



THE COMPASS

DIRECTION FOR HR LEADERS IN EDUCATION

Taking Care of Your People and Taking Care of Yourself

CULTURE IS CARE

Culture isn't fixed by piling on more initiatives—it's strengthened by care. Explore why the healthiest organizations focus on reinforcing trust, recognition and capacity before adding more weight and how leaders who take care of their people and themselves build cultures that can withstand pressure, prevent burnout and drive lasting engagement.



TEACHing Our Way Out of the Educator Shortage

How Bias Shapes Educator Hiring and How to Reduce It

From Belonging to Mattering:
The Retention Strategy We Might be Overlooking



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#K12Talent



A Commitment to Inclusion: *Plyler v. Doe* and the Role of School HR Professionals

As President of the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA), I have witnessed first-hand the transformative power of inclusion in our schools. The Supreme Court's decision in *Plyler v. Doe* stands as a vital reminder that every child—regardless of immigration status—is entitled to a free, quality public education. For those of us in school human resources, upholding this promise is more than a legal obligation; it is a cornerstone of our mission and the key to building thriving, equitable schools.

Plyler v. Doe: A Foundation for Equity

In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that denying children access to education based on immigration status was unconstitutional. *Plyler v. Doe* established that schools must welcome all students, ensuring they are not excluded due to circumstances beyond their control. By safeguarding every child's right to learn, this decision helps shape a society that values opportunity and fairness.

For our membership and colleagues nationwide, *Plyler v. Doe* is a guiding principle. It calls upon us to create environments that are not only inclusive, but actively embrace each student's unique story and potential.

Why Inclusion Is Essential

Inclusive schools do more than open their doors—they open minds and hearts. When we nurture diversity, we cultivate academic excellence and well-being for every student. For children impacted by immigration status, inclusion means security, dignity and the genuine chance to succeed. Studies consistently show that inclusive practices benefit both individual students and the larger school community.

As HR professionals, our role is critical. We set the tone, policies and expectations that ensure inclusion is woven into the fabric of our schools. This is not just best practice—it is justice in action.

The School HR Professional's Role

School personnel administrators shape the culture of learning through hiring, training and policy oversight. It is our duty to recruit staff who embody the values of equity and inclusion, and to provide ongoing professional development regarding the rights of students guaranteed by *Plyler v. Doe*.

We must also ensure that our policies safeguard student privacy, prohibit discrimination and protect each child's right to a supportive and respectful learning environment. By doing so, we help every student feel seen, respected and empowered to reach their full potential.

Strategies for Inclusion and Compliance

Educate Staff: Offer regular training on *Plyler v. Doe* and strategies for supporting every student.

Review Policies: Make sure all school policies are clear, accessible and protective of student rights.

Encourage Communication: Create safe spaces for students and families to voice their concerns and seek support.

Support Diversity: Build teams that reflect and value the backgrounds of our student population.

Protect Confidentiality: Maintain strict safeguards for student information, especially regarding immigration status.

Engage Community Partners: Collaborate with local organizations to extend resources and support for families navigating their rights under *Plyler v. Doe*.

A Call to Action

Inclusion is a pledge we make to every student who walks through our doors. As President of AASPA, I challenge school HR professionals to champion the legacy of *Plyler v. Doe*—ensuring equity is at the heart of every policy, practice and interaction. Through our leadership, compassion and commitment, we can guarantee that every child receives the education they deserve. Together, let's build schools where inclusion is not just a promise, but a reality.

With deep appreciation,

Dr. Steve Grubb

President, American Association of School Personnel Administrators

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

From the Desk of Dr. Steve Grubb, AASPA President

CULTURE IS CARE



TAKING CARE OF YOUR PEOPLE AND TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

By Wendell B. Sumter, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Chester County School District, Chester, SC

When culture is weak, organizations respond by “piling on” more initiatives — and the structure collapses. Here’s a practical culture-of-care framework HR leaders can use to strengthen the foundation, protect capacity and improve retention.

Culture. Culture. Culture.

We hear it all the time — but in too many organizations, the culture is running on fumes.

You can feel it when you walk in. People are present, but not engaged. Meetings feel heavy. Morale is fragile. Turnover becomes normal. And leaders keep trying to fix what’s broken by adding more — more initiatives, more meetings, more expectations.

But what if the real fix isn’t adding more? What if it’s strengthening what’s already there?

Over the years, working across education and people-centered leadership roles, I’ve learned a simple truth: The healthiest cultures are built on care. Not soft leadership. Not lowered standards. Real care — care that is structured, consistent and visible in everyday decisions.

That’s why I summarize culture in two responsibilities:

1. Take care of your people.
2. Take care of yourself — so you can lead well long-term.

These two responsibilities are connected. When leaders neglect people, the culture eventually breaks. When leaders neglect themselves, the culture becomes unstable too — because burnout always leaks into the environment.

STRENGTH BEFORE WEIGHT: THE JENGA TEST

One of the best ways I’ve found to explain culture is with a simple image: culture is like a Jenga tower.

When the tower is stable, you can add weight. But when you start removing the wrong blocks — support, clarity, trust, consistent leadership — the structure gets shaky. And when the structure is shaky, adding more weight doesn’t help. It accelerates collapse.

That’s what happens in many workplaces. Leaders feel pressure to add: more initiatives, more meetings, more metrics, more programs, more expectations. The intent may be good. But employees don’t live inside our intentions — they live inside the workload.

Healthy culture is built by strengthening the structure first. The most important question is not “What are we adding?” It’s:

What are we reinforcing?
What are we simplifying?
What are we protecting?
What support are we adding so people can succeed?

In HR — especially in education — this matters because culture is not only about morale. It affects retention, staffing stability, performance, safety and trust. A strong culture allows organizations to carry heavy seasons without losing their people.

WHAT CARE LOOKS LIKE

“Taking care of your people” doesn’t mean avoiding hard conversations. It means building an environment where people feel seen, supported and equipped to meet expectations. Here are five practical culture builders that work in nearly any setting — education, HR, corporate, manufacturing, health care, nonprofit and beyond.

1. Make recognition a habit, not an event

Most leaders believe in appreciation. The difference is whether people actually feel it. Recognition works best when it is specific and consistent — especially when stress is high.

A simple rhythm: start meetings with recognition—spotlight collaboration. Name the behaviors you want repeated. And be specific.

“Great job” is encouraging, but it’s not culture-forming. “Great job stepping in to support your teammate when the day was falling apart — your calm presence kept the situation from escalating” is culture-building. That kind of recognition tells employees what excellence looks like in your organization.

CARE OF YOUR PEOPLE



HR actions that make this stick:

- Build a simple monthly recognition rhythm (staff meeting shout-outs + “caught being great” emails).
- Train leaders to recognize behavior, not personality (what you did and why it mattered).
- Spotlight the work of behind-the-scenes roles (often the most overlooked).

2. Use check-ins to catch small problems early

Culture problems rarely explode overnight. They grow quietly through unspoken frustration, unclear direction, workload strain or the feeling that no one is listening. Leaders who protect culture keep a finger on the pulse with regular check-ins. That can be as simple as asking:

What's working right now?
What feels heavy this week?
What's one thing you need from me?

