



# BEST PRACTICES

In School Personnel

Cultivate:  
**GROWING PEOPLE, CULTURE &  
THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS**



MAY / JUNE / JULY



**Cultivating Connection:**  
*How One District Grew HR Collaboration  
from the Ground Up*

**Think Like a Farmer**  
*Cultivating the Leaders Who Grow  
Your Schools*

**Strengthening University-District  
Partnerships** for Teacher Preparation  
and Retention

2025 - 2026  
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## IN THIS ISSUE:

<b>President's Corner</b> .....	3
<b>The HeaRtwork of HR</b> .....	4
Cultivating Connection: How One District Grew HR Collaboration from the Ground Up	
<b>Your Best Recruiting Tool Isn't a Job Posting, It's Your Culture:</b> .....	8
Building The Foundation Before The Next Hiring Cycle	
<b>Think Like a Farmer</b> .....	12
Cultivating the Leaders Who Grow Your Schools	
<b>Redesigning the Educator Workforce:</b> .....	16
Insights from the National Educator Shortage Summit	
<b>Strengthening University-District Partnerships</b> .....	20
for Teacher Preparation and Retention	
<b>Future Forward:</b> .....	24
Investing in Our People, Elevating Our Community	



## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

From the Desk of Dr. Vincent Citarelli, AASPA President

Dear AASPA Members,

As we approach the close of another school year, there is a unique energy felt by school HR leaders across the country. This season is both exciting and incredibly demanding. While districts celebrate graduations, student accomplishments, retirements and the successful completion of another academic year, HR offices are simultaneously immersed in one of the busiest hiring seasons of the year. Recruiting, interviewing, onboarding, staffing projections, contract recommendations and planning for the future all happen at once. It is the work behind the scenes that keeps our schools moving forward and ensures our students begin each school year with outstanding educators and support staff in place.

In the midst of the fast pace and daily challenges, it is important that we continually remind ourselves why this work matters. At the center of every hiring decision, staffing conversation, policy discussion and leadership challenge are our students. "What is best for kids?" must remain the guiding question that drives our work each and every day. As school personnel administrators, we have the privilege and responsibility of helping shape the adults who impact students' lives. The decisions we make influence school culture, classroom experiences, student opportunities and ultimately the success of children in every district we serve.

That is why the work of AASPA is more important than ever. AASPA continues to provide leadership, advocacy, professional development and meaningful resources for PK-12 human capital leaders across the nation. Through conferences, webinars, networking opportunities, certifications, legislative advocacy and the sharing of best practices, AASPA supports members in navigating the ever-changing landscape of education and human resources. The association's mission is centered on supporting school HR professionals and the students they serve, while providing timely and relevant resources that help members lead effectively.

As your President, I am honored to serve alongside such dedicated professionals who work tirelessly on behalf of students, staff and school communities. I encourage each of you to continue leaning into the support, expertise and professional community that AASPA provides. Together, we will continue to elevate the profession of school human resources, support one another through the challenges ahead and most importantly, keep students at the heart of everything we do.

Respectfully,

**Dr. Vincent E. Citarelli**  
*President, American Association of School Personnel Administrators*  
*Assistant Superintendent, Garnet Valley School District, Glen Mills, PA*

Join the conversation!

#K12Talent



# The HeaRtwork of HR

## CULTIVATING CONNECTION:

### HOW ONE DISTRICT GREW HR COLLABORATION FROM THE GROUND UP

By Tatia Davis, Human Resources Coordinator, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Chapel Hill, NC

Think about the last time someone asked what Human Resources in a school district actually does—not in a dismissive way, but genuinely. It’s a harder question to answer than it should be, because so much of what we do is invisible. We contribute to the institutional knowledge that keeps our school district moving through leadership transitions, declining enrollment, budget cuts and allotment shifts that would stall a district without dedicated HR teams. When HR is working well, nobody notices. When it isn’t, everyone does.



#### THE WORK BEHIND THE WORK

As HR professionals, we are simultaneously responsible for the organization’s most sensitive decisions and its most foundational ones. They are the architecture of a healthy district and the people responsible for these functions deserve the same investment in their own professional growth that they champion for everyone else.

That’s the gap HeaRtwork Collab was designed to address. Our roles frequently operate without the collaborative experiences commonly available to educators in the district. This absence of structured peer collaboration can limit growth, slow problem resolution and reinforce dated, ineffective practices. In dedicated collaborative spaces, we can step away from our day-to-day responsibilities, think strategically with colleagues in other districts who understand this work and return to our districts with new perspectives and feasible solutions.

The idea grew out of a recognition within our own leadership team, led by Dr. Ashauna Harris, CHCCS Chief Human Resources Officer: why don’t we create space for HR teams in the education space to talk honestly about their work and learn from one another?

#### RETHINKING GROWTH IN HR IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

We also made a deliberate choice about how the day began: with breakfast and conversations. Relationships have to come before anything else. When people have had time to just be human with each other—to laugh or to even commiserate—they show up differently to the crucial work that follows. Each role-alike group was anchored by two complementary tools: Solve This! and Repeat This! Together, they gave this half-day experience its structure and its purpose.

#### The Tools: Solve This! And Repeat This!

Solve This! was designed for challenges—the things our departments are actively stuck on and haven’t cracked yet. Repeat This! was designed for wins—the practices, processes and approaches that are working so well they’re worth scaling or sharing.

