multiple state championships over the years. Softball and basketball have also enjoyed sustained success. Friga credits that success not to extraordinary resources or secret formulas, but to the collective commitment of an entire community.

"You can't sustain success that long without the whole community buying in," he said. "I don't think we do anything outside the box except the level of care and commitment, and the amount of pride."

That same pride was evident during a tour of town when Friga stopped to discuss a project completed by students in the district's Agriculture Construction program. Students cleared overgrowth, rebuilt dugouts and helped rehabilitate a local ballfield while learning practical workforce skills. As he described the project, his focus remained on the students who completed it. Their craftsmanship, initiative and investment in the community represented exactly the kind of learning experience he hopes every student has before graduation.

For Friga, the project was never really about dugouts. It was about students discovering what they are capable of accomplishing and taking pride in contributing to something bigger than themselves.

Pictured below:
A third-grade class viewing
a documentary.

Serving Something Bigger

This year, Friga serves as MASA president after four years on the association's executive committee. He also serves on AASA's Governing Board and chairs MASA's School Finance Focus Group. For a superintendent leading a district of roughly 300 students, the level of involvement is significant. Friga hopes it also sends an important message.

"I think there's a narrative that if you're in a small district, maybe you can't do those types of things," he said. "I don't like that narrative. We all got a part to play in it." The relationships he has built through MASA have become one of the most rewarding aspects of his professional career. He describes the superintendent network as the strongest professional community he has experienced in education, where leaders genuinely work together to support one another. Those experiences have shaped his leadership while bringing new ideas and perspectives back to Oran.

"Oran R-III is a better place now because of the network I've had through the executive committee," he said. More importantly, the experience has reinforced his belief that leadership is ultimately about service.

"I really felt like I found what I was called to do."

Pictured below:
"The Giving Nest," an in-school food pantry.



Called to Lead

Throughout the conversation, Friga returned repeatedly to the same themes: service, responsibility, relationships and people. Those principles shaped him as a student. They guided him as a teacher, coach, principal and superintendent. They continue to drive him as MASA president.

Few educational leaders spend an entire career investing in the community that first invested in them. Friga grew up in Oran's classrooms, played on its ballfields, built his career in its schools and now watches his own daughters walk the same halls he once did.

As he serves school leaders across Missouri this year, his perspective remains grounded in the values that have defined both his community and his career.

"We're here to serve, we're here to support people. We're here to take care of people."

Twenty-five years after an 18-year-old student first watched a principal at work and decided he wanted to follow the same path, Adam Friga is exactly where he hoped he would be. Not because he never left Oran, but because he never stopped believing in the power of helping people and leading with purpose. ■



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Brothers Overstreet

Rooted in resilience, shaped by family legacy, and united by a lifelong commitment to serving students.

By Chelsea Blair



Ask Dr. Tyler Overstreet and Dr. Christian Overstreet where their leadership comes from, and brothers land on the same two words: no excuses. It was the mantra that filled their childhood home in Nixa, and it now shapes how each of them leads a school district. Tyler is in his first year as superintendent of Republic R-III, and Christian is in his second as superintendent of Fair Grove R-X.

Five years apart, they've walked the same road: baseball fields, classrooms, principals' offices, and now superintendents' desks a few miles apart. That road traces back to two educators who, without ever pushing it, planted the same calling in two of their sons.

Raised in the Classroom

Tyler and Christian are two of six Overstreet children, but it was their parents' careers that set the family's course. Their father, Mark Overstreet, spent more than two decades as a teacher, coach and administrator at Nixa High School, from 1990 to 2012. Their mother, Sharon Overstreet, taught elementary school.

"Our mother had the care and compassion side an elementary teacher would have, and our dad had the old coach-and-administrator side: expectations, accountability, but also helping everyone grow and improve in their own unique, individual ways," Tyler said. "That's a rough summary of our background, and how education became such a big part of it."

Christian knew early that he wanted to coach and teach, inspired by the coaches and teachers who had shaped him, many of whom, he later realized, had also been shaped by his own parents. "We run into former students and players of our parents, and just the impact they're able to tell us about: 'Man, I love your dad, your dad was awesome, your mom was such a good teacher,'" Christian said.

"Hearing those stories growing up is kind of what led me into education."

Tyler flirted with a different plan, briefly considering law school, before the same pull brought him back. "Seeing the impact our parents had on

kids, and on those they worked with as adults, made me feel called to do it once I got to college," he said.

From the Dugout to the Superintendent's Office

Christian played baseball at Missouri State, then coached there, before joining Tyler at Rogersville High School. He spent 10 years as head baseball coach at Fair Grove, the last seven also serving as assistant principal and athletic director, then three years as principal before becoming superintendent in July 2025, now in his second year.

"I wanted nothing to do with administration. I wanted to coach and teach forever," Christian admitted. It was Chris Stallings, an assistant coach under Christian who later became Fair Grove's principal (and whom Tyler eventually hired as an intermediate principal in Republic), who saw something else in him. "He was the guy who said, 'Hey, I think you could be a good administrator,'" Christian said. "That was a great opportunity."

Tyler's path wound through Johnson County Community College, Mizzou and Missouri State, then five years teaching and coaching at Logan-Rogersville before he moved to Glendale High School in Springfield, where a new principal asked him one June to become assistant principal and athletic director, a moment he wasn't expecting. "The life of an administrator is busy, but being a Class 5 head football coach was also extremely busy, and we just felt like the time was right," he said. He spent five years as Republic's high school principal and six more as assistant superintendent before stepping into the superintendency this year. Between them, the brothers now bring 34 years of combined experience to Missouri public education: Tyler entering his 20th year, Christian his 15th.

What kept them there, they said, is what drew them to coaching in the first place. "You get to have an impact on kids, maybe not as directly as a teacher or coach, but you can help those who most closely serve kids," Tyler said. "You help remove barriers so they can help kids reach their potential."

A Family Built on No Excuses

The brothers' belief in resilience traces back to their father. As a senior at Boonville High School in the 1970s, Mark Overstreet lost circulation in both legs after what doctors believe was a reaction to a vaccination. Both legs were amputated below the knee, and doctors gave him two weeks to live. He was 17.

He never let it slow him down, and he never let his sons treat it as an excuse, either. "He knew what it was like to wake up and have everything he thought taken from him," Tyler said. "No excuses was a mantra in our house. Find the best in every situation, no matter how bad it is, and make the most of it."

The family faced another loss when the boys' mother, Sharon, passed away when Tyler was 16 and Christian was 12. "Those experiences shaped us and bonded us," Tyler said. "You can sit around and feel sorry for yourself, or you can do something about it. I think that's why we both approach things head-on, personally and professionally."

As the family moved forward, another educator became an important part of their story. Their stepmother, Karen Overstreet, taught at Nixa Junior High and continued the family's deep connection to education. "She was my favorite teacher in seventh-grade," Christian said.

That mindset carries into the new school year. At Fair Grove, Christian is building on a talk by former Navy SEAL Jocko Willink called "Good": treating every setback as an opportunity rather than an excuse. "Bad test scores? Good. We've got a chance to reach a kid. A discipline issue or a parent issue? Good. Now we have the chance to tell our story," he said.

At Republic, Tyler built this year's theme, "The RepMO Depot," around the town's railroad history and the idea of servant leadership: staying "on track" through a season of new faces in district leadership while keeping the focus on kids. "We don't want the movement of the adults to make an impact on the kids," he said. "We want it to stay business as usual for them."



Shown here:
Overstreet Family Photographs



Shown here:
Christian and Tyler Overstreet

Brothers, Best Friends, Coaching Staff

The brothers have covered a lot of ground separately, but they've never really left each other's side. They talk multiple times a day, their wives are best friends, their kids are best friends, and most weekends they're together on a youth baseball field: Christian as third base coach, Tyler as what Christian calls "director of baseball ops."

"We're really like best friends," Tyler said. "One of us will be dealing with something, and we'll run it by the other, or we'll just get caught up. I think that's one thing both our backgrounds have given us: an understanding that it's not one person who's the fountain of all knowledge. Learning from others is something we do regularly."

That same instinct extends to the Southwest Missouri superintendents both brothers credit with shaping their careers: Dr. Chance Wistrom and Dr. Matt Pearce for Tyler, and Mike Bell, his predecessor at Fair Grove, for Christian, part of what Christian calls his own "Mount Rushmore,"

many of whom he met through MASA. "They're down-to-earth, solid people who want what's best for Fair Grove just as much as their own district," he said. "Connecting me with them has given me confidence, and created friendships and camaraderie that go a long way."

Their advice for anyone eyeing the superintendency: get involved, build your network, don't grow in a vacuum. As Tyler put it, "We're Southwest Missouri boys through and through ... it truly is a brotherhood."

For the Overstreet brothers, that word carries a double meaning: one that started long before either of them ever set foot in a superintendent's office, in a house in Nixa where their parents taught them that no matter what life hands you, there's always a way to rise above it. ■

It's the no-excuses approach: what are you doing to fix it?

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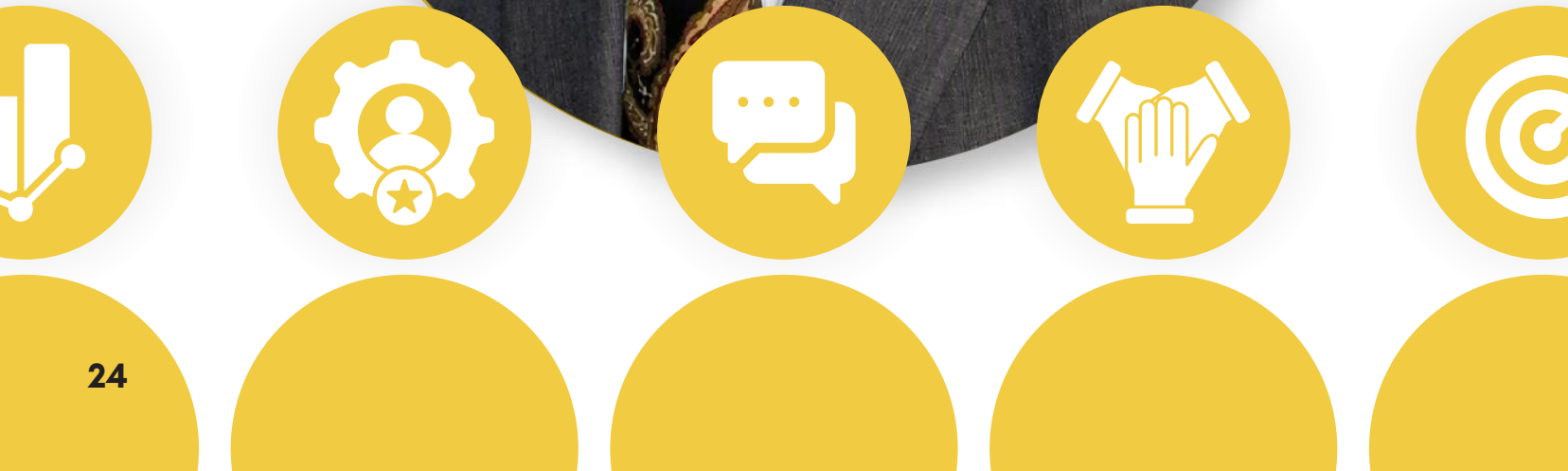
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Built on Relationships

Teacher, Coach, Superintendent, Lobbyist, Mentor
to Generations of Missouri School Leaders

Dr. Chris
Straub

By Chelsea Blair





Making a Difference.