When leaders ask consistently, people stop suffering in silence. And when leaders respond consistently, trust grows.

HR actions that make this measurable:

- Add brief pulse questions monthly (two questions beats no questions).
- Use stay interviews with high performers (Why are you staying? What might make you leave?).
- Turn feedback into visible action (communicate one change you made because employees spoke up).

3. Build relational equity: greet, remember, connect

Culture is shaped through small moments — a warm greeting, remembering a name, noticing when someone seems off, asking about a family member. Those moments communicate, “You matter here.”

Many leaders say they don’t have time for relationships, but trust isn’t extra — it’s infrastructure. When pressure rises, teams with trust stay stable longer.

HR actions that reinforce belonging:

- Strengthen onboarding with a buddy system (someone checks on new employees for 30 days).
- Coach leaders on listening and follow-up (don’t just ask — respond).
- Create meeting norms that respect people’s time (start on time, end on time, reduce bloat).

4. Manage negativity like a threat to the environment

Every workplace has stress. But persistent negativity spreads. When leaders ignore it, it doesn’t stay contained — it becomes a group norm.

Negativity often shows up as gossip that divides, cynicism that undermines, complaint cycles that produce no solutions, and constant resistance that becomes a habit.

This isn’t about silencing concerns. It’s about setting a standard for how concerns get raised and resolved. A simple

standard can shift the atmosphere: If you bring a problem, bring a possible next step or a willingness to help find a solution. That doesn’t silence people — it strengthens the organization’s ability to solve rather than spiral.

HR actions that reduce “viral negativity”:

- Reinforce respectful communication expectations (especially for supervisors).
- Address repeat offenders early with coaching, not avoidance.
- Create a clear path for concerns (so employees don’t feel gossip is their only outlet).

5. Don’t “pile on.” Protect capacity.

Leaders often add initiatives with good intentions. But employees experience the total load, not the intent behind it. Before launching something new, leaders should run a capacity check:

What are we stopping or reducing?
What training, time or resources are being added?
What will this cost the team emotionally and practically?
How will we measure whether it’s helping — not just adding activity?

HR actions that show you mean it:

- Pair every “new” with a “stop” (remove one burden when you add one).
- Audit meeting load (who is in meetings all day and when do they actually work?).
- Protect planning time and reduce unnecessary compliance friction when possible.

A LEADERSHIP MOMENT THAT STUCK: THE RIB-EYE LESSON

Let me make this personal.

When I served as a principal, there were seasons when my staff was exhausted — testing pressure, heavy needs, long hours, and the emotional load that comes with caring for students and families. I realized that one of the most powerful things I could do wasn’t another speech. It was to demonstrate care in a tangible way.

So I cooked for my staff. Not hot dogs. Not “whatever was easiest.” I cooked steaks — and not just any steaks: rib-eye steaks.

That wasn’t about being flashy. It was about sending a message: You are carrying a lot, and I see you. You matter. You are worth the effort. And something happened that leaders should pay attention to: when people feel genuinely valued,

they show up differently. Morale rises. Collaboration improves. Resilience increases — not because the job suddenly became easy, but because the environment became supportive.

That same thought process is what I bring into HR work. HR done well doesn’t only enforce policies — it protects people. It asks, “Within our constraints, what can we do to take care of employees in a real way?”

CULTURE IN ACTION: THE 100 DAYS CELEBRATION

Culture isn’t only built through major programs. Sometimes culture is built through moments that create emotional memory.

Recently, we held a 100 Days celebration for our induction teachers and invited all employees. It was a wonderful event, and the reactions were telling. People kept saying things like, “This was awesome,” “Outstanding” and “This is what it’s all about.”

That’s culture. It’s not the decorations. It’s not the agenda. It’s the meaning underneath: people felt included, honored and connected. Those moments tell employees what the organization values.

HR leaders should treat that kind of feedback as data. When employees repeatedly describe an experience as “outstanding,” you’ve discovered a cultural lever: celebration, inclusion and recognition are not extras. They are retention tools.

PROTECTING THE LEADER

Here’s what many leaders miss: your personal health becomes part of your organizational culture. If employees watch leaders grind without rest, skip boundaries and live in constant urgency, they learn that burnout is the price of belonging.

That’s why self-care is not selfish. It’s a leadership responsibility.

CARE OF YOURSELF

In my forthcoming 2026 book, *Dirt Road Destiny*, I urge leaders to be intentional with boundaries: “Protect the calendar. If you don’t schedule time for your family, others will schedule it for you. Treat family time like you treat board meetings or Sunday services—non-negotiable.”

I also frame rest as a leadership practice, not a luxury: “Rest is not selfish—it’s stewardship. Ministry and education can consume every ounce of energy if you let them. But burnout helps no one.”

When leaders don’t protect their capacity, they eventually make reactive decisions, communicate sharply under pressure, stop listening and create cultures built on urgency instead of sustainability. When leaders model healthy boundaries, they give their teams permission to work in healthier ways, too.

Some realistic examples leaders can model include a weekly no-meeting block, clearer end times where possible, scheduled renewal (movement, reading, quiet, hobbies) and device breaks that create mental space. The point isn’t perfection. The point is sustainability.

HR LEADER TAKEAWAYS

Five culture moves that pay off fast

- Recognize specifically: weekly, not just annually.
- Check in consistently: before problems turn into turnover.
- Reduce friction: simplify processes that waste time and patience.
- Address negativity early: protect the environment before it spreads.
- Protect capacity: remove something when you add something.

A 30-DAY CULTURE-OF-CARE CHECKLIST

People care

- Start meetings with specific recognition.
- Add consistent check-ins to surface strain early.
- Build relational trust through small moments of connection.
- Set standards for healthy communication and address negativity early.
- Do a capacity check before launching new initiatives—and reduce one burden when you add one.



Leader care

- Block renewal time on the calendar like it’s non-negotiable.
- Protect one focus block each week.
- Model boundaries publicly.
- Treat rest as a leadership tool, not a luxury.

CLOSING

Pressure doesn’t create culture — it exposes it. Whatever is practiced on normal days is what shows up on the hard days. When leaders consistently take care of people and take care of themselves, they build cultures that can carry weight without collapsing.

You don’t have to overhaul everything to shift culture. Start with recognition. Start with check-ins. Strengthen the structure before adding more weight. Celebrate people in ways that create emotional memory. And protect leadership health — because your wellness becomes permission for others to work in healthier ways too.

In the end, culture isn’t a slogan. It’s a set of daily decisions rooted in care. ■



Wendell B. Sumter is Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources for Chester County School District in Chester, South Carolina, and pastor of Zion Mill Creek Baptist Church in Columbia. A veteran educator and former principal, he has more than 30 years of experience in public education and has led work in recruitment, retention and professional development. He is the author of the forthcoming 2026 book, *Dirt Road Destiny*.

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Who Should Attend?