Solve This!	
<b>Target / Goal Blocked</b> <i>What are you trying to accomplish, and what’s getting in the way?</i>	<b>General Description</b> <i>A fuller picture of the challenge—context, history, what’s already been tried, and why this problem matters for our district.</i>
<b>Solution Space</b> <i>This is where shared knowledge becomes actionable—others contribute ideas, approaches, and direct experience.</i>	<b>Final Words of Wisdom</b> <i>The group’s closing synthesis: the things participants should carry forward from the conversations.</i>
Repeat This!	
<b>Target / Goal Addressed</b> <i>What outcome did this practice help you achieve?</i>	<b>General Description</b> <i>An overview of the practice—what it is, where it came from, and how it fits into our own work</i>
<b>Nuts and Bolts</b> <i>The implementation details that make the practice actually replicable. This is where the value lives for someone who wants to try it.</i>	<b>Things to Watch Out For</b> <i>Honest reflection on what doesn’t work, what surprised you, or what you’d do differently. This is what separates a genuine knowledge-share from a surface-level “highlight reel”.</i>



### WHEN PEER KNOWLEDGE BECOMES THE MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE IN THE ROOM

Let me share what happened in the Staffing Team breakout group, because I think it illustrates the kind of value this model generates at its best.

The conversation turned to onboarding—which, in any honest gathering of HR staffing professionals, is never really just about paperwork. It’s the moment your “white-glove service” either shows up in practice or doesn’t. It’s also the window where new hires decide, consciously or not, whether they made the right choice.

One staffing team from a neighboring district shared that they were in the middle of a transition to a new HRMS system. They had a clear goal—a smoother, more consistent onboarding. Our district, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, has been using that exact system for almost seven years. We knew that what we could share was real conversations about the ins and outs of the platform. What we had wasn’t theoretical knowledge—it was hard-earned experience from trial and error that was now freely transferable because the right people were in the right room with the right structure to share it.

### THE CASE FOR CROSS-DISTRICT COLLABORATION

HR divisions in education are increasingly being asked to do what any HR departments do in other industries: think strategically about your organization’s needs, anticipate

*When people have had time to just be human with each other—to laugh or to even commiserate—they show up differently to the crucial work that follows.*

needs before they become crises and create systems that make the organization resilient rather than always reactive. That work requires perspective that goes beyond any single school district’s experience.

Yet the opportunities for building that perspective are surprisingly few and far between. What most HR teams in school districts don’t have is a consistent peer network of colleagues at the same level, doing the same work. This is the strategic value of cross-district HR collaboration and it’s worth framing it that way. This isn’t just professional networking. It’s building capacity at the highest level. Every district that participates benefits not only from what they bring, but from everything the other districts bring.

### THE HEARTWORK COLLAB FRAMEWORK

What emerged from our time together wasn’t just a productive day. It was a replicable model—a framework grounded in clear principles that any HR team in a school district could adapt and build from. Let’s call it the HeaRtwork Framework! Each letter represents a concrete practice.

**H — Human First Start:** Before the agenda, before any structured work—make space for people to connect as colleagues and as human beings. At our gathering, that meant a shared breakfast before the sessions began. Participants who take the time to know each other show up differently to focused discussions. Start there, every time.

**E — Experience the Work Together:** These conversations insist on real problems and real wins. Bringing actual challenges into the room is what makes the learning useful rather than just interesting. That connection is where the depth of this model lives.

**A — Acknowledge Shared Realities:** Some of the most significant moments in the day came simply from hearing a colleague say out loud something that every person in the room already knew, but hadn’t quite said. When those realities are named without embarrassment, they stop being individual burdens and become collective problems worth solving together.

**R — Reflect Across Districts:** The person sitting next to you from another district has already solved something you’re still figuring out. That kind of peer-to-peer reflection is one of the most underused resources we have. They’ve built a process you’re still designing.

**T — Translate Into Practice:** Every discussion closes with a clear expectation: you’re leaving with something specific you’re going to do or at least share with your colleagues. Not “Oh, this was a great event”, but “I’m going to take that idea back to my district.” The translate step is what separates learning that is impactful from learning that simply feels good in the moment.

### WORK — WHERE IT CONTINUES

The day ends. The drive back to your district happens. The next week begins. If HeaRtwork worked the way it’s designed to, the learning doesn’t stop when the rooms are emptied. You have a colleague’s number now. You’ll think of them when you have a question—and you’ll call. That’s the power of this type of collaboration; actually creating a network that spans across district lines.

### CULTIVATING WHAT COMES NEXT

The word cultivate fits this work well. You don’t force growth. You create the conditions where growth comes naturally. You remove what’s in the way. You add what’s needed.

The HeaRtwork Collab demonstrates the value of intentional, structured engagement among HR teams in school districts. This approach suggests that meaningful professional development does not require large-scale, costly events, but rather intentional design.

For HR leaders considering similar work, three practices stood out to us: 1) Start with real problems, not hypothetical issues; 2) Structure dialogue so listening is as important as sharing and 3) End every session with actionable takeaways. HeaRtwork Collab is a model that can be replicated, adapted and scaled.

If you’re reading this and seeing the potential for something like HeaRtwork Collab in your own region, the path forward is simpler than it might seem. You just need a few neighboring districts willing to show up honestly, protocols that keep the conversation grounded in real work, a meeting space in your school district, a modest budget for a continental breakfast and snacks and a commitment to protecting the time. The process will build itself from there because once people experience what genuine peer collaboration feels like, they tend to want more of it. ■



**Tatia Davis** joined the Human Resources Division at Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools four years ago as an HR Coordinator, bringing more than 25 years of experience across the classroom, teacher leadership and district-level teacher mentoring.

*That career arc gives her a unique lens on staffing, hiring and onboarding — she has seen the work from every angle. Collaborating directly with principals and district leaders, she is dedicated to creating a new hire experience that is efficient, welcoming and strengthened by technology. She believes onboarding isn’t just a process — it’s a promise. And how a district keeps that promise during someone’s first experience with the district often determines whether they stay, grow and give their best to the students and communities they serve.*

Your Best Recruiting Tool Isn't a Job Posting, It's Your Culture:

# BUILDING THE FOUNDATION BEFORE THE NEXT HIRING CYCLE

By Sheena Boykin, District Recruiter, Savannah-Chatham County Public School System, Savannah, GA

*In today's K-12 hiring environment, recruitment does not begin when a position is posted. By that point, candidates have already formed opinions about a district, often before there is any direct interaction.*



They have heard from current and former employees, observed how the district presents itself publicly and decided whether it is a place worth considering. That perception plays a critical role in whether they apply, accept an offer or choose to look elsewhere. For school systems working to recruit across all functions, this matters.

