

**Session Titles and Descriptions**  
**AASPA 2026 Virtual Access & Achievement Summit**  
**Wednesday, April 22, 2026**

**(All sessions will be presented in CST.)**

**EEOC in the News: Understanding the Legal Background, Investigations, and Recent Updates**

**Policy & Practices for Equitable Access (Legal)**

*Presented by Elizabeth Becker, Attorney, Robbins Schwartz, Chicago, IL*

This presentation will offer attendees valuable insight into the agency tasked with enforcing federal employment discrimination laws. It will explain the laws at issue, how the EEOC investigates alleged violations, and the most recent actions and communications coming from the agency, including discussion of practical implications for educational employers.

**Growing Our Own: Cultivating the Next Generation of Educators**

**Creating Safe & Inclusive Spaces / Organizational Culture**

*Presented by Kimberly Sutton Mason, Director of Human Resources, Darlington County School District, Darlington, SC*

Across the nation, school districts are searching for sustainable, long-term strategies to strengthen the educator pipeline. Darlington County School District has found success by looking inward—intentionally investing in local talent and building clear, supported pathways into the teaching profession.

In this session, participants will explore how DCSD is “growing our own” through innovative partnerships with local universities and **eight Alternative Certification Programs**, creating multiple on-ramps to certification for paraprofessionals, career changers, and community members who are ready to make a difference in the classroom.

Attendees will learn how DCSD has:

- Expanded access to certification through flexible, high-quality preparation programs
- Built strong university and ACP partnerships that remove barriers and accelerate readiness
- Supported paraprofessionals and local candidates with coaching, mentoring, and targeted professional learning
- Increased retention by cultivating educators who are deeply rooted in the community

This session will highlight the district’s early wins, lessons learned, and the powerful impact of investing in homegrown talent. Participants will leave with practical strategies and replicable structures to strengthen their own educator pipelines and fill vacancies with committed, well-prepared teachers.

Darlington County School District is proving that when we cultivate the talent already in our communities, we don’t just fill positions—we build a thriving, sustainable future for our schools.

**Mattering in the Workplace: Actionable Skills to Improve Morale and Culture**

**Conditions for a Positive and Thriving Organizational Culture**

*Presented by Dr. Neill Allewa, Assistant Superintendent of HR, Katonah-Lewisboro School District, Cross River, NY*

The daily, and often relentless, pressure to perform and respond interfere with one of the most important endeavors in education: connecting with other human beings. This session will focus on the actionable skills that anyone can practice and implement thanks to the research on the Power of Mattering, a concept and framework written about by scholar-author Zach Mercurio.

**Project Thrive: A Data-Driven Approach to Teacher Retention**

**Retention of Under-Represented Talent**

*Presented by Rebecca Savage, Director, Organizational Development and Retention, Jaelyn Quintero, Coordinator of Organizational Development and Development and Dana Philpott, Coordinator of Organizational Development and Retention, The School District of Lee County, Fort Myers, FL*

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Retaining high-quality educators is essential for student success and organizational stability. This session explores "Project Thrive", a strategic initiative by The School District of Lee County designed to achieve a 95% teacher retention rate by July 2026.

Using the "Four Disciplines of Execution" framework, Project Thrive focuses on a Wildly Important Goal (WIG) supported by rigorous lead measures, a compelling data dashboard, and a weekly cadence of accountability. Attendees will learn how the district utilizes a multi-faceted approach to support its 5,500+ teachers, including:

- Targeted Support: Monthly strategy meetings with Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools to provide tailored assistance.
- Key Retention Pillars: Implementing structured onboarding, supportive leadership, growth opportunities, and healthy organizational culture.
- Actionable Data: Using pre-, mid-year, and post-assessments along with stay and exit interviews to inform ongoing strategy.
- Collaborative Accountability: Maintaining a "Retention Response" through cross-departmental collaboration between HR, regional leadership and school-based teams.

Participants will walk away with a roadmap for building a sustainable retention culture that moves beyond tracking "lag" data to actively driving "lead" measures that keep teachers in the classroom.

**Recruiting Is Retention: Designing the Employee Journey in K–12**

**The employee experience/Journey mapping**

*Presented by Sonya Roberts, Human Resources Director, Franklin Special District, Franklin, TN*

In today's competitive educator labor market, recruiting and retention can no longer be viewed as separate strategies — and equitable hiring cannot be treated as a standalone initiative. The employee experience begins long before day one, often at the first job posting click, and every touchpoint shapes whether candidates feel welcomed, valued, and positioned to succeed. This session explores how school districts can intentionally design the employee journey from recruitment through exit, with a strong emphasis on recruiting and hiring as the foundation for both retention and equity. Using an employee journey mapping framework, participants will learn how to identify hidden barriers in their hiring processes, reduce bias through structured practices, and create human-centered systems that improve access and belonging for underrepresented talent. Attendees will walk away with practical tools to map their district's employee journey, pinpoint friction points that disproportionately impact diverse candidates, and align recruiting, onboarding and retention into one cohesive, equity-driven strategy.