PK-12 Administrators | Higher Education Representatives | Agency/Department of Education Representatives | Teachers/Other Educators |



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TEACHing OUR WAY OUT OF THE EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

By Charity Comella, Assistant Superintendent for Personnel, Affirmative Action/Title IX Officer, West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, West Windsor, NJ & Dr. Scott Rocco, Superintendent of Hamilton Township School District, Hamilton Township, NJ

Every school district in the nation faces an educator staffing crisis that temporary measures can no longer solve. Nearly one in eight teaching positions is either unfilled or staffed by non-certified educators. Shortages are most acute in special education, science and mathematics, directly impacting student learning and long-term outcomes.

THE EDUCATIONAL AND FISCAL CLIFF

The consequences of this crisis are both instructional and financial. Replacing a single teacher can cost districts up to \$20,000 (adjusted for inflation) after accounting for recruitment and onboarding. Meanwhile, attrition is accelerating: two-thirds of teachers leave voluntarily rather than through retirement. This trend is particularly alarming as one-third of the workforce is over age 50. Paradoxically, while districts attempt "grow-your-own" pipelines, antiquated regulatory frameworks often prevent capable, motivated staff already in our buildings from being deployed where they are needed most.

LESSONS FROM THE HOUSE STANDARD

The educational community has navigated similar hurdles before. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, states like New Jersey developed the High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE). This allowed teachers to demonstrate content expertise through a "Content Knowledge Matrix" involving coursework and professional activities. While the HOUSE Standard proved that high standards and adaptability could coexist, it was a time-bound, point-based measure. Once it expired, the

profession reverted to rigid, time-intensive relicensure mechanisms.

THE SHIFT TO MICRO-CREDENTIALS

To solve today's crisis, we must move beyond limited, point-based systems toward Micro-credentials (MCs). MCs are verified evidence of specific competencies demonstrated through practical application and evaluated against validated rubrics.

As of 2020, twenty-six states have implemented educator micro-credential policies. These applications include:

- Licensure Renewal: Accepted in Tennessee, Utah and Massachusetts.
- Career Advancement: Arkansas and Louisiana use "stacks" of MCs for leadership roles.
- Specialized Endorsements: Utilized in Arizona (Computer Science) and Virginia (STEM).
- Financial Incentives: Delaware and Oklahoma link MC completion to salary increases.

The TEACH Framework

We propose a modern evolution: TEACH (Targeted Evidence Amplifying Competencies Held). This framework reframes how expertise is recognized, moving away from "seat time" toward observable instructional outcomes.

	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Connection to HQT and Micro-credentials</u>
T	TARGETED	MCs offer personalized learning experiences tailored to specific classroom skills.
E	EVIDENCE	Teachers collect evidence of effective instruction, the most significant factor in student achievement.
A	AMPLIFYING	Moving beyond "seat time," this requires evidence of application to amplify alternative modes of efficacy.
C	COMPETENCIES	A competency-based system verifies discrete skills rather than time-based requirements.
H	HELD IN HIGH-QUALITY	Ensures rigorous standards are used to recognize high-quality instructional practices.



EXPANDING EDUCATOR EXPERTISE

TEACH provides a pathway for currently credentialed teachers to gain additional certifications in high-demand fields like science, math and special education. For example, a special education teacher providing departmentalized instruction could use a competency-based model to obtain necessary endorsements quickly, potentially leading to stipends or salary increases.

At its core, TEACH utilizes MCs—lesson artifacts, classroom videos and student work—to verify mastery in urgent areas: multilingual learning, trauma-informed practice and instructional technology. Unlike the old HOUSE matrix, which focused on compliance, TEACH focuses on impact.

STACKABLE DESIGN AND RETENTION

A critical feature of TEACH is its stackable design. Sequences of related micro-credentials can collectively demonstrate readiness for new roles. Educators can build "TEACH stacks" in bilingual education or inclusive practices, allowing districts to deploy talent strategically.

This also addresses the retention crisis. Many experienced educators leave because their advanced skills go unrecognized. By linking TEACH stacks to leadership roles or licensure renewal, education departments signal that professional growth is valued.

MODERNIZING EXCELLENCE

For TEACH to succeed, policy alignment is essential. Micro-credentials must be integrated into state licensure systems rather than treated as optional add-ons. Educators need protected time for this work, and the standards for assessment must remain rigorous.

The goal is not to lower standards but to modernize how excellence is defined. TEACH offers a forward-looking path to align rigor with relevance, ensuring every student has access to a highly qualified professional. ■



Charity Comella is the Assistant Superintendent for Personnel, Affirmative Action/Title IX Officer for the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District. Overseeing all hiring practices and regulatory compliance measures, she has a strong background in public schools and private sector organizations. A former

teacher, reading specialist, staff developer, supervisor and current central office school administrator, she has over 25 years' experience in public education (over 33 years in service-related work). Ms. Comella is also the proud president of NJ STRIDE (New Jersey Statewide Recruitment of Diverse Educators)- njstride.org- a statewide consortium of public school districts representing nearly every NJ county, where she collaborates with school leaders across the state.



Scott Rocco, Ed.D. has dedicated over 30 years to education and currently serves as Superintendent of Hamilton Township School District in New Jersey. As a former teacher, vice principal and elementary principal, he has extensive K-12 teaching and leadership experience. An ardent supporter of the profession,

Dr. Rocco advocates for education on the local, state and national levels. He is dedicated to positively engaging educators and others to improve student learning, enhance instruction and create effective instructional environments for all who work and learn in schools.

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HOW BIAS SHAPES EDUCATOR HIRING AND HOW TO REDUCE IT

By Dr. Anthony Graham, Chief Operating Officer, St. Louis Language Immersion School, St. Louis, MO

Bias, whether conscious or unconscious, remains a persistent challenge in educator hiring. Despite strong equity commitments and well-intentioned practices, many school systems continue to rely on traditional hiring processes that unintentionally reinforce homogeneity or exclude qualified candidates.



In many cases, human resources professionals and hiring committees may not recognize how bias operates within these systems. Addressing hiring bias extends beyond the human resources office; it is central to equity, instructional excellence and student success across school districts.

WHY HIRING BIAS MATTERS IN EDUCATION

Many school systems serve student populations that are significantly more diverse than their teaching and leadership staff. When hiring bias narrows applicant pools or favors certain candidate profiles, the effects extend beyond individual one-off employment decisions. Bias in hiring influences student representation, the availability of culturally responsive instruction, staff morale, district equity commitments and community trust in public schools.

Reducing hiring bias is more than an administrative improvement. It is a student-centered strategy that supports inclusive learning environments, strengthens instructional quality and improves educational outcomes. When educators reflect the diversity of the communities they serve and are selected through equitable processes, schools are better positioned to meet the academic and social needs of all students.

COMMON FORMS OF HIRING BIAS

Bias influences hiring decisions in subtle ways. Several common forms of bias are particularly relevant in educational contexts.

Affinity bias occurs when interviewers favor candidates who share similar backgrounds, communication styles or professional experiences. For example, a hiring committee may prefer a candidate who attended the same teacher preparation program or previously worked in a similar district, assuming the individual will “fit right in,” while overlooking equally qualified candidates with different experiences.

Confirmation bias emerges when evaluators seek information that supports an early impression while discounting contradictory evidence. For instance, if an interviewer initially believes a candidate lacks classroom management skills, they may focus on minor hesitations during responses as evidence of weakness and minimize examples of effective classroom leadership that are shared.