Recruitment is not limited to a single area. It reflects the full scope of the district. Organizational culture is the one factor that connects all roles and influences how positions are filled.

## CULTURE IS THE FIRST IMPRESSION

Before submitting an application, candidates are already evaluating the district. They pay attention to how employees are treated, how contributions are recognized and how leadership communicates. Culture is reflected in everyday interactions, social media presence, employee experiences, word of mouth and even how quickly candidates receive follow-up communication during the hiring process. Across the district, candidates are asking the same questions. Will I be supported here? Will I be treated with respect? Is this a place where people stay and grow? When those answers are consistently positive, recruitment becomes less about convincing candidates to apply and more about attracting them naturally.

A district's reputation is built long before a job is posted. Candidates are drawn to environments where they see stability, respect and opportunity. When those elements are visible, interest in the district increases without the need for aggressive recruitment tactics.

## RETENTION STRENGTHENS RECRUITMENT

Recruitment and retention are often treated as separate priorities, but in practice, they are closely connected. Employees who feel supported do more than remain in their roles. They become advocates for the district. They recommend the district to others, encourage peers to apply and contribute to a positive perception within the community. This is often reflected in simple, everyday interactions. Employees who have a positive experience will tell others to apply. Those who do not will just as quickly share their concerns. These conversations carry more influence than any marketing campaign.

A positive employee experience extends recruitment reach in ways that traditional strategies cannot. In this way, retention is not just about maintaining staffing levels. It is a key component of an effective recruitment strategy within school districts.

## LEADERSHIP SHAPES DAILY EXPERIENCE

Organizational culture is not defined by mission statements or formal initiatives. It is shaped by daily leadership practices. Employees experience culture through clear and consistent communication, access to necessary resources, fair expectations, accountability and recognition of their work. These are not large-scale efforts. They are small, repeated actions that influence how employees feel about their roles and responsibilities. When these practices are consistent, employees are more likely to stay and speak positively about the district. When they are inconsistent, recruitment becomes more difficult, regardless of how much effort is placed on outreach.

Consistency in leadership builds trust. Trust influences both retention and recruitment. Employees who trust their leadership are more engaged, more productive and more likely to encourage others to join the district.

## VISIBILITY BUILDS CONNECTION

Districts that use culture as a recruitment strategy make it visible. This goes beyond general messaging or slogans. It includes highlighting real employees, sharing authentic workplace experiences and demonstrating how staff members are supported and recognized. When candidates can see themselves reflected in the district, they are more likely to apply. Visibility allows candidates to better



understand the work environment and imagine their place within it. Authenticity is key. Candidates are more responsive to real stories and real experiences than to generalized messaging. When districts consistently showcase their people, culture becomes tangible and relatable.

### THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE REFLECTS THE CULTURE

The hiring process is often a candidate's first direct interaction with a district. That experience should reflect the same level of professionalism, organizational values and respect that is expected internally. A clear and timely process signals that the district values people's time and communicates effectively. Delays, lack of communication or disorganized processes send the opposite message. In competitive K-12 labor markets, candidates are unlikely to wait for unclear or inconsistent follow-up. They will move on to other opportunities.

A strong candidate experience reinforces the district's credibility. It increases the likelihood that candidates will accept offers and remain engaged throughout the hiring process. It also leaves a lasting impression, even for those who are not selected.

### BUILD BEFORE THE HIRING SEASON BEGINS

Districts that consistently attract strong candidates do not rely on last-minute recruitment efforts. They invest in their culture throughout the year. This includes strengthening onboarding practices, creating opportunities for professional growth, recognizing employee contributions and building partnerships that support long-term workforce pipelines. These efforts create a stable foundation. When hiring needs arise, recruitment becomes more effective because the environment already supports it. Instead of reacting to vacancies, districts are positioned to respond strategically. A proactive approach allows districts to maintain momentum rather than start from scratch each hiring season. It also ensures that recruitment efforts are aligned with the overall employee experience.

### CONCLUSION

Recruitment is influenced long before a position is posted. Organizational culture shapes what employees say, what candidates believe and whether individuals choose to apply. School districts that focus on consistency, support and visibility across their systems position themselves to attract and retain talent more effectively. The most effective recruitment strategy is not found in a job posting. It is reflected in the daily experiences of the people who already work within the district. Those experiences become the message that candidates pay attention to.

Recruitment is not simply a matter of "if you build it, they will come." In education, it requires intentionally building an environment where people feel supported, choose to stay and confidently encourage others to join. This requires districts to think beyond immediate hiring needs and focus on long-term workforce stability. Culture cannot be addressed only when vacancies increase. It must be maintained as an ongoing priority. When employees feel supported, they contribute to a more stable and reliable workforce. That stability reduces the need for reactive hiring and allows for more intentional, strategic recruitment.

Over time, a strong organizational culture strengthens the district's reputation within the community. As that reputation grows, so does the ability to attract candidates who are aligned with the district's expectations and values. Ultimately, culture is not just part of the recruitment strategy. It is the strategy! ■



**Sheena Boykin** serves as the district recruiter for the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS), where she leads recruitment efforts for both certified and classified positions. She drives full-cycle recruitment initiatives across all roles, focusing on building sustainable talent pipelines, strengthening the candidate experience and aligning recruitment with retention and organizational culture. She holds a master's degree in human services administration and was recognized with the 2025 AASPA Human Resources Specialist/Support Staff of the Year award for Region 6 for her contributions to strategic recruitment and workforce development.