Dr. Chris Straub has spent parts of six decades in Missouri public education as a teacher, coach, superintendent, lobbyist and mentor. Ask him what mattered most across all of it, and the answer isn't a title or a policy win. It's the relationships he built along the way: a superintendent who won him over in a single interview, and a Catholic school principal who became one of his closest friends.

From Colorado to the Classroom

Straub grew up in Flagler, Colorado, a farming town of about 600 people, where his family ran the local hospital. Following his father, grandfather and grandmother to Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri, he graduated in 1966 with a chemistry degree and a simple goal: "I'd like to teach kids."

He landed his first job in Union, Missouri, drawn less by the town than by its superintendent, Leo Curtright. "I just said, I want to work for that guy," Straub said. He taught chemistry and physics, coached football, and climbed every rung in the district: assistant principal, assistant superintendent, and finally superintendent, 13 years in all, while driving to Columbia at night to earn a specialist's degree. Eventually, he also earned his doctorate where he received recognition as a Distinguished Graduate of the University of Missouri College of Education.

Building Bridges in Jefferson City

When the superintendency in Hannibal opened up, longtime friends there encouraged Straub to apply. He did, and spent a decade as Hannibal's superintendent, while also volunteering his way up through MASA's leadership ranks.

He became superintendent in Jefferson City in 1989 and, the following year, was elected MASA's president. He arrived in Jefferson City to a district with overcrowded schools and a bond issue that hadn't passed in years. He eventually got one across the finish line at 71 percent, funding two new middle schools and solving the crunch.

That work leaned heavily on relationships Straub built across the community, including a genuine friendship with Jim Rackers, principal of Helias, the area's Catholic high school. The two met most Saturday mornings for coffee, and when a bill surfaced in the early 1990s to create Missouri's first private-school voucher program, they worked together to help defeat it in committee.



“A superintendent is only as good as the teachers and administrators around them.”

Service Beyond Retirement

Straub retired from the superintendency in 1997 with 31 years in the state retirement system, but he wasn't done serving Missouri schools. He spent three years as MASA's assistant executive director, then six as the Missouri School Boards Association's first full-time lobbyist, building relationships across the aisle, participating in weekly meetings throughout legislative sessions, and helping rewrite the state's school funding formula in 2005.

In 2007, he returned to MASA as a part-time finance consultant, a role he kept for a decade, giving back to the profession that had given him so much. He hosted a weekly gathering of Missouri's education associations for 10 straight years and started the three annual school finance workshops MASA still runs today. At the same time, he taught graduate-level school finance courses at two universities for two decades, training the next generation of school leaders. He finally retired in 2017.

Throughout his career, Straub received numerous honors recognizing his contributions to education, including the Pioneer in Education Award, induction into the MoASBO Hall of Fame, and designation as a MASA Past President Honoree.

What He'd Tell the Next Generation

Straub's advice for today's superintendents comes from hard experience: never spend one-time money on ongoing costs, a lesson he learned decades ago when a new power plant flooded his district with cash. He sees districts make the same mistake with things like pandemic relief funds and similar one-time windfalls. His broader advice is simpler still: get out of your office, build relationships in the community and with staff and board members, and keep parents informed. “A superintendent is only as good as the teachers and administrators around them,” he said.

Ask Straub what he hopes his MASA colleagues remember about him, and he deflects with a joke: “That I'm still alive.” The truth is, his influence doesn't depend on being remembered. Every fall, when a district sits down for a school finance workshop built on the model he started, sets a budget using a process he helped design, or leans on a funding formula he helped pass, Straub's work is still in the room. Six decades after a small-town kid from Flagler, Colorado, decided he wanted to teach, that's the legacy he leaves: not a title or a headline, but a state full of schools running a little better because he gave a lifetime to them. ■



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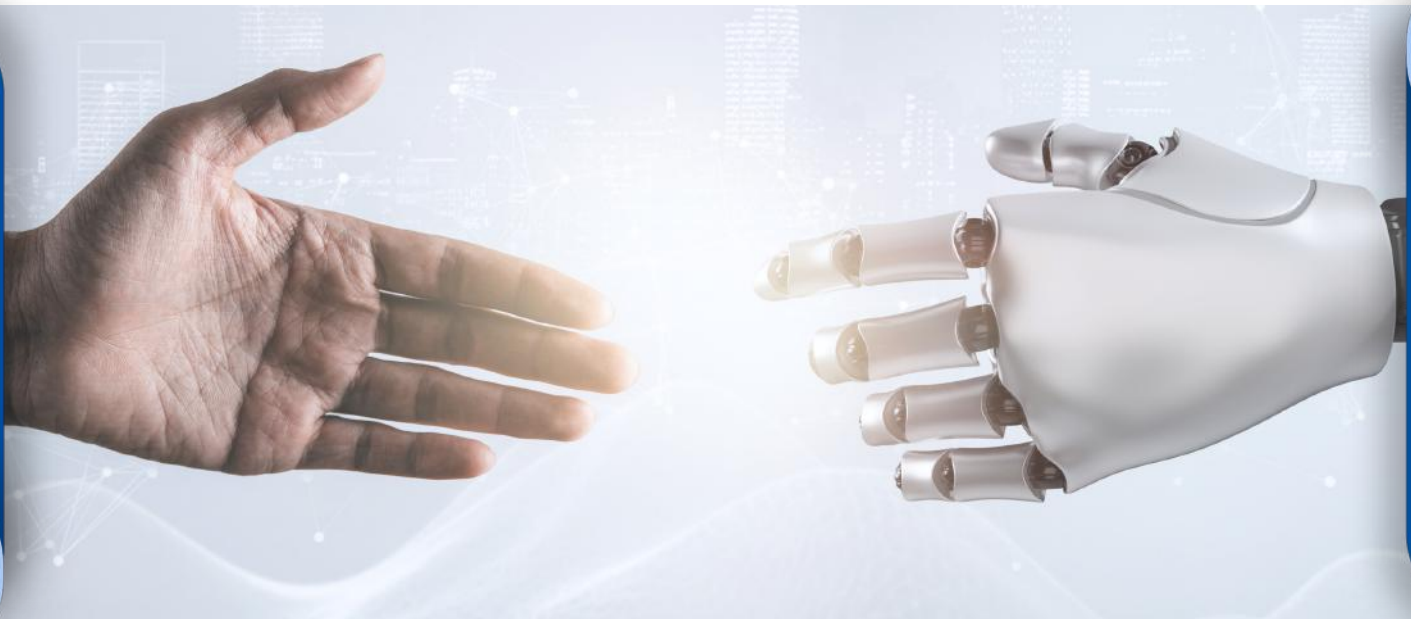
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Beyond the Fiscal Note: Introducing Lebra IMPACT

A year after recognizing fiscal note challenges for Missouri superintendents, MASA is introducing an AI tool to simplify complex legislation into clear, district-specific communications for its members.

By Dr. Mark Penny



When I first started with MASA, one of the things I heard from our members, again and again, was how difficult fiscal notes had become. Time-consuming. Often confusing, even for superintendents who know their budgets inside and out. A bill moves through Jefferson City, and within days a superintendent is expected to understand what it means for their district and explain it to a board, staff, parents, and community, usually without a policy team or a communications department to help. That gap stuck with me. When MASA built its strategic plan this year, we made sure it included a goal aimed squarely at that problem. The result, launching in phases beginning this September, is Lebra IMPACT: a new

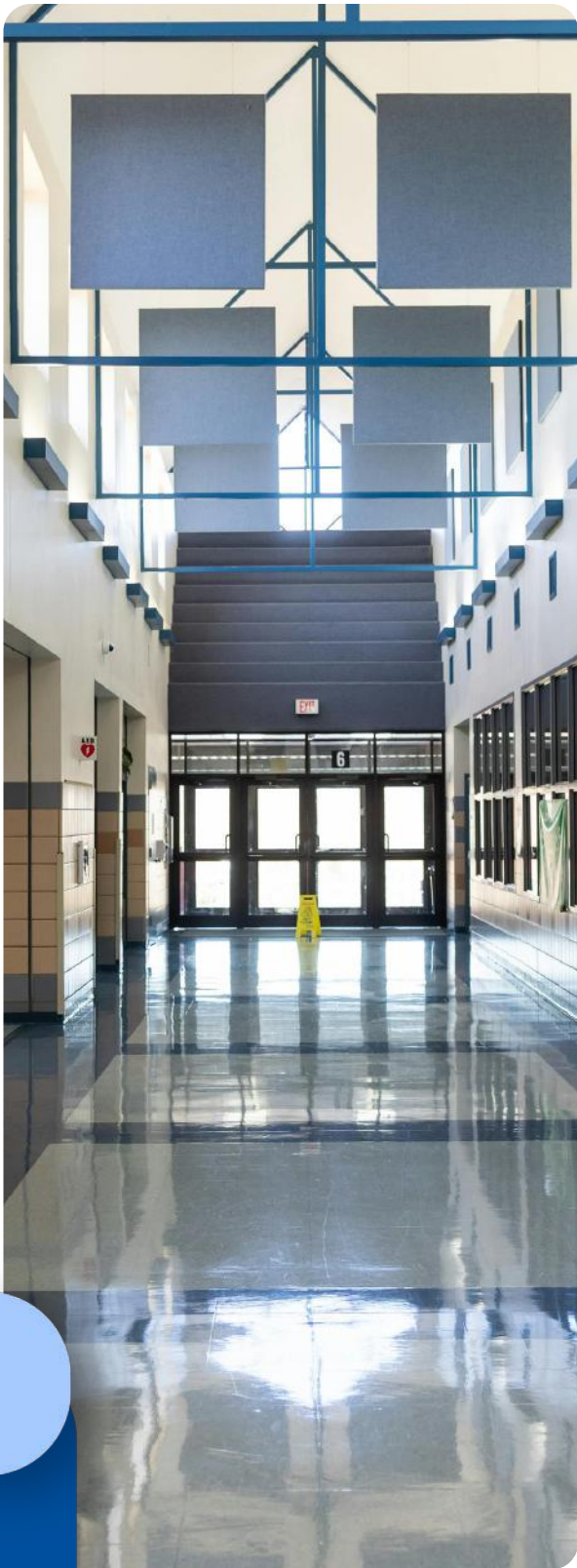
tool, free to MASA members this year, that turns complex legislation into plain-language, district-specific understanding, and gives superintendents a fast, credible starting point for communicating it.

