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From the Desk of Dr. Steve Grubb, AASPA President

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Dear Members of the American Association of School Personnel Administrators, As we embrace Fall and Winter and reflect on the progress we have made this calendar year, I am honored to address you as your president. Over 1200 attendees at our annual conference in Nashville made it the largest AASPA conference to date and sets the bar high for our next annual conference in Austin in 2026. Our membership is similarly reaching new heights at 3,602 members.

I wish to highlight the vital importance of our strategic plan and core values—two pillars that guide our work, inform our decisions and inspire our vision for the future. Our strategic plan is more than a roadmap; it is a living document, developed collaboratively, that sets forth our priorities and empowers us to achieve meaningful, measurable results.

Our Strategic Plan: Pathways to Excellence

The strategic plan of the American Association of School Personnel Administrators is built upon four foundational goals: supporting and growing our membership, optimizing organizational performance, advocacy and professional development. I am proud of the work of our staff led by Executive Director, Kelly Coash-Johnson, as they have met and exceeded targets in each of these areas.

We are committed to providing robust professional development opportunities for our members. Through webinars, conferences and peer networking, we aim to deliver the latest research, best practices and leadership skills that empower you in your daily work.

Equity is not simply a value—it is a call to action and a through line in our strategic plan. We are dedicated to cultivating environments where diversity is celebrated and inclusion is embedded in every policy, practice and interaction. Our strategic initiatives include supporting recruitment and retention strategies that reflect the rich diversity of our communities, developing programs that address bias and promote cultural competency and advocating for policies that ensure fair treatment and opportunities for all staff and students.

Our Core Values: The Heart of Our Association

At the core of every initiative and decision are our shared values. These values are the heartbeat of the American Association of School Personnel Administrators.

- AASPA values the practice of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in our leadership, in our organizational structure, professional development and resources
- AASPA values the need for advocacy of the profession of human capital practices in education
- AASPA values high quality, engaging, relevant and timely professional development
- AASPA values active engagement of its members
- AASPA values the creation of a community of connected professionals
- AASPA values the impact of our human capital leaders have on students

At the October 2025 Board meeting, we took a close look at each of these values and how they resonate in our professional lives and our leadership within AASPA. As we look to the future, I invite each of you to engage with our strategic plan and embrace our core values in your daily work. Let us continue to innovate, collaborate and advocate for the success of our schools and the professionals who make them thrive. Thank you for your unwavering dedication. Together, we are making a profound difference—today, tomorrow and for generations to come.

With deep appreciation,

Dr. Steve Grubb
President, American Association of School Personnel Administrators

Join the conversation!

#K12Talent





TEACHER PIPELINES: GROWING OUR OWN

By Dr. Kimberly S. Mason, Director of Human Resources, Darlington County School District, Darlington, SC

As a member of a fifth-generation plumbing business, I grew up in rural South Carolina hearing about pipes and lines. My grandfather, father and brothers were always talking about how to adjust someone's field lines to release water or replace piping – so they could access water at the right pressure, temperature and quality.

While I learned the business from the organizational side, I took another career route and became an educator. Little did I know that, 33 years in, I too would be concerned with pipeline pressure, access and quality.

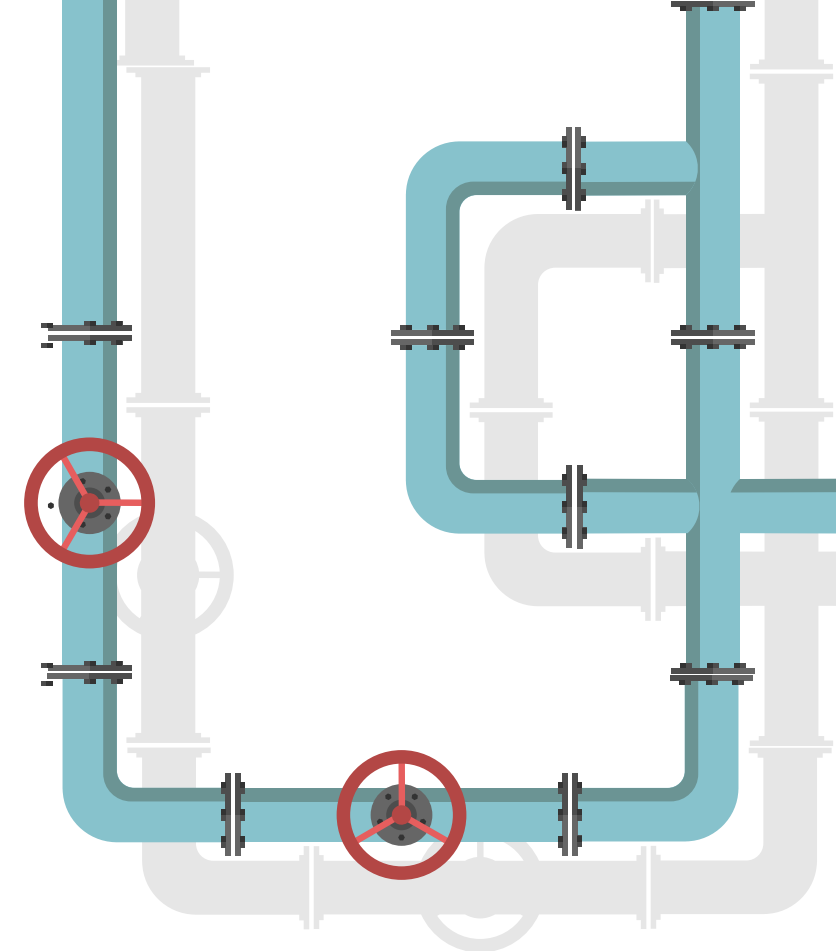
As a veteran Principal and now Director of Human Resources, I am constantly concerned with the teaching candidates we can attract, the preparation of the candidates and the suitability or quality of the candidates for the teacher vacancies that we have. We are in a high-stakes battle these days to overcome teacher shortages for the sake of our children's education. For the Darlington County School District, as with most school districts across the country, we have developed models and concepts of teacher pipelines that allow us to grow our own regionally prepared teachers to fill the growing vacancies. For some of us, this idea has been a game-changer, while for others it has been met with colossal failure. So, what is it that makes building teacher pipelines work? There are varying opinions about what success really is, but opportunities such as building from the Teacher Assistant level, career changers and classroom apprenticeships show some promise.