“ Culture isn't just what we say— it's what people experience every day. ”

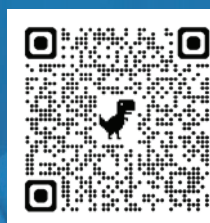


# Get Involved

AASPA volunteers are a driving force in the development of new programs and services for members and for school personnel administrators.

**WE WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR TALENTS!**

From joining a Committee to presenting at an event or writing an article, there are so many ways to get involved!



SCAN HERE & Let us know how you want to get involved!



2026

## SCHOOL HR SUMMER BOOT CAMP

JUNE 11 - 12, 2026 DENVER, CO

AASPA's School HR Summer Boot Camp is an unrivaled opportunity for PK-12 HR School System Leaders to collaborate across all levels and gather valuable resources you can use to help your teachers, employees and school district. Our most popular regional meeting, this two-day workshop offers a variety of essential topics for all HR administrators. Breakouts are aligned to two levels of professional practice, ensuring both developing HR professionals and experienced administrators can engage in relevant, high-value discussions. Topics include recruitment, HR legislation, hiring, employee evaluation, employee discipline and more!

### WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

- HR DIRECTORS/MANAGERS/SUPERVISORS
- SUPERINTENDENTS
- ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENTS
- PRINCIPALS
- BUSINESS OFFICIALS
- AND MORE!



REGISTER NOW!



# THINK LIKE A FARMER

## CULTIVATING THE LEADERS WHO GROW YOUR SCHOOLS

By Mike Bollinger, Global VP, Strategic Initiatives - Cornerstone OnDemand, Santa Monica, CA

*We've all heard the line: people don't leave bad jobs, they leave bad managers. It's become conventional wisdom in HR circles, repeated in keynotes and exit interview debriefs with such regularity that most of us stopped questioning it. And it's the wrong diagnosis.*

When surveyed by Angus Reid Global across a sample of 2,300 employees, 93% said their supervisor treats them fairly, a number that actually improved from 91% five years earlier. 87% said their supervisor is helpful in getting the job done. The prevalence of truly “bad” bosses is far lower than popular media suggests. Yet we keep reaching for that narrative every time a promising educator walks away, as if pinning blame on the principal explains what happened.

It doesn't. What it does is obscure a much more important and far more actionable, truth: building leaders aren't failing your people. Your systems are failing your building leaders.

### OLD EXPECTATIONS, NEW PRESSURES

The building leader role has fundamentally changed, but nobody updated the job description. Today's principals, assistant principals, department chairs and team leads are expected to be instructional coaches, culture stewards, mental health first responders, data analysts and operational leads, simultaneously. They navigate what researchers call the “authenticity paradox”: they have to be vulnerable enough to connect, but composed enough to lead through crisis. Show empathy without burning out. Enforce district policies they didn't design for a workforce that didn't ask for them.

Gartner calls this the “player-coach” trap. It's exhausting. In K-12, that pressure is amplified by substitute shortages, parent communication demands and compliance responsibilities that don't scale with staffing gaps.

Meanwhile, the data tells us where the real attrition pressure sits. Career development, not leader behavior, is

the number one reason employees leave, according to the Work Institute Retention Report. Up to 35% of new hires resign within the first 45 days. And 78% of the reasons people quit could have been prevented by the employer. Not by the building leader alone. By the employer. Taken together, these signals point to the same conclusion: attrition isn't primarily a leadership failure, it's a system design failure that shows up in leadership roles.

So when a first-year teacher walks away in October, the question shouldn't be “what did the principal do wrong?” It should be “what services and support conditions inside the building did we fail to cultivate?” Were mentoring structures in place? Did the new hire have access to instructional coaching? Was there a counselor or peer network to help navigate the emotional weight of that critical first year? Retention is not a single leader's responsibility; it is a reflection of the entire support ecosystem within the building.

### FIVE INVESTMENTS THAT CHANGE THE EQUATION

So what does it look like to cultivate them? Five purposeful investments: empathy.

#### New Support

68% of leaders report feeling overwhelmed. Yet only 14% of HR teams have taken action to help. That gap is a crisis hiding in plain sight. Building leaders need peer-to-peer networks, holistic wellness resources and access to coaching, not just the cabinet-level leaders, but every principal and department chair. Equally critical: strengthen the in-building services that surround them. Counseling support, instructional coaching, mentoring programs and dedicated onboarding resources all distribute the weight of staff development across the building rather than dropping it on one person's shoulders. The goal is an ecosystem of support, not a hero principal carrying it all alone. And let's not forget, building leaders are employees too. Their own development, wellbeing and sense of belonging matter just as much.

#### New Resource & Flexibility

If support is about who surrounds the leader, resources are about what they are empowered to change. Sixty-seven percent of employees value work-life balance more than higher pay, and half would take a pay cut to get it. Yet building leaders are often asked to enforce rigid scheduling, outdated role definitions and talent practices that run counter to what educators actually want. Districts need to equip leaders with clarity on approved flexibility models, role design tools and frameworks for evolving in-person practices. When policy

*“Taken together, these signals point to the same conclusion: attrition isn't primarily a leadership failure, it's a system design failure that shows up in leadership roles.”*



contradicts the lived experience of staff, building leaders absorb the friction. Give them resources that resolve the contradiction instead of perpetuating it.

**New Skills**

27% of employees say they're more likely to quit if their leader doesn't pay attention to their personal life. That's not a management deficiency, it's a skills gap. Building leaders need training in coaching, empathy, emotional intelligence and managing the authenticity paradox. Not a one-day PD session with a binder they'll never open. Real space to learn, practice and master relational behaviors over time. Skill development has to be sustained, not episodic.