Halo and horn effects occur when a single positive or negative trait disproportionately shapes overall judgment. A candidate who appears confident and articulate may be rated highly across multiple competencies, even without

supporting evidence. Conversely, a candidate who begins an interview nervously may be viewed as less capable overall, despite strong instructional skills.

Demographic bias results from factors such as names, accents, age, gender presentation or perceived cultural background. In education, this may occur when a candidate with a noticeable accent is unconsciously perceived as less effective in parent communication, despite documented success engaging families.

Cultural fit bias is prevalent in education, but often poorly defined. In the absence of clear criteria, it may serve as a proxy for sameness rather than genuine alignment with a school’s mission or values. For example, a school may label a candidate as “not a good fit” because their teaching philosophy or communication style differs from staff norms, even when it aligns with district improvement goals.

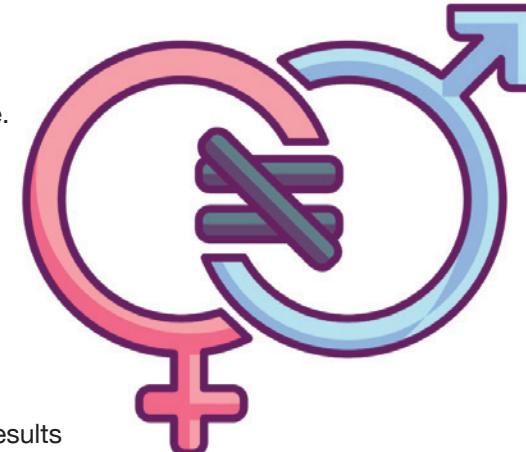
Structural bias emerges when hiring systems rely on informal networks, subjective interviews or inconsistent evaluation tools. A district that depends heavily on word-of-mouth recruitment and unstructured interviews may unintentionally limit access for underrepresented candidates.

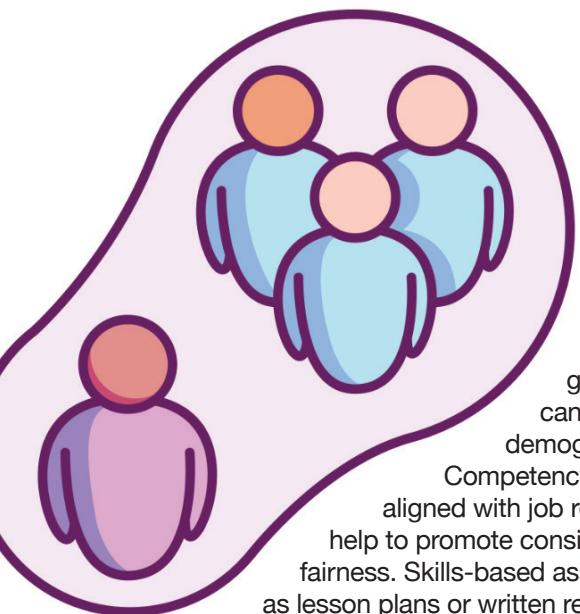
REDUCING BIAS ACROSS THE HIRING PROCESS

Effective bias mitigation requires intentional design at every stage of the hiring process, from recruitment through final selection.

Recruitment and sourcing. Bias often originates in job postings and sourcing practices. Job descriptions may contain exclusionary or coded language, such as “rock star” or “digital native,” that discourages qualified candidates from applying. Districts can reduce bias by developing inclusive, competency-based job descriptions. Targeted recruitment efforts may include partnerships with minority educator organizations, bilingual educator networks, community groups and veteran transition programs. Employee referrals should be used cautiously, as they frequently replicate existing staff demographics.

Application screening. Resume review represents another common entry point for bias, particularly when evaluators favor familiar universities or traditional career pathways.





Blind screening practices that remove names, addresses and graduation dates can help reduce demographic bias.

Competency-based rubrics aligned with job requirements help to promote consistency and fairness. Skills-based assessments, such as lesson plans or written responses, should be evaluated without identifying information whenever possible.

Interviews and selection. Interviews are especially susceptible to bias related to first impressions and informal interactions. Structured interviews provide an effective means of mitigation by requiring all candidates to respond to the same job-related questions using standardized scoring rubrics. This approach shifts evaluation from personality or perceived “fit” to evidence of practice. Diverse interview panels can help balance individual biases, while standardized note-taking and immediate scoring support equitable decision-making.

CONCLUSION

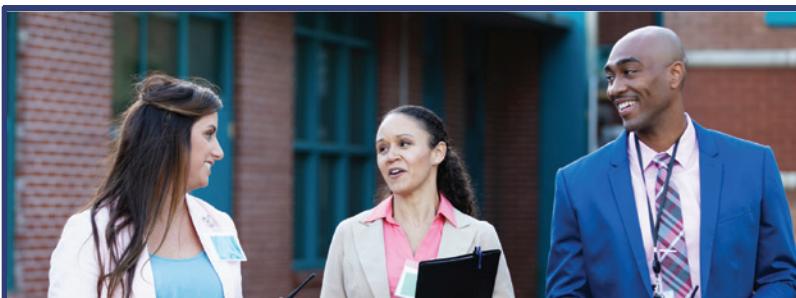
Hiring bias remains a significant barrier to building diverse, effective and representative school teams. Because educators shape student experiences and school culture, biased hiring practices directly affect equity, achievement and community trust.

School districts can reduce bias through inclusive recruitment strategies, equitable screening practices, structured interviews, diverse hiring panels and competency-based evaluations. For education leaders, addressing hiring bias is not merely a matter of compliance or efficiency; it is a commitment to creating schools where all students feel represented, supported and valued. ■





Dr. Anthony Graham currently serves as Chief Operating Officer and an experienced human resources professional at the St. Louis Language Immersion School in St. Louis, Missouri. He brings more than a decade of experience in education, with service in diverse settings including Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Southern Illinois and rural Alaska. He holds PHR, SHRM-CP and pHCLE certifications. In addition to his civilian role, Dr. Graham is an officer in the United States Army Reserve, serving with the 426th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) in Upland, California, as a Civil Affairs Military Government Officer (38G-6D).



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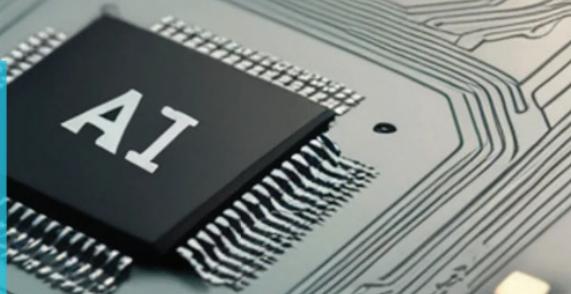
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FROM BELONGING TO MATTERING: THE RETENTION STRATEGY WE MAY BE OVERLOOKING

By Dr. Neill Alleva, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Katonah-Lewisboro School District, Cross River, NY

Districts nationwide continue to strengthen culture, refine onboarding and build systems that support connection. These efforts matter. But research on organizational psychology points to an additional factor that strongly influences whether people stay committed to their work: the experience of mattering.