From a Question to a Partnership

Last fall, MASA partnered with Lebra, a company already helping school districts use AI for staff evaluations and internal communication. We asked them a further question: could this same technology help our members communicate with their staff, boards, communities, and legislators about the issues affecting their districts?

Months of brainstorming followed. Lebra cofounder and CEO Matt Wenzel,

retired building and district administrator and Lebra partner Ryan Stanley, and Joplin Schools Assistant Superintendent of Finance Dr. Jordan Henegar worked together to build the answer: Lebra IMPACT. “The idea started with a simple question: how can we help superintendents spend less time deciphering legislation and more time leading their districts?” Wenzel said. “What began as a conversation about simplifying legislative information evolved into a statewide platform that helps leaders understand what proposed legislation means for their district and communicate those impacts with confidence.”



Built for Missouri Districts

What sets IMPACT apart is how specific it is. The platform is customized to each district using its own CSIP, budget, strategic plan, vision and mission, and communication voice and tone. Districts upload their own audiences and apply the scenarios specific to them, then generate communication, including fiscal impact analysis, with the press of a button. “Most AI tools start with a blank prompt and expect the user to provide all the context,” Wenzel said. “IMPACT starts with the context already built in.” The platform, he added, was built in partnership with MASA and Missouri superintendents: “Every feature was shaped by the real challenges school leaders face during legislative session, not by technologists guessing what they might need.”

What’s Inside the Platform

Instead of reading a lengthy bill, searching for its fiscal implications, and then drafting communication from scratch, a superintendent using IMPACT can see a plain-language summary of proposed legislation, district-specific financial and operational impact projections, and AI-supported drafts for boards, staff, and community members, all in one place. A central dashboard keeps that information current throughout the legislative session, rather than scattered across email threads and bill trackers. “Instead of starting with a blank page, leaders start with a thoughtful first draft that’s grounded in district-specific information,” Wenzel said. “That allows them to spend more time thinking strategically and less time wrestling with wording.”

Keeping You In Control

Both Wenzel and Henegar, who helped shape IMPACT’s development, describe trust as the feature that mattered most. “The information has to be accurate, clear, and usable, but it also has to preserve the superintendent’s judgment and voice,” Henegar said. “This cannot be a tool that replaces local leadership or asks someone to send a generic AI-generated message with no review.” Every draft IMPACT produces is meant to be reviewed, edited, and personalized before it goes out, a starting point rather than a finished message.

Henegar, who brought a superintendent and school-finance perspective to the platform’s development, said the goal was making a complicated issue feel manageable. A superintendent should be able to move, he said, “from ‘I just heard about this bill’ to ‘I understand the potential local implications and have a thoughtful way to communicate about it,’ without spending hours starting from scratch.”

From Pilot to Rollout

MASA's Executive Committee piloted IMPACT over the summer, and the response was strong: enthusiasm, optimism, and genuine excitement about what the tool could do. "Last few years it's been extremely difficult as we try to run a district," said Dr. Bob Jerome of Blue Springs School District. "The ability to adapt and craft impact statements bring tremendous value."

Dr. Kevin Carl of Hancock Place put it more simply: "What you are giving us here is really intuitive. It's incredible; it's really easy to use." MASA believed in the platform enough to invest in it directly, and it will be available to members at no cost this year. IMPACT is rolling out in phases, released to groups of districts one at a time beginning in September, with plans to refine and improve it as more superintendents put it to use.

What excites me most is not the technology itself, but what it makes possible. "Too often, districts are trying to explain an issue only after confusion, misinformation, or concern has already taken hold," Henegar said. "Lebra can help leaders get ahead of the conversation with clear, local, fact-based communication." When people understand how policy decisions affect their local district, and see their leaders communicating about it clearly and consistently, they are better equipped to be informed advocates for public education. That was the goal from the beginning, not just a faster way to read a bill, but a better way to lead through one. ■

"The AI doesn't replace a superintendent's judgment. It amplifies it."

Featured Contributors



Matt Wenzel, CEO and Co-Founder of Lebra.
Email: Matt@lebrahq.com



Ryan Stanley, Vice President of Partnerships for Lebra.
Email: Ryan@lebrahq.com



Dr. Jordan Henegar, Assistant Superintendent of Finance at Joplin Schools.
Email: Jordanhenegar@joplinschools.org

SB3 One Year Later

The April 2026 elections reveal the practical problems with Missouri's property tax experiment.

By Natalie Hoernschemeyer



When Senate Bill 3 emerged from Missouri's 2025 special legislative session, supporters presented it as a straightforward effort to provide property tax relief to homeowners. In a previous article, I examined *Kirchhoffer et al. v. State of Missouri et al.*, a legal challenge to Section 137.1055, enacted as part of SB3. The case was brought by two individual taxpayers, a small group of public school districts, and a fire protection district, and it raises fundamental constitutional questions regarding SB3's arbitrary classification of counties, its impact on tax uniformity, and its unequal treatment of taxpayers and voters throughout Missouri.

Section 137.1055 divides Missouri counties into three categories: "zero-percent," "five-percent," and "ineligible" counties. The statute authorizes counties in the first two categories to submit the measure to local voters. If approved, eligible homeowners receive a property tax credit that effectively freezes future property tax increases in zero-percent counties and limits future increases in five-percent counties. Ineligible counties are excluded altogether and are not permitted to submit the question to voters. The plaintiffs in *Kirchhoffer* argue that these classifications and the resulting differences in tax treatment raise serious constitutional concerns.

One year after the passing of SB3, Missouri has its first opportunity to evaluate how the system functions in practice. The April 2026 elections have come and gone, and the results reveal a process that was anything but uniform. Counties presented different ballot questions, held elections at different times, and in some cases failed to submit the measure to voters at all. Rather than creating a consistent statewide approach to property tax relief, SB3 has produced a patchwork system that varies dramatically depending on where a taxpayer happens to live.

A Fragmented Election Process

At the April 2026 election, twenty-three counties required by Section 137.1055 to submit the question to voters did not do so. Those counties included Atchison, Bollinger, Butler, Callaway, Cooper, Dunklin, Lewis, Lincoln, Mercer, Mississippi, Nodaway, Pemiscot, Perry, Ray, Ripley, Scott, Shannon, Shelby, St. Clair, St. Francois, Ste. Genevieve, Stone, and Worth. Texas County also did not submit the question at the April 2026 election, but for a different reason: officials placed the measure before voters in November 2025, where it passed months before most Missouri voters had an opportunity to consider it.

Among the counties that did submit the question to voters, results were mixed. Twelve counties rejected the measure, while sixty-one approved it. Counties rejecting the proposal included Carter, Christian, Holt, Howell, Iron, Johnson, Knox, Monroe, Oregon, Scotland, St. Charles, and Webster. So, depending on where they lived, Missouri voters either approved the measure, rejected it, voted on it months earlier than other counties, or were never presented with the question at all. But the inconsistencies did not end with whether or when voters were asked to decide the question.

Varying Ballot Language

During the April election, most counties used similar ballot language: “Shall the County of [County Name] exempt eligible taxpayers from certain tax increases on eligible taxpayers’ primary residence above the liability incurred during the initial credit year?” At first glance, this language appears straightforward. Yet it omitted one of the most important details: voters were not informed whether they lived in a “zero-percent” county, where property taxes would effectively be frozen, or a “five-percent” county, where annual increases would merely be capped.

The distinction is significant. A property tax freeze and a five-percent cap are materially different forms of tax relief. Nevertheless, many voters approved or rejected the measure without being told which system would actually apply in their county. Other counties used considerably different ballot language. Cass County’s ballot informed voters that the program would “freeze” property tax liability on an eligible homestead, subject to limited exceptions. Bates County’s ballot explained that annual increases would be limited to the greater of five percent or the annual increases in

the Consumer Price Index. Webster County took yet another approach, expressly informing voters that SB3 was “currently under legal challenge” and making implementation contingent upon the legislation surviving judicial review. Some counties even cited the wrong statutory provision: Franklin, Lafayette, and St. Charles Counties referenced Section 137.1120, rather than Section 137.1055. Consistency in voter information is not a trivial concern. It goes directly to whether voters throughout Missouri were afforded an equal opportunity to make informed decisions. The uneven implementation of SB3 also has tangible consequences for taxpayers and the local taxing entities that depend on property tax revenue.



Real-World Consequences

The implementation of SB3 demonstrates that similarly situated taxpayers may face different tax consequences solely because of county boundaries.

Meramec Valley R-III School District provides a useful example. The district encompasses property located in both Jefferson County and St. Louis County. Jefferson County is a zero-percent county that voted to approve the measure. St. Louis County was excluded from voting on any type of relief. This means that taxpayers in Jefferson County will pay lower taxes to the Meramec Valley R-III School District than similarly situated taxpayers in St. Louis County.

As such, homeowners living within the same school district face different tax obligations for supporting the same educational system simply because their homes happen to be located on opposite sides of a county line. Two taxpayers receiving the same educational services, voting for the same school board, and benefiting from the same district resources may contribute different amounts toward those services based solely on the county in which their property is located.

According to Mike Owen, superintendent of the Doniphan R-I School District in Ripley County, that same inconsistency is why his district's board voted to help fund the Kirchhoffer litigation.

“Two children going to the same school, receiving the same services, yet their parents could be taxed totally differently. ***We don't believe that is constitutional.***”

Owen also sees the disparity reaching past the classroom: “This bill will forever take away from your local community. Not just the school, every community service available: police, EMS, fire department, libraries, sheltered workshops.”