**New CareerPathways**

74% of employees want tailored career guidance. When they don't get it, they leave. Districts can democratize development for every educator by adopting internal-first hiring mindsets, which dramatically improve both time-to-fill and time-to-productivity by giving staff visibility into growth opportunities through technology. Research shows that 80% of employees would start exploring career paths on their own if the tools were available and then bring those conversations to their leader. That shifts the dynamic entirely: the leader is no longer the gatekeeper of growth, but the guide for it.

**New (AI) Tools**

Harvard Business School research found that professionals who leverage AI complete tasks 25% faster with 40% better quality. For building leaders, AI offers real opportunity: data-driven insights for talent decisions, coaching support

for delivering targeted feedback, sentiment monitoring to catch morale dips before they become resignations and skill gap identification to focus professional development where it matters most. When 54% of a leader's time is consumed by administrative coordination, AI can reclaim hours that go back to what matters: people.

**CULTIVATE, DON'T BLAME**

Great districts think like farmers. They cultivate fertile soil - the culture. They irrigate and fertilize - regular check-ins. They choose the best plants for the soil - intentional team building. They remove weeds proactively. And critically, they don't uproot crops before they've had a chance to grow.

They also accept that there will be good seasons and bad seasons and that you can't control the weather. You can only be prepared for it.

Gallup found the single most impactful habit for successful leaders is one meaningful conversation per week with each team member, 15 to 30 minutes. Not a new initiative. Not a budget line. Not a board resolution. A conversation.

So start with one thing. Invest in building leaders and the services and support systems closest to your people. Embrace diversity of thought, enable communication, assume noble intent and don't forget to re-recruit the leaders you already have.

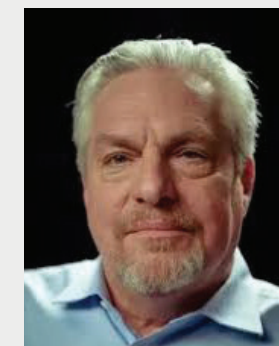
In the end, you don't fix retention by replacing crops. You fix it by fixing the soil. ■

# Cornerstone Galaxy for K-12

## Smarter K-12 Talent Development

- Accelerate Hiring & Onboarding
- Close Critical Skill Gaps
- Boost Teacher Retention
- Automate Compliance & PD
- Build Your Leadership Pipeline

### Explore Galaxy for K-12



**Mike Bollinger** is an accomplished executive with 20 years of industry experience. In his current role as Vice President of Strategic Initiatives with Cornerstone, he is responsible for internal research as well as strategy development

around outcome-based goals. Mike helped found and currently manages the Cornerstone People Research Lab (CPRL), whose mission is to generate data-driven discoveries about the world of work today and identify emerging trends which will give rise to new work models. Mike also collaborates with Cornerstone clients in an executive capacity as a leader, influencer and change agent who applies expertise to complex businesses.

## Have a story, strategy, or fresh perspective to share with school HR leaders?

Join us as a guest on **The Leader's Lounge Podcast!**

We're looking for voices from the field to discuss leadership, recruitment, retention, culture, innovation, and the challenges shaping PK-12 human capital today.

**Step into the lounge and help shape the conversation!**

INTERESTED? Submit your episode proposal to [karin@aspa.org](mailto:karin@aspa.org)



# REDESIGNING THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE:

## INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL EDUCATOR SHORTAGE SUMMIT

By Dr. Kelly Coash-Johnson, Executive Director, AASPA, Overland Park, KS

*At the 2026 National Educator Shortage Summit in Alexandria, Virginia, the conversation shifted in a meaningful way.*

*We are no longer asking what the educator shortage is. We are asking how to redesign the system so educators choose to stay.*



Hosted by the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA), the National Educator Shortage Summit (NESS) is an interactive, action-oriented convening that brings together PK–12 leaders, educator preparation programs (EPPs), state agencies and national organizations to move beyond discussion and toward data-informed solutions. Those characteristics make it unique, as does the pivot from a singular focus on pipeline development to comprehensive strategies for retention of the education workforce.

At the center of this work is a growing body of research and practice, including:

- 5 Shifts to Address the Educator Shortage
- Mapping a Journey to Address the National Educator Shortage
- Rewriting the Retention Playbook

Together, these resources and the Summit itself represent a living framework that continues to evolve through collaboration and real-world application.

### A DIFFERENT KIND OF SUMMIT: DESIGNED FOR ACTION

From the opening session to the final call to action, the Summit was intentionally designed to engage participants as problem-solvers, not just attendees. The structure of the Summit included interactive table discussions with pre-determined seating for comprehensive perspectives. Attendees included PK–20 educators, plus state departments of education and other educational organizations and stakeholders. This model consistently provided maximum opportunity for problem-solving and innovation.

Participants explored:

- National data and policy perspectives on educator retention
- District-level strategies that are moving the needle
- Statewide initiatives designed to recruit, recognize and retain educators
- Innovative workforce models such as team-based staffing and redesigned school structures

But the most powerful work of the Summit did not happen on the stage; it happened at the tables. The priority takeaway was that engaging with the full complement of PK–20 educators and stakeholders added immeasurable value, as reported by attendees and for the research that



resulted. This structure is something that will be retained at future events because of its effectiveness in developing solution-oriented strategies.

Another priority takeaway was the use of “old school” methods of brainstorming, prioritizing and reporting. In an effort to eliminate outside distractions, much of the work by participants was completed using pencil and paper, or rather, Sharpies and sticky notes. This method forced participants to be fully present, introduced movement to the active learning activity and resulted in a certain energy level in the room. Removing the distractions of technology, including the interruptions from life back at the office, resulted in improved participant focus on the task and a high-quality end-product.