Mattering is the belief that one is seen, valued and needed. Researcher Zach Mercurio, Ph.D., describes mattering as the combination of feeling valued and adding value. His work shows that when people believe they matter they engage more deeply, persist through challenges and commit more fully to their organizations. In schools, where purpose fuels performance, mattering can be a decisive factor in whether employees remain and thrive.

BELONGING VS. MATTERING

Belonging is the feeling that we're part of a larger group that values, respects and cares for us and to which we feel we have something to contribute. As such, many districts have invested appropriately in belonging through mentoring, onboarding and relationship-building.

Mattering on the other hand, is the belief that we're significant to the world around us: Do I have value and do I add value?

The two concepts are complementary. Belonging brings people in. A culture of mattering makes them feel significant once they arrive. An employee can feel welcomed yet still wonder whether their presence or work truly matters. When belonging is not paired with mattering, people may feel included, but not needed, affirmed or noticed.

HOW MATTERING SHOWS UP IN HR PRACTICE

Mattering is communicated through everyday interactions, not programs. Mercurio's research highlights three core experiences that shape whether people believe they matter:

Noticed. Individuals want to be seen for who they are and for the work they do, both publicly and privately.

Affirmed. People need to hear that their contributions have value and that their strengths are recognized.

Needed. Employees want to know their role has purpose, that their absence would be felt and that their work advances the mission.

These elements align closely with HR's daily work from onboarding, modeling transformational leadership practices, orientation, feedback, communication, policy design and professional learning.

WHAT HR LEADERS CAN EXAMINE

A mattering lens combined with the acknowledgement that leaders have an outsized impact on those they lead can

sharpen retention efforts (and organizational culture) without adding new initiatives. Helpful questions to ask of the organization include:

- What messages tell new hires their work has impact, and their opinions are not only wanted, but needed?
- How do daily conversations contribute to showing employees that they make a difference?
- To what extent do leaders remember the names of staff, their children, their spouses and then ask specific questions about their lives?
- Do leaders take the time to tell employees that their work is indispensable?
- Do leaders take the time to check in on employees?

Small shifts in these areas can meaningfully influence commitment, and more importantly, bring about a sense of healing for all employees. Who wouldn't want to work somewhere where they authentically felt a sense of mattering?

MOVING FORWARD

As districts compete for talent, mattering offers a clear, research-aligned framework for deepening retention. It strengthens existing culture work by linking connection to significance. It helps ensure that employees not only feel welcome but also feel essential to the district's mission.

For human capital leaders, intentionally cultivating both may be the most powerful strategy we have for helping employees choose not just to join our schools, but to stay, grow and contribute with purpose. ■



Dr. Neill Alleva is the assistant superintendent for human resources in his fifth year with the Katonah-Lewisboro School District. He has worked in public education since 2001 and brings a systems-oriented, people-centered approach to leadership and talent development. Dr. Alleva studied organizational leadership at Northeastern University, where his work deepened his interest in how leadership practices, culture and human capital systems shape organizational effectiveness. He is particularly committed to fostering workplaces where educators and staff feel supported, valued and able to do their best work in service of students.

WHY TEACHERS OF COLOR LEAVE

—AND WHAT KEEPS THEM

By Dr. Marva Tutt, Elementary Human Resources Coordinator, Richmond County School System, Augusta, GA



Despite increased attention to diversifying the educator workforce, teachers of color continue to leave the profession at disproportionate rates. While school systems have invested heavily in recruitment efforts, retention strategies have not kept pace.

This imbalance undermines long-term workforce stability and student outcomes. Recruiting teachers of color without intentionally retaining them is costly, ineffective and ultimately unsustainable. Research consistently demonstrates that all students benefit from a diverse teaching workforce. Teachers of color positively influence academic achievement, expectations and long-term outcomes for students of color, while also benefiting White students through exposure to diverse perspectives. Yet teachers of color are often asked to shoulder additional responsibilities, serving as cultural brokers, disciplinarians, mentors and informal counselors, without corresponding institutional support. When these added demands intersect with unaddressed bias and exclusionary school cultures, attrition becomes inevitable.

From a financial perspective, teacher turnover is expensive. Districts spend an estimated \$20,000 per teacher on recruitment, onboarding, induction and professional learning. Beyond the fiscal impact, turnover increases the likelihood that students, particularly those in historically underserved communities, are taught by inexperienced or underqualified educators. Retention, therefore, is not simply a staffing concern; it is an equity imperative.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Teachers of color consistently report feeling silenced, overlooked and undervalued in their schools and districts. Many experience negative school climates marked by implicit bias, microaggressions and limited opportunities for growth. They often describe a sense of invisibility, present in schools, but absent from decision-making spaces and leadership pipelines. The lack of representation among school and district leaders reinforces the perception that advancement is unattainable.

Additionally, teachers of color are frequently expected to assume expanded roles because they share racial or cultural identities with students. While many embrace this work out of commitment to their communities, the expectation is rarely formalized, compensated or supported. Over time, this dynamic contributes to burnout and disengagement.

Curriculum also plays a significant role in attrition. Teachers of color often feel disconnected from instructional materials that fail to reflect the lived experiences of their students. Many report feeling disempowered to adapt curriculum in ways that are culturally responsive, creative or relevant. When curriculum perpetuates dominant narratives and limits professional autonomy, teachers of color struggle to see their instructional identities affirmed.