The implications extend far beyond individual taxpayers. School districts, libraries, fire protection districts, ambulance districts, and other local taxing entities rely heavily on property tax revenues to provide essential public services. When tax limitations apply unevenly across jurisdictions, the resulting disparities can affect both revenue stability and the equitable funding of those services.

Looking Ahead

The constitutional questions surrounding SB3 are now squarely before the courts. On June 29, 2026, both the plaintiffs and the State filed competing motions for summary judgment in the Circuit Court of Cole County, asking the court to determine whether Section 137.1055 complies with the Missouri Constitution based on an agreed factual record.

That record now includes the April 2026 election results, the varying ballot language used throughout Missouri, and the practical effects on taxpayers and local taxing entities. The case is fully submitted, and school districts, local governments, and taxpayers across Missouri are awaiting a ruling that could determine not only the future of SB3, but also broader questions concerning how Missouri funds public education and governs local taxation for years to come. ■



Natalie Hoernschemeyer
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+1 816 519-9473
brent.blevins@psc.com



Todd Goffoy
+1 314 726-7532
todd.goffoy@psc.com



John Jungmann
+1 417 408-3217
john.jungmann@psc.com



Matthew Courtney
+1 913 345-3355
matthew.courtney@psc.com

*Competitive and negotiated long-term transactions, underwriter and financial advisor combined. Source: Thomson Reuters, as of 12/31/2025 Since 1895. Member SIPC and NYSE. © 2026 Piper Sandler & Co. CM-26-13143 8/26

No. 1

In the Midwest by par amount of K-12 education transactions, 2023-2025*

\$4.8B

Par amount of K-12 education bond financings in the Midwest, 2023-2025*

272

K-12 education transactions completed in the Midwest in 2023-2025*



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MCSA Finance Academy

Powered by MASA & MoASBO, helping Missouri's new superintendents & central office leaders understand school finance.

By Kelly Hinshaw

Ask a new superintendent what caught them most off guard about stepping into the role, and school finance is likely to be near the top of the list. Fund accounting, cash flow, revenue sources, compliance requirements, and building and managing a district budget can present a steep learning curve, even for experienced educators and administrators. While leadership preparation programs address many aspects of the superintendency, few have the time to provide the depth of financial training the position demands. As a result, many of Missouri's newest superintendents and central office leaders have traditionally learned school finance on the job, one budget decision and one fiscal year at a time.

The MCSA Finance Academy for New School Leaders was created to change that reality. The Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA), in partnership with the Missouri Association of School Business Officials (MoASBO), developed the yearlong Missouri Council of School Administrators (MCSA) Academy to give new school leaders practical, in-depth preparation for the financial responsibilities they face. Powered by MASA and MoASBO, the program brings together the leadership experience of former superintendents and the technical expertise of experienced school finance officers.

Designed for first-year superintendents and other central office administrators with responsibility for district finances, the academy includes ten learning sessions from July 2026 through May 2027, combining in-person, virtual, and conference-based experiences at no cost to members. Its inaugural cohort of ninety-three individuals is already working

through a comprehensive curriculum that moves from the fundamentals of Missouri school finance and fund accounting to budgeting, revenues, compliance, cash flow, and the full financial cycle of operating a school district.

One Classroom, Two Perspectives

One of the academy's defining features is the experience and perspective of those leading each session. Two former chief financial officers, Patty Bedborough and Paul Northington, along with retired superintendent Dr. Jim Cummins, lead every session. Bedborough, associate executive director of MoASBO, sees this combination as central to the academy's success. "Together they represent the largest and most experienced network of school district administrators in Missouri," she said.

The instructors bring complementary perspectives to the program. Former CFOs provide technical expertise in school finance, accounting, budgeting, and compliance, while a former superintendent brings a leadership perspective, helping participants understand how financial decisions connect to the broader responsibilities of leading a school district.

That same cross-functional approach is reflected among the participants. Approximately two-thirds are superintendents, with the remaining participants serving in school finance roles for the first time. This mix creates opportunities for administrators with different responsibilities to learn alongside one another, and from one another. Northington, one of the academy's instructors, describes that collaboration as one of the program's greatest strengths: "This academy is unique because it provides a collaboration of efforts between two organizations who are providing vital

information to individuals who are new to their roles and who are also tasked to know school finance."

A Long Time Coming

Northington sees the pattern play out from the front of the room. New leaders, he said, "are often expected to understand school finance even though they had limited experience or exposure to the business side of education." Closing that gap early, he believes, changes the arc of a career. "Making wise financial decisions today will provide greater flexibility in the future. The goal is to be proactive versus reactive when guiding their districts." Bedborough sees the same gap from the MoASBO side. "New superintendents and school district leaders often step into their roles with strong instructional and leadership preparation," she said, "but traditional programs rarely provide the depth of financial training required to manage a school district in Missouri."



Kelly Hinshaw
MASA Director of Leader Development

MASA and MoASBO aimed to fulfill a long-standing need for Missouri's new school leaders, and **the positive feedback from the first cohort indicates success.**

Dr. Jim Cummins, one of the academy's contracted finance experts, sees a particular version of that gap playing out right now. Many of today's newer leaders spent much of their careers in a period when districts were not facing significant financial reductions, he said, and some are inheriting budgets that were temporarily buoyed by federal COVID relief dollars. As that one-time money has disappeared, districts can be left with ongoing commitments that outpace recurring revenue. What new leaders need most, in his view, is not just a grasp of this year's numbers but a sense of where the budget is headed, especially around personnel, a district's largest financial commitment. "Leaders need to be able to look beyond today's fund balance," he said, "and understand the financial trajectory of their district."

Built for the Long Run

The sessions ahead move from foundational fund accounting into budget development, financial reporting and compliance, and cash flow and fund balance monitoring: the tools a superintendent reaches for the rest of their career. Both Northington and Bedborough describe the payoff in terms bigger than any one spreadsheet. "Better decisions today set the course for a better decision long-term," Northington said.

Bedborough puts it in fuller terms: "The goal is for every participant to walk away feeling confident, supported, and ready to make informed financial decisions that strengthen their schools." Cummins ties that same payoff back to leadership itself. "A budget should be more than a financial document," he said. "It should reflect the district's priorities." Demonstrating that connection, he added, is what builds trust and confidence with staff, boards, and communities. For educators who began their career focused on serving and impacting students, this goal may be the quiet success of the academy: turning a part of the job that once felt overwhelming into one they feel equipped to tackle. By doing so, our new leaders can dedicate more time to their original mission, meeting the needs of those placed in their charge.

What the First Cohort Says

Forty-one participants filled out evaluations after the academy's first session this summer, and the response was uniformly strong: every one of them rated the session's overall value "Above Average" or "Very Good," with four in five choosing

the top mark. The written comments said even more than the numbers. "I was feeling a little lost when it came to the financial side of my job," one first-year superintendent wrote, "and this exceeded my expectation." Another called it simply "one of the best you have put on, and I have been to several." Participants pointed to specific, usable takeaways: breaking down fund accounting codes, learning to read the state's Annual Secretary of the Board Report, and ready-made spreadsheets they could plug their own district's numbers into that same week.



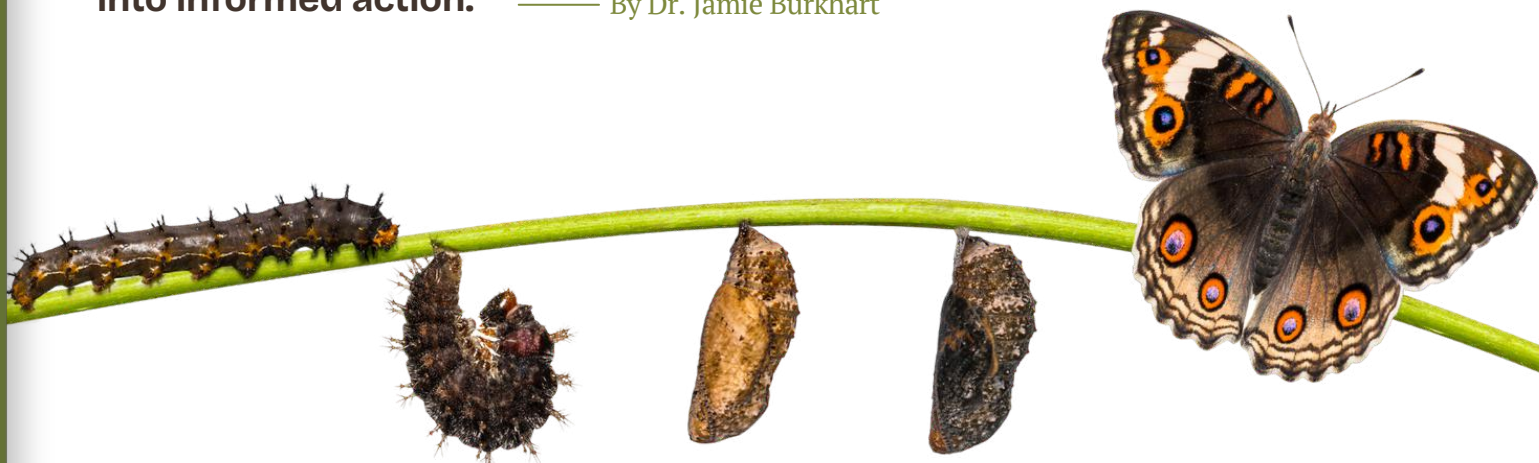
The connections in the room may outlast the curriculum itself. Participants said that kind of networking was already happening at the tables. One wrote that the format left room for "connecting with people who may hold different roles than me," while another said her table "really appreciated the time we had to talk about each topic and share how we approach those topics in our own district." ■



Pictured above: MCSA Finance Academy session, September 2026.

Advocacy is Not an Add-On

A practical blueprint for telling the story of Missouri public schools – and turning trusted relationships into informed action. — By Dr. Jamie Burkhart



Every day, Missouri's public schools carry out work that is both deeply personal and profoundly public. We teach children to read. We help them discover a career path. We provide meals, transportation, safety, belonging and opportunity. We strengthen the workforce and anchor communities. Yet too often, when public policy is being shaped, school leaders assume that the value of this work speaks for itself. It does not. If we do not explain how a proposal will affect students, families, staff and communities, someone else will define the issue for us—often without the local context needed to make a sound decision. Advocacy, then, is not a political side project. It is a core responsibility of educational leadership: making sure decision-makers understand the real-world consequences of the choices before them.