*“Improving the educator shortage for the long term will require coordinated, systemwide strategies focused on retention, growth and workforce sustainability...”*

### FROM PERSONAS TO PRACTICE: CENTERING THE EDUCATOR EXPERIENCE

At the heart of the Summit experience was an interactive activity: Retention Journey: Using Educator Personas to Strengthen Workforce Strategy. Participants were assigned educator personas and worked through questions around engagement, barriers, sustainability and collaboration.

Across each group, one message became clear: retention is not a single initiative; it is a complex combination of factors that can present a system design challenge.

### KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

- Retention is driven by growth, not just support. Educators want opportunities to grow without leaving the classroom.
- Burnout is a system issue, not an individual one. Workload, inflexibility and staffing shortages are primary drivers.
- Compensation matters, but it is only part of the equation. Culture, recognition and meaningful work are equally critical.
- Leadership is the multiplier. Strong leaders increase retention; poor leadership accelerates attrition.
- Flexibility is essential. Rigid systems are pushing educators out.
- Mentorship and belonging drive retention. Educators stay where they feel supported and connected.
- System gaps are most visible for non-traditional educators.
- Cross-system collaboration is essential. No single entity can solve the educator shortage alone.

### A CLEAR SHIFT: FROM SHORTAGE RESPONSE TO WORKFORCE DESIGN

As we continue to develop candidates to fill vacancies,

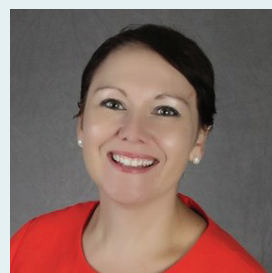
the focus has shifted to designing sustainable workforce systems that support educators across their entire career journey. Improving the educator shortage for the long term will require coordinated, systemwide strategies focused on retention, growth and workforce sustainability. While much of the Summit focused on teacher and administrator retention, it was evident that other employment groups within a school system must also be included in retention efforts. Support staff, transportation, nutrition services and custodial, to name a few, are integral reasons why a school day runs smoothly and retaining trained, quality employees in these roles contributes to the overall strength of the system.

### NEXT STEPS

Following the Summit, the retention personas were added to both the “Mapping A Journey to Address the National Educator Shortage” and the “Rewriting the Retention Playbook –

Shifts to build a sustainable educator workforce.” AASPA has fulfilled its original goal of convening national conversations around the critical educator workforce issues with great success. Ensuring resources are easily accessible, AASPA empowers state and local educators to apply these methods locally to continue making forward progress. Armed with these resources, educators and other stakeholders can move beyond discussion and into actionable, data-driven solutions for recruitment, retention and workforce sustainability, including hosting your own Educator Shortage Summit at a district or state level. AASPA is available to support those efforts should you need assistance.

The value of collaboration is innovation, forward progress and evolution. The National Educator Shortage Summits provided the venue for this to occur, specific to retention efforts. We must retain our educators to ensure sustained progress in shortage areas is made and, more importantly, so that students can academically thrive and excel. ■



**Dr. Kelly Coash-Johnson** is the Executive Director for the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA). Kelly has over 25 years of experience with educational

associations working with not only PK-12 HR Administrators, but with Superintendents, Principals and Special Education Administrators. Kelly holds a Professional Human Capital Leader in Education certification and recently completed her doctorate on teacher retention strategies.

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# STRENGTHENING UNIVERSITY-DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS

## FOR TEACHER PREPARATION AND RETENTION

By Dr. Cherissa Legendre Vitter, Associate Professor of IB Education, Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, LA



The Building Rigorous Induction and Development for Growing all Educators (BRIDGE) initiative was launched to address critical teacher shortages, strengthen preparation pathways and improve retention in high-need Louisiana districts. Funded through the U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) program, BRIDGE partnered with three Louisiana school districts to create a comprehensive pipeline from undergraduate preparation through induction. Through strategic partnerships with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and three Louisiana school districts, the program created a comprehensive pipeline that supports candidates from recruitment through induction. The initiative has achieved remarkable outcomes: 100% certification rates for Cohort 1 graduates, strong recruitment pipelines, innovative Praxis preparation supports and the establishment of a sustainable induction infrastructure. Southeastern’s leadership in this space has been recognized nationally, including an invitation to meet with U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon in 2025 to showcase the success of its induction and apprenticeship programs. BRIDGE has left a lasting legacy of collaboration, innovation and measurable impact on teacher quality in the region. It has positioned Southeastern as a national model for teacher preparation, with lessons that extend far beyond Louisiana.

### PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION

The program recognized early that addressing teacher shortages required not only preparing candidates, but also attracting them into the profession.

To this end, BRIDGE implemented a multi-pronged recruitment strategy:

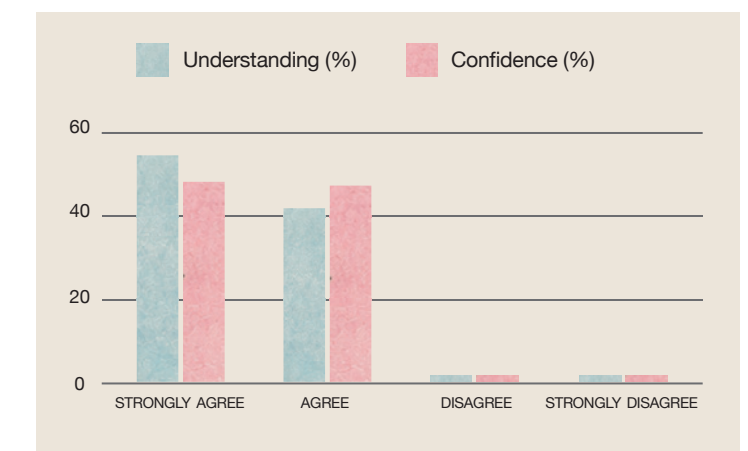
- Living Learning Communities (LLCs): Beginning in Fall 2024, 12 freshmen education majors lived and studied together, creating a supportive peer network that fostered early commitment to the profession.
- College of Education Ambassadors: Upperclassmen served as role models and recruiters, representing the College at events and mentoring younger students.
- Lion Pride Preview and Scholars Showcase: These events introduced high school students to the benefits of pursuing education at Southeastern.
- Pre-Educator Signing Days: In partnership with District 1, high school seniors committing to education were celebrated publicly, raising the profile of the profession.