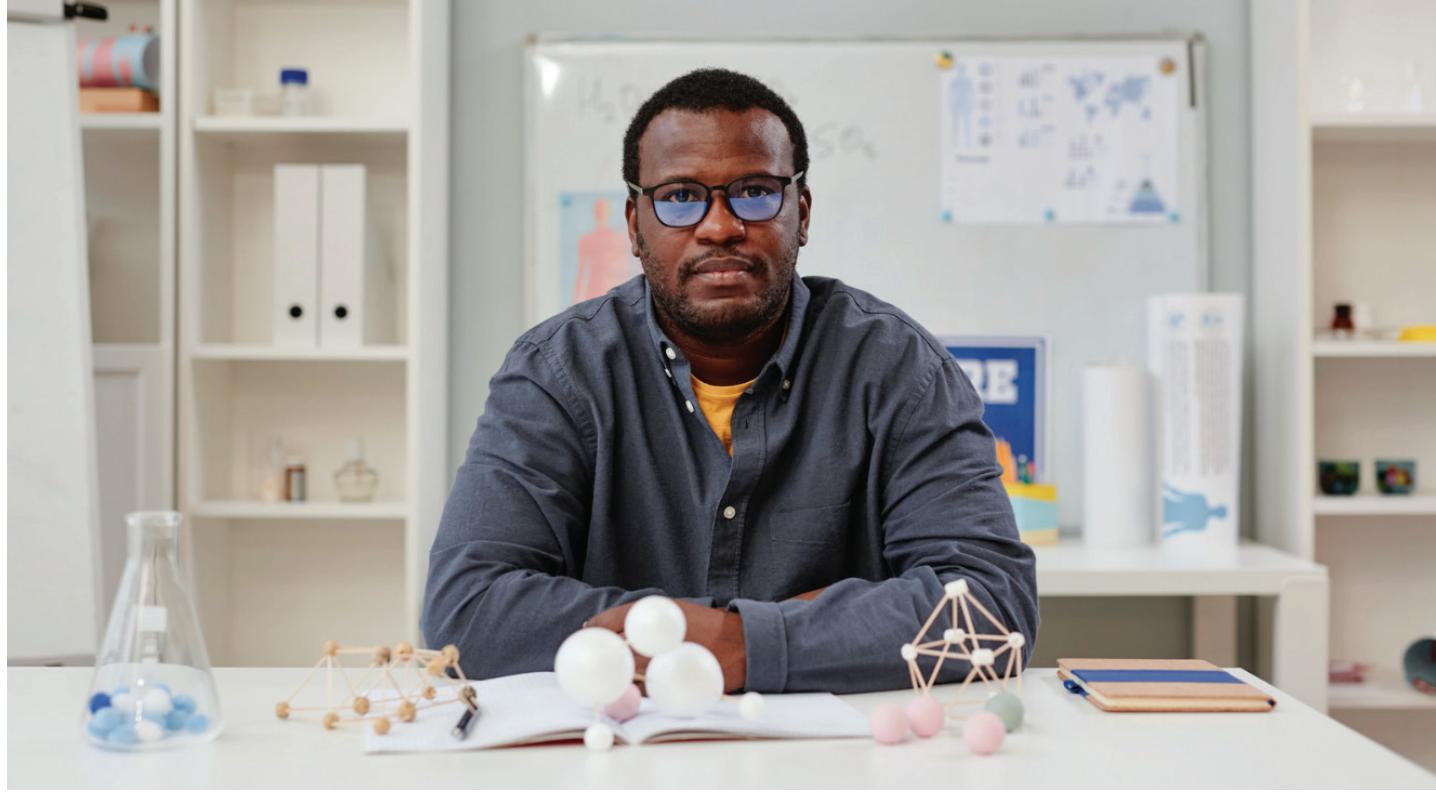
Finally, teachers of color frequently report that their identities are diminished in the workplace. Experiences with racially insensitive or overtly racist behaviors—such as inappropriate comments, hair touching or questioning of competence—undermine their authority and sense of belonging. These experiences contribute to isolation, erode trust and signal that authenticity is unwelcome in professional spaces.

HOW DO WE KEEP THEM?

Retention begins with acknowledgment. School systems must recognize that inequitable experiences exist and commit to addressing them through intentional, data-informed strategies. Districts should analyze recruitment, hiring, placement and retention data disaggregated by race to identify patterns and disparities. Climate surveys, exit interviews and stay interviews provide critical insight into why teachers of color remain, or leave, and should be leveraged strategically rather than treated as compliance tools.

School and district culture must also be examined. Teachers of color often express a strong desire to support students' social-emotional development and to help them become agents of change beyond the classroom. Districts that invest in teachers of color, through mentorship, leadership pathways and meaningful professional learning, signal that this commitment is valued. Teachers cannot cultivate strong racial identity and agency in students if their own identities are constrained or marginalized.

Providing structured spaces for teachers of color to engage in honest dialogue about race, equity and lived experience is essential. Teachers of color are more likely to remain in environments that demonstrate a clear commitment to equity, social justice and dismantling systemic barriers.



This includes transparent leadership pipelines, equitable access to advanced coursework and committees, and intentional mentoring structures

Professional learning must also evolve. While all educators benefit from inclusive practices, professional development should sometimes center courageous conversations about bias, race and power. Teachers of color should not be required to leave aspects of their identity, such as dress, hair, language or cultural expression, at the door in order to be perceived as “professional.” Authenticity and belonging are foundational to retention.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HR AND SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS

For district and school-based HR leaders, retaining teachers of color requires intentional alignment between policy, practice and culture. Key actions include disaggregating retention data by race, leveraging stay interviews, auditing leadership pipelines, embedding equity-focused professional learning and affirming authenticity in professional spaces.

CONCLUSION

Retaining teachers of color requires more than goodwill; it requires systemic change. School systems must demonstrate their value by recruiting, developing and sustaining diverse educators in environments that promote respect, autonomy and opportunity. Addressing the needs of teachers of color necessitates an honest examination of how racism and oppression operate within educational systems.

Retention is not an add-on to recruitment. It is the work. ■



Dr. Marva Tutt serves as an HR Coordinator for the Richmond County School System in Augusta, Georgia. With over 25 years of experience in education, she brings deep expertise in talent development,

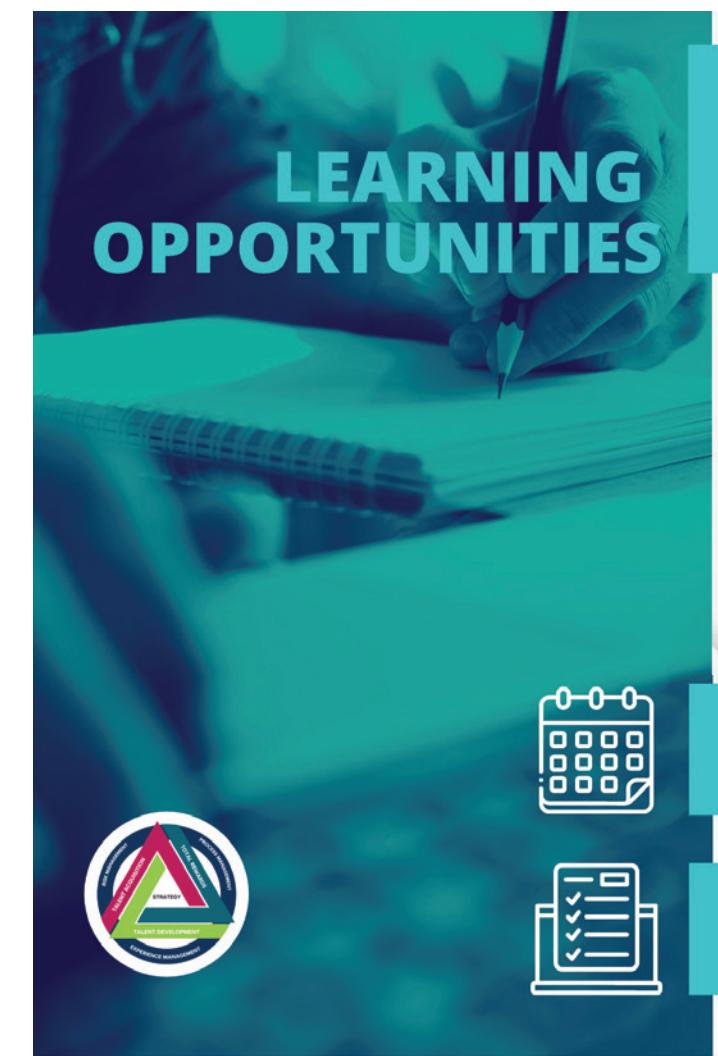
strategic staffing and organizational leadership. Dr. Tutt is widely recognized for her ability to bring order to chaos—guiding schools and leaders through complex change with clarity, structure and purpose.