“Trust is accumulated in small deposits, and credibility is the currency of advocacy.”

From Reaction to Relationship

The weakest time to introduce yourself to a legislator is the moment you urgently need a vote. Effective advocacy begins long before a bill reaches the floor. It grows through consistent, respectful contact during the legislative interim and through repeated opportunities for elected officials to see public education at work.

As a MASA West Central Region Lobby Assistant, I have the privilege of spending time in the Missouri Capitol visiting with legislators. That experience has reinforced one lesson above all others: getting to know legislators and forming genuine relationships is paramount.

Advocacy is more effective when a lawmaker knows who is calling, trusts the information being shared and understands the community behind the message. Invite lawmakers into schools—not only for ceremonies, but for authentic learning experiences.

Let them visit a career and technical education program, ride a bus route, talk with new teachers, observe a reading intervention or spend part of a day with a principal. Include legislative staff members, who often help gather information and preserve institutional knowledge. When leaders and staff know your district before a crisis, your call during a crisis has context.

A school visit can make policy consequences tangible. Legislators can see promising, meaningful and effective learning programs in action—and better understand what students could lose if funding is reduced. A budget line becomes a classroom, a teacher, a pathway and a child's opportunity.

This relationship must not be transactional. Share good news. Thank lawmakers when they help. Offer your district as a source of accurate, timely information. Ask about their priorities and listen for common ground. Trust is accumulated in small deposits, and credibility is the currency of advocacy.

A Six-Step Blueprint for District Advocacy

1) Choose the priority

A district cannot advocate effectively for everything at once. With the board and leadership team, identify one or two priorities that have a clear connection to students and the district mission. Be specific about the desired outcome. “Support public education” is a value; “preserve adequate, predictable funding” is an actionable priority. Align local priorities with MASA and partner organizations when possible so Missouri’s education community can reinforce a shared message.

2) Know the policy and the people

A district cannot advocate effectively for everything at once. With the board and leadership team, identify one or two priorities that have a clear connection to students and the district mission. Be specific about the desired outcome. “Support public education” is a value; “preserve adequate, predictable funding” is an actionable priority. Align local priorities with MASA and partner organizations when possible so Missouri’s education community can reinforce a shared message.

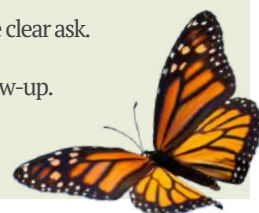
3) Build the local advocacy ecosystem

Do not map only the people who already agree with you. Build a broad network around the school-community relationship: board members, parents, educators, students, retirees, business owners, chambers of commerce, workforce partners, higher education, civic groups and neighboring districts. Ask what each partner uniquely sees and can credibly say. A superintendent can explain district operations; an employer can describe workforce needs; a parent can explain family impact; a student can make the future impossible to ignore.

Finding key communicators is essential. These trusted community voices can validate the district’s story and explain why an issue matters beyond the schoolhouse. Quite frankly, some legislators may feel they have heard the superintendent’s position many times. The same message can register differently when it comes from an employer discussing workforce readiness, a parent describing family impact or school safety, a farmer connecting career and technical education to the local economy, a retiree offering important historical perspective, or a student sharing what a program has made possible. The most effective messenger is often the person who already has the legislator’s trust.

Quick-Start Checklist

- Name one district priority and one specific policy outcome.
- Schedule an interim meeting or school visit with each local legislator.
- Identify five credible community partners and the perspective each can contribute.
- Match each key communicator with the audience and message they can deliver most credibly.
- Build a one-page brief with one story, two or three facts and one clear ask.
- Create a shared story bank and a system for rapid, accurate follow-up.
- Review legal boundaries, board policy and communication protocols with counsel.



4) Construct a message people can carry

Strong advocacy combines a local story with a few carefully chosen facts and a clear request. Begin with a shared value—opportunity, responsibility, community strength or the promise we make to children. Then explain the challenge in plain language. Use two or three relevant data points, not a spreadsheet dump. Show the consequence for real people and connect the individual example to the larger pattern. End with one direct ask.

A useful message can be summarized in four sentences: This is what we value. This is what is happening. This is what it means for people in our district. This is what we are asking you to do. If community partners cannot accurately repeat the message after hearing it once, simplify it.

5) Match the channel to the purpose

Think of communication channels as a continuum of impact. A targeted email can be helpful when it includes specific local information and carefully selected data—school finance figures are often especially useful. A personal phone call is stronger because it creates dialogue. A face-to-face visit generally makes the greatest impact because it builds relationships, allows questions and makes the local consequences harder to overlook. Use a school visit when a decision-maker needs to see implementation or impact. Use public testimony to place concise, local evidence into the formal record. Use district communications to educate the community consistently—not only when a controversial proposal appears.

Every district should maintain a one-page District Impact Sheet that can be updated and shared quickly. It should include the district’s priority, two or three local data

points, a brief student or community story, the consequences of action or inaction, and one specific request. School finance information should be translated into local meaning: classrooms, transportation routes, educators, programs and student opportunities.

Whatever the channel, respect the recipient’s time. Put the ask near the beginning, keep additional attachments short and offer to provide more. Prompt follow-up matters: when a legislator asks for information, a fast, accurate response builds the reputation that makes future advocacy easier.

6) Sustain the momentum

Advocacy has a rhythm. During the interim, build relationships, host visits and develop a story bank. Before session, confirm priorities and prepare advocates. During session, monitor bills, communicate at decision points and coordinate with statewide partners. After session, thank people, report outcomes, evaluate what worked and begin again. Track contacts and commitments so advocacy becomes an organizational practice rather than a task carried by one energetic leader.

"If we do not explain how a proposal will affect students, families, staff and communities, someone else will define the issue for us."

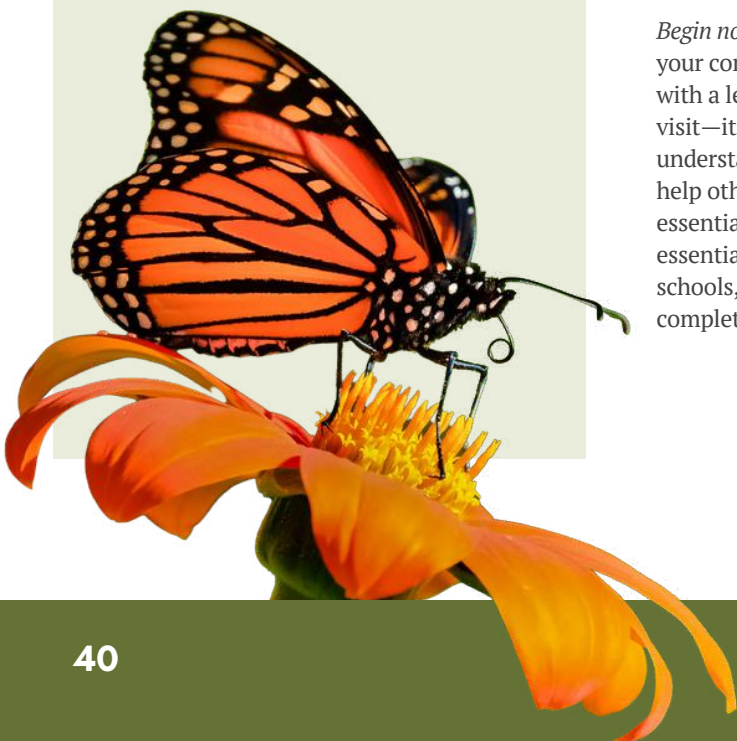


Dr. Jamie Burkhart

Dr. Burkhart is the Director of Women in Leadership for the Missouri Association of School Administrators.

Email: Jamie.Burkhart@mcsa.org

"Advocacy is leadership made visible: informed, relational, local and persistent."



The Anatomy of a 15-Minute Meeting

A short meeting can be powerful when it is disciplined. Bring a small group, ideally with one designated lead. In the first two minutes, introduce the district and state the purpose. Spend the next eight minutes on no more than two priorities, using local impact and a few reliable facts. Then make the ask: "Will you support this approach?" or "Would you be willing to raise this concern with the committee chair?" Listen carefully to the answer. In the final minutes, summarize any follow-up, leave a one-page brief, invite the legislator to visit and express appreciation for the time.

If you do not know an answer, say so and follow up. Do not exaggerate. Do not threaten. Do not overload the agenda. Do not allow disagreement today to destroy a relationship that students may need tomorrow. Within 24 to 48 hours, send a brief thank-you, provide any promised information and confirm the next step. Record the contact, the legislator's questions and any commitment made. Consistent follow-through demonstrates reliability and helps the district prepare for the next conversation.

Lead With Both Courage and Care

School leaders sometimes hesitate to advocate because they fear appearing partisan. But advocacy for students is not the same as allegiance to a party or candidate. We can be clear without being combative, persistent without being disrespectful and passionate without sacrificing accuracy. We can describe consequences, offer solutions and ask elected officials to act while maintaining the relationships essential to democratic governance.

We must also know the legal guardrails. Missouri law restricts the use of public funds to advocate for or against ballot measures or candidates. District leaders should follow current law, board policy and legal counsel, especially when communication involves elections, ballot questions, district resources or coordinated calls to action. The goal is not silence; it is lawful, credible and responsible participation.

Public schools are load-bearing institutions in Missouri communities. They develop talent, connect families, sustain local identity and prepare citizens for a shared future. Those of us closest to the work possess knowledge policymakers need. Our responsibility is to translate that knowledge into relationships, stories, evidence and action.

The Challenge: Begin Now

Begin now. Before the end of this month, identify the key communicators in your community and schedule one meaningful conversation or school visit with a legislator. Remember, advocacy is not a single email, phone call or visit—it is an ongoing commitment to relationships, trust and shared understanding. With every conversation and invitation into our schools, we help others more fully understand our school community's story and the essential role public schools play in its future. Continued advocacy is essential because if we do not consistently tell the story of our public schools, others will tell it for us—and they may not tell it accurately or completely. ■

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Invest In Yourself

Why AASA Membership Matters

Dr. Curtis Cain and Dr. Dan Wiebers discuss the impact of AASA membership on their leadership experience.