By embedding Praxis preparation into coursework, offering career development activities such as mock interviews and career fairs and providing mentorship, BRIDGE created a supportive ecosystem that encouraged persistence through the program.

### TEACHER CANDIDACY

One of BRIDGE’s most innovative contributions has been the creation of the Praxis Lab. Recognizing that Praxis exam passage was a major barrier to certification and retention, the program embedded preparation directly into coursework. Candidates engaged in structured study sessions, accessed subject-specific materials and logged required lab hours. Faculty integrated Praxis preparation into their syllabi, ensuring that exam readiness was not an optional add-on but a core component of the academic experience.

Survey data from 123 participants in Fall 2024 revealed that:

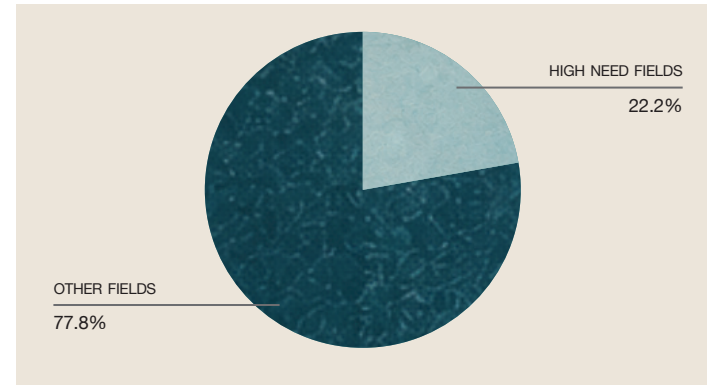


- 97% agreed or strongly agreed that the Praxis Lab improved their understanding of exam content.
- 96% reported increased confidence in their ability to succeed on the exams.

The Praxis Lab has already begun to shift outcomes, with candidates persisting in the program who might otherwise have exited due to exam challenges. It stands as a model of how universities can proactively address systemic barriers to teacher certification.

## TEACHER CERTIFICATION

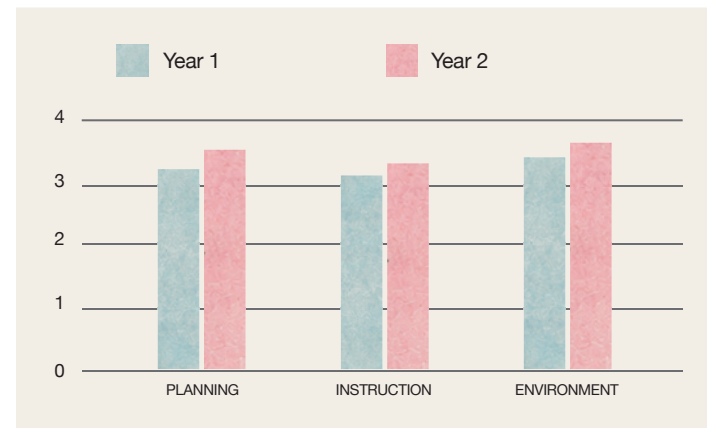
Certification is the ultimate measure of a teacher preparation program's effectiveness. BRIDGE's results are exceptional.



- 100% of Cohort 1 (90 candidates) attained certification within one year of graduation.
- 20 graduates entered shortage areas (special education, math, science, arts), directly addressing district needs.
- These outcomes not only exceed national averages but also directly address the most pressing needs of partner districts. By aligning preparation with district-defined shortage areas, BRIDGE ensured that its graduates were not only certified, but also strategically positioned to make an impact where they were needed most.

## INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY

Instructional quality is at the heart of BRIDGE's mission. By aligning coursework with NIET's Aspiring Teacher Rubric (ATR), the program has raised the bar for candidate performance. Classroom observations revealed growth across all indicators:



- Planning improved significantly, reflecting the integration of high-quality instructional materials into coursework.
- Instruction and Environment also showed steady gains, suggesting that candidates are better prepared to manage classrooms and deliver effective lessons.

These improvements are a direct result of faculty training, rubric alignment and the intentional design of clinical experiences. They demonstrate that BRIDGE is not only producing more teachers, but also better-prepared teachers.

## WORKING WITH SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Mentorship and induction are critical to teacher retention, and BRIDGE invested heavily in building this infrastructure. District Advisory Boards, composed of BRIDGE personnel, NIET representatives and district staff, ensured that induction programming was aligned with local needs. Cohort 1 began induction in District 1 in Fall 2024, with quarterly workshops focused on instructional planning, coaching and professional balance. Cohort 2 began induction in District 2 in Fall 2025. Satisfaction surveys consistently reported high levels of engagement and value, underscoring the program's success in building a sustainable induction model.

The BRIDGE initiative has been a resounding success. It has demonstrated that with strategic partnerships, innovative programming and data-driven decision-making, universities can play a pivotal role in addressing teacher shortages and improving educational equity. While the TQP grant has ended, the structures built through BRIDGE—Praxis Lab, induction workshops, mentor networks and rubric-aligned coursework—will continue to benefit candidates, mentors and districts for years to come. BRIDGE has not only met its goals but has also created a model for sustainable teacher development that can inform future initiatives at Southeastern Louisiana University and beyond. ■



**Dr. Cherissa Legendre Vitter** is an Associate Professor of IB Education at Southeastern Louisiana University and is responsible for teaching courses leading to the IB Educator Certificate in Teaching and Learning. Her areas of research are teacher

evaluation, cognitive coaching practices and future-ready classrooms where she has been a presenter at national and international conferences. She serves on the board of Louisiana IB Schools.