She holds a Doctorate in Education from Argosy University and is passionate about change management, workforce sustainability and building systems that support both educators and students. Dr. Tutt’s leadership centers on creating aligned, people-focused solutions that strengthen school communities and advance educational excellence.



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ART AS A LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP: A HUMAN RESOURCES PERSPECTIVE

By Dr. Nichelle Rivers, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Patchogue, NY

Art is a form of communication, whether people recognize it or not. When you draw, you tap into your subconscious unknowingly, and what comes out often expresses what words cannot.

As an art therapist, I witness people have 'aha' moments all the time, which could lead to real breakthroughs in understanding themselves. In my Human Resources (HR) professional development sessions, I often ask participants to create, too. Sometimes it's a simple drawing; sometimes it's a visual response to an image that represents a workplace challenge. As they draw, they begin to see themselves, their stress, creativity and assumptions—from a new angle.

During these sessions, I invite participants to notice for themselves what's coming up on the page and what it might mean for how they lead. That's what art does—it opens a quiet door to self-reflection. When we use art as a language of leadership, we give people room to walk through that door in their own time with respect, autonomy and grace.

In the contemporary corporate landscape, HR professionals are increasingly tasked with managing complex emotional environments characterized by burnout and transition. This article explores the integration of creative arts as a primary language of leadership through a healing-centered lens. By adopting the three-model framework of creative arts and aligning Daniel Goleman's six leadership styles with the triad of awareness, HR leaders can foster a resilient workplace culture that prioritizes human stories over mere compliance.

ART, LEADERSHIP AND THE HUMAN SIDE OF HR

In HR, we are often tasked with navigating complex emotional landscapes including conflict, change and the daily balancing act between policy and people. Traditional leadership development models tend to prioritize strategy, compliance and performance outcomes. Yet leadership is fundamentally relational. It requires empathy, reflection and the ability to see oneself and others clearly.

Art provides a pathway to that clarity. When HR leaders integrate creative processes into professional learning, we shift from transactional conversations ("What do we do?") to transformational ones ("Who are we becoming as we do this work?"). Drawing, collage or visual metaphor invites leaders to access right-brain processing; the realm of intuition, emotion and holistic thinking that is often overlooked in our data-driven environments.

In my work, I've seen how art helps uncover what's beneath the surface. A leader's drawing of "the workplace" might reveal themes of isolation or imbalance that no survey could capture. These images become starting points for authentic dialogue and healing-centered leadership. When we make meaning together through art, we strengthen belonging, trust and collective insight. These three qualities are essential to effective HR practice.



CULTIVATING HEALING-CENTERED HR PRACTICES

A healing-centered approach recognizes that workplaces frequently mirror the historic trauma and social contexts of the broader world. Research by Linda Archibald identifies a three-model framework for understanding how the arts facilitate restoration: creative arts-as-healing (focusing on the innate power of creativity), creative arts-in-therapy (the use of art to deepen the therapeutic process) and holistic healing (where art, culture and spirituality are inseparable).

Healing-centered leadership recognizes that our workplaces mirror the broader social and emotional contexts in which we live. This is critical for addressing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the historic trauma often found in marginalized staff or high-stress workforces. In HR, this means acknowledging that policies and people cannot be separated; both are shaped by lived experiences, identities and histories. Integrating art-based reflection into HR development allows us to hold space for that complexity with compassion.

Whether we use art to visualize organizational change, explore bias or imagine a more inclusive culture, we affirm that creativity is not an extracurricular luxury, it's a leadership necessity. Art reminds us that every decision we make in HR has a human story attached to it.

When leaders learn to "speak artfully," to notice color, texture, balance and tension, they are also learning to perceive their teams with greater nuance. Art, then, becomes not just a practice but a pedagogy of empathy and awareness for effective leadership.

To that end, effective leadership requires a triad of awareness: Inner Focus (self-awareness), Other Focus (empathy) and Outer Focus (systems awareness). A failure in any part of this triad leaves a leader "udderless, clueless or blindsided." Art acts as a conduit for these focal points by enabling leaders to explore their internal landscapes and externalize their narratives.



ALIGNING LEADERSHIP STYLES

Goleman's six leadership styles map directly onto this triad through a healing-centered perspective:

1. Coaching Style: This style focuses on personal development, aligning with Inner Focus by using reflective and creative practices to connect a leader's values with their actions.

2. Affiliative Style: Focused on building emotional bonds, this style utilizes Other Focus to restore trust and harmony through shared meaning making and relational connection.

3. Authoritative (Visionary) Style: By utilizing Outer Focus, this style articulates where a group is going, using art to visualize a shared future.

4. Democratic Style: Encourages Other Focus through collaboration and participation.



Dr. Nichelle Rivers (she/they) is a proud native of Memphis, Tennessee and a graduate of Tennessee State University. A seasoned educator, practicing visual artist and Creative Arts Therapist with over 28 years of experience in K-12 education, she currently serves as the

Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources for Eastern Suffolk BOCES. Dr. Rivers holds a Masters in Art Therapy and Counseling from Long Island University and a doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Memphis. Dr. Rivers' work centers on culturally responsive practice, inclusion and healing-centered engagement. As a multi-media artist inspired by music, spatial relationships and cultural storytelling, she integrates creativity and mental wellness into leadership and organizational systems. A lifelong advocate for equity and student well-being, she is the founder of NLR Consulting, LLC, supporting LGBTQ+ youth and at-risk communities, and the creator of The Stolen Lives Project, a decade-long initiative using art and education to honor lives lost to systemic injustice and amplify community healing.

5. Pacesetting Style: While useful for high-performing teams, it risks "blinding" leaders to their human impact if not balanced with empathy.

6. Coercive Style: Characterized by immediate compliance, it is an effective tool to use in crisis but can stifle the very innovation that healing-centered practices aim to foster.

In a time where leadership is often measured by efficiency and outcomes, art offers a counterbalance—a space to slow down, reflect and reconnect to purpose.

For Human Resources, the integration of creative processes provides a pedagogy of empathy that allows us to affirm the humanity behind the role. Art is not a break in leadership, it is leadership. Art invites self-discovery, it fosters community and through it we can model what it means to lead with compassion and curiosity, rather than certainty. By utilizing the three-model framework through an arts lens, it teaches us to see, to listen and to imagine all the opportunities and possibilities. And that perhaps, is the most essential skill any leader can cultivate. ■