By Chelsea Blair

MASA is closely partnered with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and we see real value in that membership for our members. To hear what that looks like in practice, we sat down with two superintendents: Dr. Curtis Cain of Rockwood School District, the 2022 AASA National Superintendent of the Year, and Dr. Dan Wiebers of Chillicothe R-II. Both men made their first trip to AASA's Legislative Advocacy Conference this July, within weeks of each other, and came away with the same message: AASA membership is one of the best investments a superintendent can make, no matter their years of experience or the size of their district.

You Have To Be at the Table

Cain has been an AASA member since he started as superintendent 14 years ago. "The best superintendents I have encountered have exceptionally strong and diverse networks," he said. "One of the very first pieces of advice I received was: you need to be a member of AASA." That network matters because the job can be isolating, he said. "There's something very leveling and humbling about being in a room full of fellow superintendents. I appreciate having a space where you can put your sword and shield down and be a little more vulnerable than you're able to be most days."

Wiebers felt that firsthand this July, on his first trip to AASA's Legislative

Advocacy Conference. He and 21 other Missouri superintendents met with legislative staff to advocate for public education funding, E-Rate, and arbitration protections. "They may not act on that information right away, but if I wouldn't have been there, nothing would have happened," he said.

You have to be at the table, or you don't have a say in the decisions being made. ”



Professional Growth, at Every Stage of the Career

AASA doesn't serve just one type of superintendent, Cain said. "What AASA does spans everything from the aspiring superintendent through the retired superintendent. The superintendency changes you, and AASA has different options and opportunities that help enrich and nurture you along the way."

He points to AASA's National Certification Program, a nearly two-year cohort experience paired with a personal mentor, as one of the most meaningful investments he's made in his own leadership. Being named the 2022 National Superintendent of the Year also led to a seat on AASA's Governing Board. "Participating in these programs lets you reflect not only as a superintendent, but as a board member would," he said. "It helps you fine-tune your craft."

Wiebers points to more everyday resources: AASA's superintendent salary survey, which he's used directly with his own school board, and a webinar series on Scholarship Granting Organizations he discovered at the Advocacy Conference and is now applying in Chillicothe. "If I hadn't been sitting in those sessions, I never would have gotten that information," he said. "If people are going to give money away to a school anyway, I'd rather it be one of ours."

A Stronger Missouri Voice, Nationally

Both superintendents see AASA and MASA as inseparable. "Truly, your local state's organization is what builds that program," Wiebers said. "We're so

strong at the national level because MASA does such a good job getting people involved at the state level. If you're not involved in MASA, there's no way you're going to be involved in AASA." He pointed to Missouri's five seats on AASA's Governing Board and the fact that Missouri sent more superintendents to this year's Advocacy Conference than any other state. Cain agreed.

"We can do a lot of things, but we cannot do all things," he said. "That's why the network is so important. When you miss a conversation, a meeting, who's helping to fill you in?" Membership-driven organizations across the country are struggling to stay relevant, he added, but AASA is thriving. "That's a sign that this investment, at the national level and most definitely at the state level, is well worth it."

You Have to Invest in Yourself

For superintendents weighing whether membership and involvement are worth the cost, especially in small or rural districts, Wiebers has firsthand advice. He funded his own trip to Washington through a grant from the Chillicothe Education Foundation, which typically supports teacher recruitment and retention. Wiebers made the case that strong advocacy for public education funding ultimately serves those same goals, and the foundation agreed to cover the cost. He encourages other rural superintendents to look for similar partners: a local foundation, a community organization, or a district's Title II or professional development funds. For Wiebers, it comes down to

modeling the same commitment to professional growth that superintendents expect of their teachers. Leaders who invest in their own development, he believes, set the tone for the whole district. Cain sees the same principle at play for superintendents at any career stage: a network built to help superintendents, new or veteran, rural or suburban, carry a job that was never meant to be carried alone. Whether that means a first trip to the Legislative Advocacy Conference, seat in the National Certification Program, or simply a phone call to someone who's faced the same problem before, both men agree the only wrong way to use an AASA membership is not to use it at all. As Cain put it:

You will constantly be challenged and enriched by participating with AASA.

Featured Contributors



Dr. Dan Wiebers
Superintendent
Chillicothe R-II



Dr. Curtis Cain
Superintendent
Rockwood School District

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Lorenzo Boyd
Managing Director

(314) 342-8477 | lorenzo.boyd@stifel.com



Martin Ghafoori
Managing Director

(314) 342-8467 | ghafoorim@stifel.com



Becky Esrock
Director

(314) 342-2923 | esrockb@stifel.com



Tony Rossetti
Vice President

(417) 627-5729 | rossettit@stifel.com



Conner Swanson
Assistant Vice President

(816) 203-8731 | swansonc@stifel.com



Colin Hilpert
Assistant Vice President

(314) 342-8439 | hilpertc@stifel.com



Lucas Davenport
Analyst

(314) 342-4009 | davenportl@stifel.com



Nick Von Raab
Director

(314) 342-4525 | vonraabn@stifel.com

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Dr. Lori VanLeer, MASA Emeritus
Director of Learning and Development, Facilitator,
and Coach with The Quality Coach

Give Them A Reason To Stay

For years, school districts have talked about staff retention as an organizational challenge. We analyze turnover, conduct exit interviews, review compensation and benefits, and ask why people leave. But the challenge facing public education in 2026 is bigger.

We are not simply competing with neighboring districts for talented people. We are competing with opportunities outside education. The question is no longer just; how do we keep our people? It is also why would talented people choose us in the first place? That makes attracting and retaining great people more than an HR initiative. It is a leadership responsibility. Compensation matters. Benefits matter. Workload and flexibility matter. We should continue working to improve what we can.

But here's what shifts the equation: leaders also influence something equally important, and it's the daily experience of working in our schools. Do people feel valued? Are they supported and growing? Do they trust their leaders? Can they see that their work matters? Those answers become your reputation, and your reputation becomes your recruiting strategy. People talk about where they work before they ever apply.

They tell friends whether they feel supported. They share whether their leaders communicate, recognize their contributions, and create opportunities to grow. Long before someone completes an application, they may already have an impression of what it is like to work in your district. So, how do we create organizations people want to come to and stay in?

Provide high support alongside high expectations. Great people want to do meaningful work and do it well. Leaders who remove barriers, provide resources, encourage growth, and step in when challenges arise communicate: You aren't doing this alone.

Communicate with consistency and transparency. People want to understand where the organization is going and why. Clear communication, closed feedback loops, and honest conversations build the trust that attracts people and keeps them.

Make recognition personal and meaningful. People need to know their contributions are noticed. A timely conversation, handwritten note, or specific acknowledgment of someone's impact often means more than a formal recognition program.

And most importantly, help people reconnect with purpose. Most educators entered this profession to make a difference. Yet somewhere among deadlines, mandates, staffing shortages, and daily demands, that purpose can become harder to see. Leaders can help make it visible again by sharing student successes, celebrating impact, and creating opportunities for staff to see how their work changes lives. Your employees are your most powerful recruiters. When people genuinely believe they work somewhere special, they tell others.

We cannot eliminate every challenge facing public education. But we can influence what it feels like to work in education. Perhaps, that's where attraction and retention meet. Create a place where talented people hear, "You should come work with us." And once they are there, give them every reason to stay:



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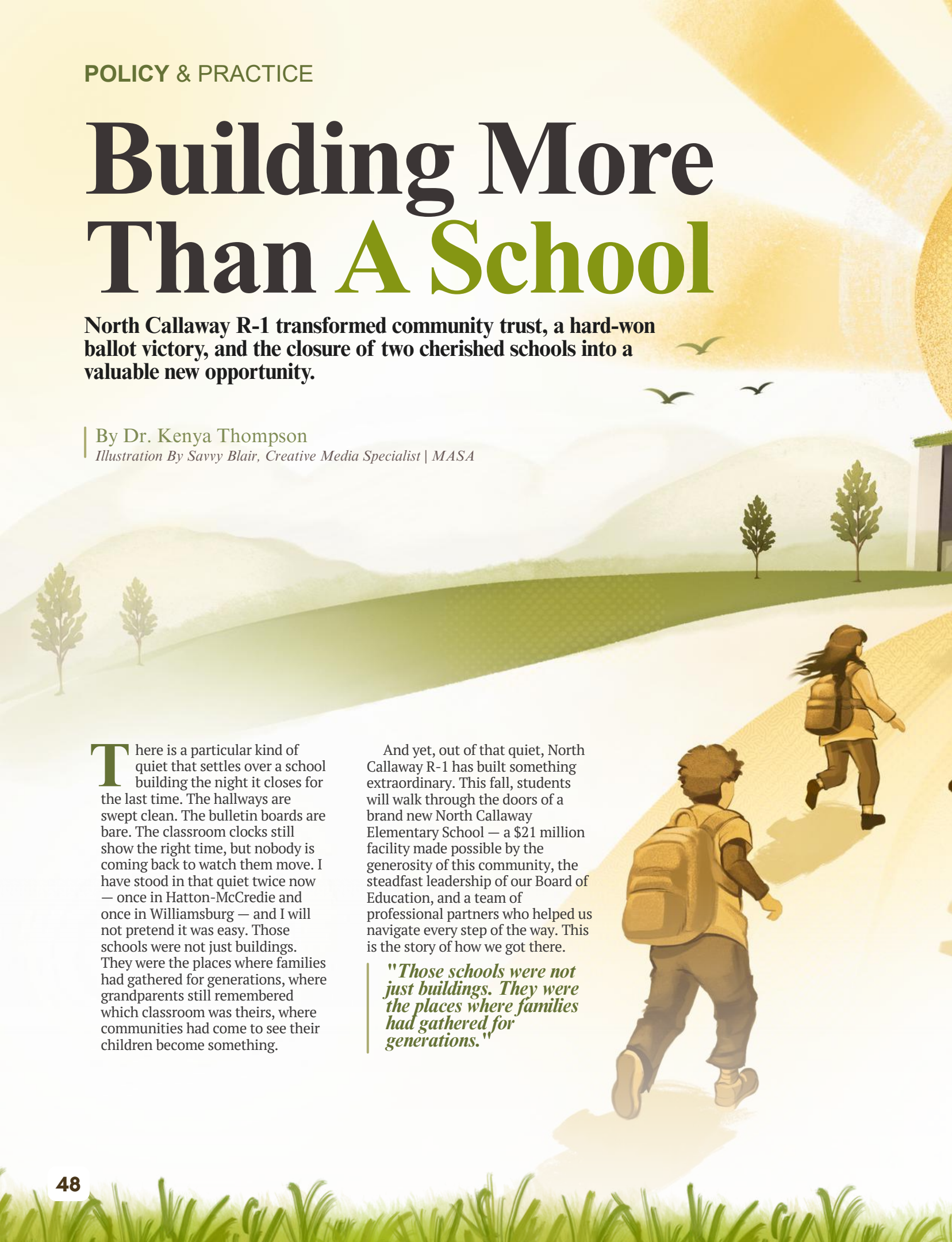
By Dr. Kenya Thompson

Illustration By Savvy Blair, Creative Media Specialist | MASA

There is a particular kind of quiet that settles over a school building the night it closes for the last time. The hallways are swept clean. The bulletin boards are bare. The classroom clocks still show the right time, but nobody is coming back to watch them move. I have stood in that quiet twice now — once in Hatton-McCredie and once in Williamsburg — and I will not pretend it was easy. Those schools were not just buildings. They were the places where families had gathered for generations, where grandparents still remembered which classroom was theirs, where communities had come to see their children become something.