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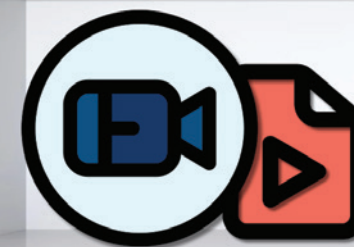
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# FUTURE FORWARD: INVESTING IN OUR PEOPLE, ELEVATING OUR COMMUNITY

By Catherine Arminio, Assistant Director of Human Resources,  
Hamilton Township School District, Mercer County, NJ

*The United States continues to face a persistent national teacher shortage, characterized by a diminishing pipeline of prospective educators entering the field. For Human Resources departments in education, this trend necessitates a strategic shift from a focus on candidate selection to a proactive emphasis on staff development and retention.*

Maintaining educator quality is paramount, as instructional staff possess the capacity to significantly shape student outcomes, precluding any compromise in standards due to inadequate candidate quantity. Over the past two years, the Hamilton Township School District, situated in Mercer County, New Jersey, initiated a full-circle HR strategy to address this pipeline issue by intensifying focus on both current staff retention and local community recruitment.

## INTERNAL PERSONNEL RETENTION STRATEGIES

The district's retention efforts commenced with formalized staff engagement protocols designed to check the organizational climate. Specifically, stay interviews were employed as a standardized method to assess the overall sentiment of the teaching staff. The four-question survey sent includes:

1. What are you learning at Hamilton Township School District? What do you want to learn?
2. Why do you stay at the Hamilton Township School District?
3. When was the last time you thought about leaving HTSD? What prompted it?
4. What supports can we provide to make your experience at work better for you?

Staff are also given an option to meet in person or on a virtual platform if they would like to elaborate or prefer a different format. The resulting data fueled meaningful conversations, providing empirical evidence of satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding building culture and employee outlook. This proactive approach enables the HR department to identify potential attrition trends before they escalate into staff turnover, thereby supporting long-term teacher retention.

Beyond data collection, the District implemented opportunities for leadership development, notably through the Aspiring Administrator program. This initiative compensates teachers to assume limited principal duties, granting them essential real-life administrative experience during preparatory periods and in the resolution of building issues, which is a recognized strategy for developing internal capacity and increasing engagement among high-potential employees.

Another area of focus the District looked at was how to effectively communicate the benefits offerings and how to check in with staff. The District offers a robust benefits package, including excellent health insurance, dental insurance, a prescription plan, an employee assistance

program, optional disability and savings and tax shelters. A key challenge identified was the low awareness among staff regarding the full scope of these benefits. Using AI tools such as Notebook LM and Gemini, as well as live informational sessions, the District was able to increase knowledge of the programs within the District and educate staff on the benefits. Additionally, the District sends out reminders about wellness and the importance of self-care, urging staff to support one another and educating them about the services available if needed.

## DEVELOPING NON-CERTIFICATED STAFF PATHWAYS

The second component of the comprehensive strategy involved establishing "grow your own" pathways for non-certificated staff—such as educational assistants and support personnel—to transition into certified teaching roles. The District actively cultivated partnerships with external organizations that facilitate the certification process by reducing financial barriers and bridging the gap between the employee and university certification programs. Currently, approximately 10 Educational Assistants are actively engaged in the pipeline to become future teachers. Research indicates that such programs are highly effective in building a more representative and stable workforce.

Recognizing the complexity of the state's certification process, a commitment was made to simplify the requirements for existing staff. This involved restructuring the state-provided information into digestible segments, creating a clarifying visual chart for the District website and hosting individualized counseling sessions with non-certificated employees.

Furthermore, the District actively integrates student teachers into the organizational structure. Twice annually, the District meets with the student teachers to explain the benefits of substitute teaching and eventually joining the District as a teacher. By offering a comprehensive, supportive and high-quality student teaching experience, the district cultivates familiarity and encourages future employment from a cohort that is already integrated into the school environment and community.

## Leveraging Community Recruitment

The final strategic effort focused on leveraging the local community's unique socio-historical context. Hamilton Township, noted for its deep-rooted history and strong local identity, features a population self-identified as "Hamiltonians" who grew up in town and remain in the

area to raise their families. Harnessing this strong local connection, the District held targeted job fairs throughout the year, including specialized events for educational assistants and specific teaching staff vacancies. This fall, the Human Resources department also dedicated time to provide community members with detailed, personalized counseling on the certification process. This outreach resulted in direct consultation with approximately 15 community members interested in career transition, demonstrating how localized recruitment can tap into non-traditional candidate pools.

Every profession starts with a teacher and it is our duty to keep the profession alive. The systemic challenge of declining teacher numbers demands a proactive response. HTSD is committed to ensuring the teaching profession remains an attractive and viable career path for present and future educators through deliberate strategies. These include prioritizing the retention of our current staff, creating clear development pathways for our non-certificated personnel and strategically utilizing our unique community resources. The teaching profession is foundational, every career depends on it and it is our responsibility to sustain it. ■



**Catherine Arminio,**  
Assistant Director of HR  
for the Hamilton Township  
School District (23 schools,  
12,000+ students in Mercer  
County, NJ), pioneers  
wholistic HR strategies  
focused on retention, talent  
development and inclusivity  
to "Build Minds and Build  
Futures."

Her professional leadership includes serving as Co-Chair of the Scholarship Committee for the NJSTRIDE Consortium (a subgroup of NJASA) and active membership in NJASA, PAA, NJSBA and AASPA.

Beyond her professional roles, Catherine is driven by her family of five (including three sweet boys) and two dogs. She serves the community as an Achilles guide, where she combines her love of running and helping people. She spends her spare time running, baking, reading and occasionally "forcing" her family to join in her love for the sport by signing them up for a 5K.



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