**Reducing Bias in Hiring: Protecting Civil Rights and Ensuring Defensible Employment Decisions**

**Addressing Bias in Hiring**

*Presented by Jackie Gharapour Wernz, Legal Consultant, ERC Solutions, Dallas, TX*

Educational institutions have a legal obligation to ensure hiring practices are free from unlawful bias. This session focuses on identifying risk factors within recruitment and selection processes and implementing structured safeguards that promote fair and consistent outcomes. Topics include conducting risk-based audits of hiring procedures, using objective selection criteria, improving recordkeeping, and equipping hiring teams to recognize and mitigate bias. The result is a hiring system that is transparent, compliant, and positioned to withstand scrutiny while strengthening organizational effectiveness.

**RESTORE & Retain: Designing Districts Where Under-Represented Talent Thrives**

**Retention of Under-Represented Talent**

*Presented by Dr. Marva Tutt, HR Coordinator, Richmond County School System, Augusta, GA*

This session explores strategic approaches to retaining under-represented talent within K–12 systems. While many districts focus heavily on recruitment, long-term impact depends on building sustainable retention structures that protect educator voice, strengthen

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leadership pipelines, and reduce preventable attrition. Participants will examine data-informed retention practices, alignment between HR systems and school-level leadership, and practical tools that move districts from reactive hiring to intentional talent sustainability. Attendees will leave with actionable strategies to operationalize retention as a core component of workforce planning rather than an afterthought.

**Stop the Pile-On: The Capacity Playbook for a Culture of Care**

**Creating Safe & Inclusive Spaces & Organizational Culture**

*Presented by Wendell Sumter, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Chester County School District, Chester, SC*

When organizations feel shaky, the instinct is to add more. This session uses the “Strength Before Weight” (Jenga test) to show how to stabilize culture by strengthening the structure before stacking new initiatives. Built around two responsibilities, take care of your people and take care of yourself so you can lead well and last. HR leaders will learn how to spot early signs of overload and reinforce clarity, trust, support, and capacity. Attendees leave with five practical culture moves (specific recognition, consistent check-ins, equitable care across teams, addressing negativity early, and reducing friction) plus a simple method to protect capacity by pairing every new ask with something to stop or scale back, helping reduce burnout and improve retention.

**The Lunchroom Narrative: Creating, Cultivating and Sustaining a Safe Inclusive Organizational Culture**

**Creating Safe & Inclusive Spaces / Organizational Culture**

*Presented by Peter Ferguson, Multicultural Coordinator and Scholar Development & Assistant Supervisor of Recruiting and Marla Styles, Human Resources Specialist, Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, NE*

Culture and connection aren't defined solely in the teachers' lounge; it's revealed in the lunchroom. Through story and reflection, this session reframes an often antiquated understanding of belonging by elevating the voices of nutrition staff, paraeducators, custodial teams, transportation staff, early childhood educators, and classroom educators. Drawing from practice in Lincoln Public Schools, we explore how belonging and connection become real when every role is valued. Participants will engage in practical strategies to retain, support, and affirm staff before expanding diverse networks. Because inclusion that is seen, heard, and felt begins with how we love, invest in, elevate, and protect those already in the mix.

**When Expression Impacts Environment: Balancing Rights and Inclusion in School HR**

**Creating Safe & Inclusive Spaces / Organizational Culture**

*Presented by Meagan Booth, Supervisor of Employee Relations, Knox County Schools, Knoxville, TN*

Public school HR professionals increasingly find themselves navigating employee speech issues that sit at the intersection of constitutional protections, professional conduct expectations, and workplace climate. From social media posts to advocacy during staff meetings, expression that is legally protected can still impact morale, belonging, and perceptions of safety within a school community. This session explores how HR leaders can balance employee speech rights with the responsibility to foster inclusive, respectful work environments. Participants will examine the legal framework governing public employee speech, common pitfalls in policy enforcement, and how inconsistent responses can unintentionally undermine trust and retention, particularly among underrepresented staff. Through real world scenarios and practical guidance, attendees will leave with a clearer framework for responding to speech related complaints in ways that protect the district, uphold employee rights, and strengthen organizational culture.