And yet, out of that quiet, North Callaway R-1 has built something extraordinary. This fall, students will walk through the doors of a brand new North Callaway Elementary School — a \$21 million facility made possible by the generosity of this community, the steadfast leadership of our Board of Education, and a team of professional partners who helped us navigate every step of the way. This is the story of how we got there.

"Those schools were not just buildings. They were the places where families had gathered for generations."





A Community at a Crossroads

North Callaway R-1 serves approximately 1,000 students across a rural Callaway County footprint. For years, the district operated three separate elementary buildings: Auxvasse Elementary in Auxvasse, Hatton-McCredie Elementary in Hatton, and Williamsburg Elementary in Williamsburg. Each school carried deep community roots and loyal followings. Each also carried a sobering reality — aging infrastructure, rising maintenance costs, and enrollment numbers that made delivering equitable programming across three small

buildings increasingly difficult.

The data was clear. The facilities needed significant investment to remain viable, and the district's programming was constrained by geography and building limitations. But data alone does not close a school. That requires something harder: honest conversation, sustained community engagement, and leadership willing to make a decision it believes in even when it is not universally popular.

Over the course of several years, the North Callaway Board of Education engaged in exactly that process. They commissioned facility studies, scrutinized district finances, analyzed enrollment

projections, and wrestled with a question that rural administrators know intimately:

“How do we honor what these schools have meant while building what our students actually need?”

The answer they arrived at was consolidation — a single, purpose-built elementary school that would house all K-5 students under one roof, eliminate the inequities of split programming, and give North Callaway a facility worthy of its next century.

The road to a new elementary school, however, did not begin with Props N+C. It began with a decision that was itself deeply controversial. In March 2020, the North Callaway Board of Education voted to repurpose the Auxvasse Elementary School building as the new home of the North Callaway Middle School — a move that freed up capacity and set the long-term facilities plan in motion, but that was met with significant resistance from a community that was not yet ready to let go of what that building represented. The timing could hardly have been worse. Within days of that vote, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in full force, shutting schools across Missouri and plunging communities into fear and uncertainty. Families who might otherwise have had the bandwidth to process a building transition were instead consumed with remote learning, health concerns, and the disorienting loss of normal life.

The Board's decision — made in good faith and with clear educational purpose — landed in the middle of one of the most destabilizing moments in modern public education.

That context matters. It made the path to Props N+C longer and harder, and it required the district to spend the next several years rebuilding the trust and goodwill that any successful bond campaign depends on. That the community ultimately said yes — not once, but twice, on both propositions — is a testament to the patience and persistence of everyone who believed the work was worth doing.

Props N+C: A Campaign Built on Relationships

The committee — made up of parents, teachers, alumni, local business owners, farmers, community members, and even students from across the district — spent months making the case for the bond and levy. Proposition N was a no-tax-increase \$17 million general obligation bond to fund construction of the new elementary school. Proposition C was a \$0.25 levy increase dedicated to employee compensation, designed to ensure the district could attract and retain the talented educators the new building deserved.

Together, they represented a vision: that North Callaway could build for the future without abandoning its fiscal responsibility to the present. The committee organized over 54 events from January to the final vote in April, for myself and our assistant superintendent to engage in authentic dialogue with the community.

The committee attended church dinners, the Cattleman's Dinner, ball games, sewing circles, and even the local watering hole. They held kitchen table conversations with their neighbors and ran an impactful social media campaign. They answered hard questions — about what would happen to the old buildings, about whether rural kids would still feel at home in a larger school, about whether the district could actually be trusted with a facility investment this significant.

On April 2, 2024, the community answered back. Despite failing 7 times previously, both propositions passed. It was, by any measure, a remarkable expression of faith — in the district, in the Board, and in a future worth investing in.

"The committee attended church dinners, the Cattleman's Dinner, ball games, sewing circles, and even the local watering hole."

A Board That Led With Courage

School boards are asked to make decisions on behalf of communities that do not always agree, and to make those decisions transparently, accountably, and with the long view in mind. The North Callaway R-1 Board of Education did exactly that throughout this process.





Board members absorbed criticism with grace and persevered through it. They studied facility reports, toured aging buildings, listened to concerns from Hatton-McCredie and Williamsburg families, and ultimately cast votes they believed were right for every child in the district — not just the ones in their own corners of the county. That is the job, and they did it with a steadiness that the entire community should be proud of.

The Board's work did not end on election night. They oversaw the development of the bond spending plan, approved the selection of professional partners, monitored construction progress, and held the district accountable to its commitments to the community.

When bids came in under the projections, they managed the \$21 million project with they with the same fiscal discipline that earned community trust in the first place.

The Partners Who Made It Possible

A project of this complexity requires expert guidance at every stage — financial planning, design, and construction. North Callaway R-1 was fortunate to partner with three organizations that brought exactly the right expertise at exactly the right moments. A project of this complexity requires expert guidance at every stage — financial planning, design, and construction. North Callaway R-1 was fortunate to partner with three organizations that brought exactly the right expertise at exactly the right moments.

L.J. Hart & Company served as the district's municipal bond advisor throughout the financing process. Their team guided North Callaway through the complexities of structuring the general obligation bond, managing the bond proceeds during construction, and ensuring the district maximized its borrowing capacity without overburdening local taxpayers. Their counsel was particularly critical in helping the district understand how to structure Props N and C as a complementary package — a no-tax-increase bond paired with a targeted levy increase — in a way that the community could understand and support.

MOCAAT — the Missouri Capital Asset Advantage Treasury — served as the district's investment management resource for the bond proceeds during the construction period. MOCAAT, provided the competitive liquid investment options and bond proceeds management tools that allowed North Callaway to preserve capital and generate yield on unspent construction funds while maintaining the liquidity needed to meet construction draw schedules. In a project of this scale, thoughtful management of interim investment earnings is not a detail — it is real money for students. NAVIGATE Building Solutions served as the district's owner's representative throughout the preconstruction and construction phases. Their role was to represent North Callaway's interests at every stage — from architect selection and contractor procurement through schedule management, budget control, and quality oversight during construction.

In a rural district without dedicated facilities staff, having a seasoned owner's representative in that role was not a luxury; it was a necessity. NAVIGATE's ability to reduce change orders and hold vendors accountable, allowed the District use the remaining project funds to add paved parking lots, a first in the District, at both the new elementary school and the high school. NAVIGATE helped get the District more than we ever thought possible.

Honoring What Was, Building What Will Be

The hardest part of this whole process was not the election, or the financing, or the construction. The hardest part was sitting with Hatton-McCredie and Williamsburg families in community meetings and acknowledging, directly and without equivocation, that the schools their families had loved were closing. There is no way to make that easy. There is only a way to make it honest. We made commitments to those communities. We committed that the consolidation would be handled with care — that the transition would be managed thoughtfully, that their children would be welcomed warmly into a new school that felt like theirs.

We committed that the new North Callaway Elementary would not erase what came before it but would carry those communities forward into something better. And we committed that every decision we made during this process would be driven by what was best for students.

I believe we have kept those commitments. The new North Callaway Elementary School is not just a building — it is the physical embodiment of what this community decided it believed about its children. It says that rural kids deserve modern, safe, well-equipped spaces. It says that consolidation, done right, can strengthen a community rather than fracture it. It says that a school board, a superintendent, a citizen committee, and a collection of dedicated professional partners can work together to accomplish something genuinely remarkable.

What Other Districts Can Learn

Rural consolidation projects are among the most emotionally and politically complex undertakings a superintendent can lead. The North Callaway experience offers a few lessons worth sharing with colleagues across Missouri. Start the community conversation early, and never stop having it.

The engagement work that preceded Props N+C was not a campaign — it was a years-long relationship-building process. By the time the ballot question was asked, it was not the first time most voters had heard the idea. That familiarity matters.

This dialogue continues today through annual State of the District addresses and quarterly video messages regarding the District's progress towards ambitious goals. Choose your professional partners as carefully as you choose your words. The quality of the guidance North Callaway received from L.J. Hart, MOCAAT, and NAVIGATE was not incidental to the project's success — it was central to it.

"In a rural district without dedicated facilities staff, having a seasoned owner's representative was not a luxury — it was a necessity."

Rural districts do not have the internal capacity to manage a project of this scale alone. Invest in partners who know Missouri school finance and construction, and who will treat your community's trust with the seriousness it deserves. Let your Board lead. The North Callaway R-1 Board of Education made hard decisions and stood by them.

They did not waver when things got uncomfortable, and they did not take the credit when things went well. That is what good board governance looks like, and it made every step of this process easier. And finally: do not rush the grief. The families of Hatton-McCredie and Williamsburg needed time to mourn what was ending before they could celebrate what was beginning. Honor that. Create space for it. The new school will mean more to every family in this district because we did not ask them to simply move on.

A New Day for Thunderbird Country

This fall, a kindergartner from Hatton will walk into a brand new classroom for the first time. A fifth grader from Williamsburg will find her favorite new story in the library. A teacher who has spent twenty years in a building that needed a new roof will stand in a space that was built for her. A school board member who cast a hard vote will see what that vote became. That is what we built. Not just a school — a declaration about what North Callaway R-1 believes its students deserve. Thunderbird Proud doesn't begin to cover it. ■



Photos courtesy of North Callaway R-1



Dr. Kenya Thompson
*Superintendent,
North Callaway R-1*



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The Value of Meet & Confer

Why meaningful employee engagement remains the best path to preserving local control

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

When Missouri lawmakers considered legislation that would have introduced binding arbitration to public schools, much of the discussion centered on what districts stood to lose: local control.