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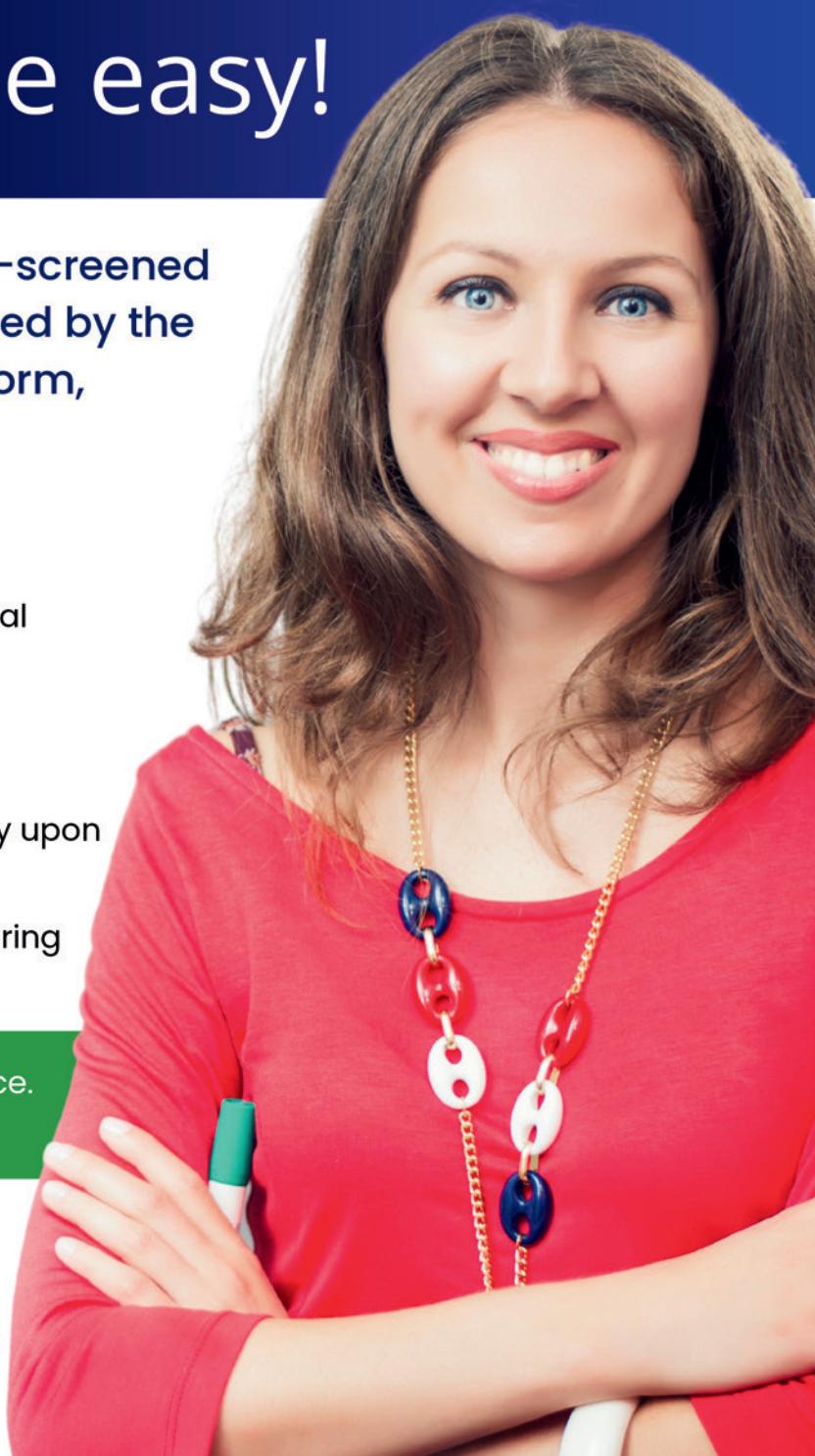
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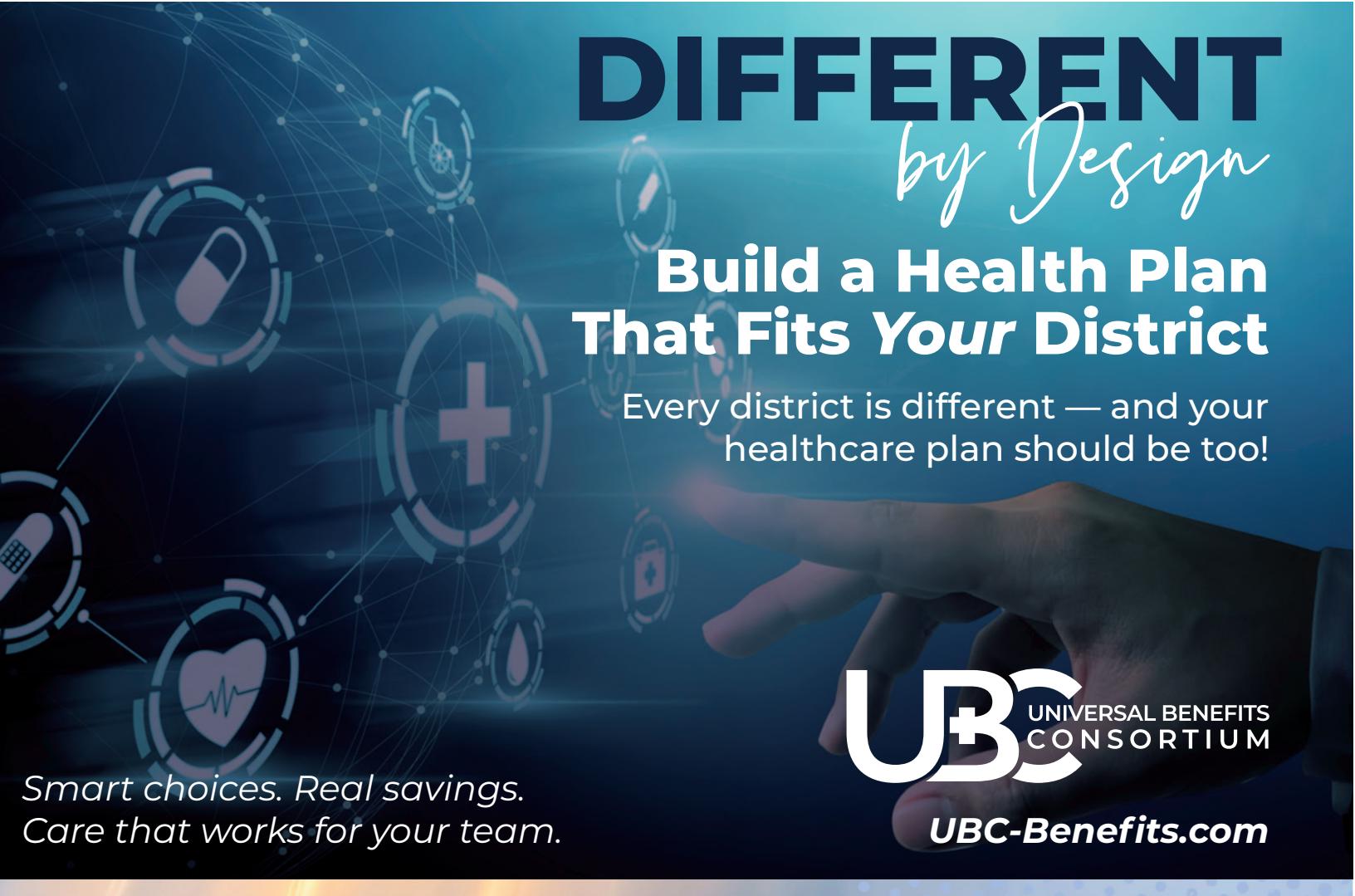
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