While the proposal ultimately failed to pass, the issues that brought it forward have not disappeared. School districts continue to navigate teacher shortages, workforce competition and increasing expectations from employees who want meaningful opportunities to provide input on issues affecting their work. The conversation surrounding employee voice, workplace governance and local decision-making is unlikely to disappear simply because one piece of legislation failed.

For school leaders, the debate raises an important question: How can districts ensure employees have a voice while preserving the authority and accountability of locally elected school boards?

Many Missouri school leaders believe the answer begins with a strong meet-and-confer process. Unlike binding arbitration, meet and

confer emphasizes communication, collaboration and problem-solving while allowing locally elected boards to retain final decision-making authority. When done well, it strengthens relationships, builds trust and creates meaningful opportunities for employee input long before disagreements become disputes. The recent legislative debate provides an opportunity to examine not only what binding arbitration would have changed, but also why many school leaders believe meet and confer remains the better approach.

What Would Binding Arbitration Change?

Binding arbitration is a dispute-resolution process in which an outside, neutral arbitrator hears evidence from both a district and an employee organization and then issues a ruling that becomes legally binding on the parties. It differs from mediation, where a neutral third party helps both sides reach their own voluntary agreement. Under Missouri's current system, commonly referred to as meet and confer, unresolved issues remain under the

authority of the locally elected board of education. District leaders and employee representatives can discuss concerns, exchange proposals and seek solutions, but ultimate decision-making authority stays local. Recent legislation would have changed that process by sending unresolved disputes first to mediation and, if necessary, to binding arbitration. Under that model, an outside arbitrator could ultimately make decisions involving issues that otherwise would remain subject to the authority of the locally elected school board.

“The final result of this change would mean that the decision-making authority of the locally-elected school board would be ceded to an outside individual,”

-said Duane Martin, an attorney with EdCounsel who regularly represents public school districts and is engaged in public sector bargaining.

Supporters often describe arbitration as a predictable way to resolve disputes when negotiations reach an impasse. Critics raise concerns about accountability, flexibility and local governance. For many school leaders, the concern is straightforward. Decisions about compensation, staffing, operations and district resources carry long-term consequences and require balancing competing priorities within the realities of local budgets. School boards must make those decisions while remaining accountable to their communities.

Martin believes accountability lies at the heart of the discussion.

“Decisions involving the expenditure of taxpayer funds should remain with locally elected officials rather than outside arbitrators.”

He also points to another concern based on his experience with states that already utilize binding arbitration.

“What begins as a narrowly tailored process can gradually expand through legislation, administrative interpretation, and court decisions or negotiations,” he said.

Whether one views arbitration as a solution or a concern, the legislative discussion highlighted a broader issue that extends beyond any single bill: how districts can ensure employees have meaningful opportunities to be heard while preserving local accountability.

The Alternative: Meet & Confer

For school leaders, preserving local decision-making does not simply mean opposing binding arbitration. It means creating systems that encourage communication, employee engagement and trust. Meet and confer provides a framework for doing exactly that.

At its core, meet and confer is an ongoing process that gives administrators and employee representatives opportunities to discuss workplace issues, share concerns, exchange information and work toward solutions before disagreements become conflicts. Unlike collective bargaining systems that can culminate in binding arbitration, meet and confer does not require unresolved issues to be handed to a third party. Instead, it encourages dialogue while preserving the authority of the locally elected board of education.

That does not mean employees have less voice. In many districts, a strong meet-and-confer process creates more opportunities for communication because discussion occurs throughout the year rather than only during formal negotiations. The process can take many forms, including advisory groups, employee committees, listening sessions, surveys or regularly scheduled meetings with staff representatives. The structure matters less than the commitment to maintaining open lines of communication and creating meaningful opportunities for feedback.

When done well, meet and confer becomes more than a process. It becomes part of a district's culture. The goal is not for either side to win every disagreement but to identify concerns early, understand competing interests and work collaboratively toward solutions before positions harden and relationships become strained.

Meet & Confer in Practice

At Lincoln County R-III School District in Troy, Superintendent Dr. Matt Frederickson meets quarterly with the district's Professional Advancement and Security Committee. Building representatives come from the Community Teachers Association, the district's MSTA affiliate, along with its NEA members, who do not have the numbers there to form a recognized bargaining unit.

The committee weighs in on everything from planning time and benefits to policy implementation and operational concerns. Importantly, those conversations occur before decisions are finalized rather than after they have already been made, allowing employee perspectives to shape discussions while options are still on the table.

“I think the best communication is when it's one-on-one with folks,” Frederickson said.

That accessibility, he explained, helps build rapport and creates opportunities for more meaningful feedback. “You get more nuanced information.” Frederickson has experienced multiple labor-relations models throughout his career. Early on, he worked in a district with a formal NEA bargaining unit and later led a school organized under a different union structure before moving back toward meet and confer. Those experiences reinforced his belief in the importance of accessibility and communication.

His advice to new superintendents is direct. “The more isolated you become, the more staff will want to do some sort of collective bargaining. You're better off just allowing yourself to be accessible and in the conversation. That way, you save yourself a lot of grief. If we choose the combative approach, it doesn't always work out well for us,” he said.

Frederickson's perspective highlights an important reality. Employee voice is not created by a statute or a legal process alone. It is created through relationships, ongoing communication and a culture in which employees feel their perspectives are genuinely valued. When those conditions exist, districts are often better positioned to address concerns collaboratively and maintain the trust necessary to navigate difficult decisions.



Why It Matters

Meet and confer and binding arbitration represent fundamentally different approaches to workplace disagreements. One emphasizes ongoing communication, relationships and local decision-making. The other creates a process through which an outside arbitrator can ultimately make a binding decision when the parties cannot reach agreement.

For Missouri school districts, the distinction goes beyond labor relations. A strong meet-and-confer process gives employees meaningful opportunities to provide input on issues affecting their work while allowing boards to continue weighing those perspectives against enrollment trends, available revenues, staffing needs, educational priorities and the many other responsibilities involved in operating a school district.

Employee voice and local control do not have to compete with one another. In fact, the most effective meet-and-confer processes often strengthen both. When employees believe their concerns are being heard and thoughtfully considered, districts are better positioned to address challenges collaboratively. Trust grows. Communication improves. Relationships strengthen.

Looking Ahead

Binding arbitration is not law in Missouri today, but the pressures that brought the issue to the legislative agenda are unlikely to disappear. As school districts continue navigating workforce challenges and evolving employee expectations, the conversation will likely continue as well.

The strongest argument for preserving local control is not opposition alone. It is demonstrating that employee voice and local decision-making can successfully coexist. A meaningful meet-and-confer process allows districts to do exactly that by creating opportunities for employees to be heard while preserving the authority and accountability of locally elected school boards. For many Missouri school leaders, that balance is precisely where the value of meet and confer can be found. ■

Those outcomes
benefit employees,
administrators, board
members, and ultimately
the students they serve.

Featured Contributors



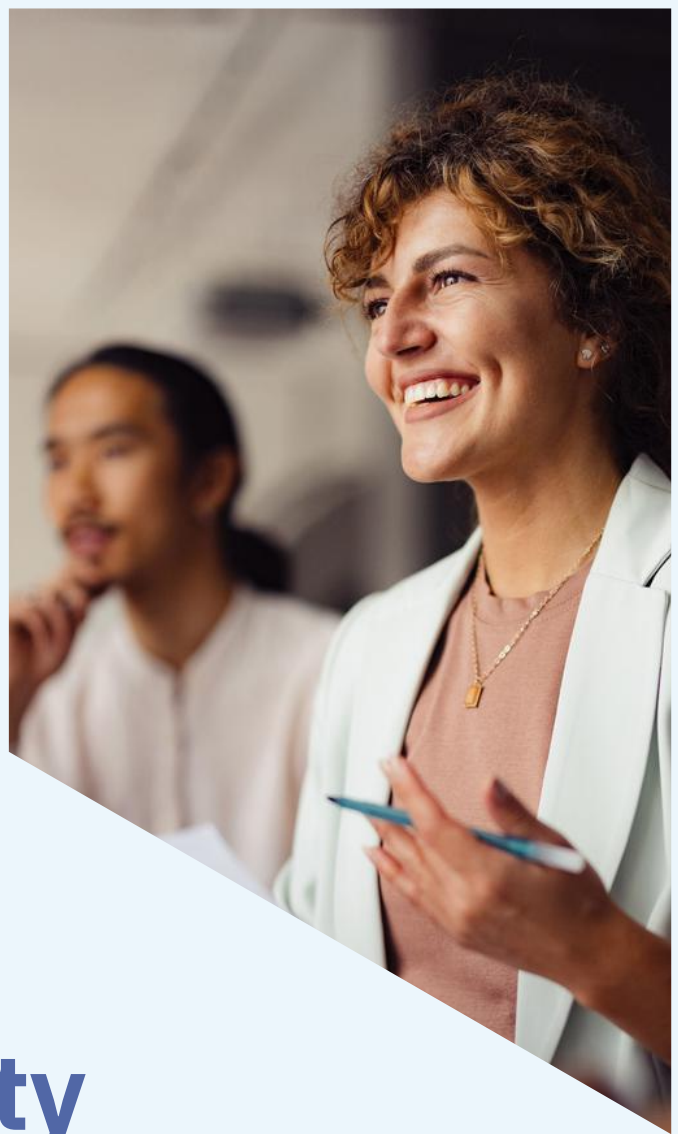
Dr. Matt Frederickson is the superintendent at Lincoln County R-III in Troy, Missouri.

Email: frederm@troy.k12.mo.us



Duane Martin is an attorney with EdCounsel serving districts across Missouri.

Email: dmartin@edcounsel.law



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Ashly Obermier
District Manager
Office: 573.449.3090
aobermier@inter-state.com



Cody Maher
National Sales Executive
Office: 573.280.9123
cmaher@inter-state.com



Caitlin Waldo
Office: 816.600.2454
cwaldo@inter-state.com



Julie Watt
Office: 816.600.2454
jwatt@inter-state.com



Allen & Christina Phillips
Office: 660.335.4218
cphillips@inter-state.com



Valerie Peavler
Office: 573.449.3090
vpeavler@inter-state.com



Dana Scott
Office: 417.869.4800
dscott@inter-state.com



Sarah Lamb
Office: 314.878.1800
slamb@inter-state.com



Kathy Maschmeier
Office: 314.878.1800
kmaschmeier@inter-state.com