Various Pathways in SC

In SC, we have fifteen state-approved Alternative Certification Pathways. These pathways are diverse and appeal to different potential teaching candidates based on their current educational level, certification interests and to some degree their regional residency. For more than twelve years, I have worked with Teach for America (TFA SC) to recruit socially active, highly driven corps members from across the country. Their track record has been great in high-poverty rural areas. And now, they too face the changing talent pool, but they continue to screen and select the most talented incoming teachers.

A few years ago, one of the first teacher residency programs emerged from Clemson University, CU-Prepares. Like so many other grant-based programs across the nation, CU-Prepares was largely funded by Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants. Unfortunately, they were among those grants that ended due to federal budget cuts last year. The ten or so local CU-Prepares candidates we found during an interest meeting have had to choose other options. And some have changed their minds after the experience.

In the last two years, Coker University began a teacher certification program that works as an apprenticeship in our local school districts. For example, in Cohort I in the Darlington County School District, we hired five teacher assistants who were admitted to the Alternative Pathways to Educator Certification (APEC) at Coker University. The agreement is that the teaching candidates are employed as paraprofessionals, attend online and in-person courses for a year and pass the required Praxis exams for their teaching area. Upon successful completion of the



program, the apprentices were hired as teachers in our district. Additionally, the teachers have the opportunity to pursue a Master's degree if they continue coursework. Now in year two, Cohort II candidates are being trained on the job with mentor teachers daily and receiving traditional coursework in pedagogy, classroom management and community interactions.

Working with our Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Charles Miller, we have explored at least six pathways and International Teacher Exchange Programs as well. He characterizes this method for building the teacher pipeline this way. "Alternative certification pathways are no longer a luxury; they are necessary to fill critical vacancies across South Carolina, especially in high-needs areas. The clear advantage is the speed at which we can bring diverse, talented professionals into the classroom. The challenge, however, is ensuring these accelerated programs still provide the rigorous training and support needed to turn a new hire into an effective, long-term educator." And it seems that most Human Resource and Personnel Administrators are having the same experience. Ten years ago, Alternative Pathways were novel and trendy. Five years ago, they were a nice alternative. These days, they are a necessity.

Research vs Reality

In one Texas study conducted by Deneault & Riehl entitled, "Should States Reduce Teacher Licensing Requirements?", the quality of traditionally trained teachers is compared to

the quality of alternatively trained teachers. The key findings are listed below:

Prior Experience and Placement- Alternative-route teachers often have degrees in business, communications, social sciences and STEM fields, closer to overall college demographics. They are more likely to teach in middle and high schools, helping fill hard-to-staff positions. Traditionally, teachers largely serve in elementary grades.

Retention and Quality- Retention parity: About 70% of both groups remain in the classroom after five years. Effectiveness: Alternatively certified ELA and math teachers show slightly lower value-added scores, though differences are statistically small. For-profit alt-cert teachers perform worse than non-profit program graduates on all outcomes. Uncertified teachers show the lowest student achievement gains and the highest attrition rates.

Policy Impact- Texas's expansion of alternative certification programs successfully reduced reliance on uncertified teachers, achieving its staffing goals. Researchers call the impact "net zero," but findings suggest a net positive—schools replaced uncertified teachers with certified ones of higher quality. A new post-pandemic rise in uncertified hires has led to academic declines, prompting legislation to end uncertified teaching by 2029.



Dr. Kimberly Sutton Mason is a devoted educator and Baptist minister. Holding a B.A. in Biological Sciences from Clemson University, an M.Ed. in Learning Disabilities from Francis Marion University, an M.Ed. in Educational Administration from the University of South Carolina and EdD in Educational

Leadership at Liberty University. Kimberly currently serves as Director of Human Resources for Darlington County School District. She was the longtime (16.5 years) Proud Principal at Rosenwald Elementary School in Society Hill, SC. Dr. Mason serves as an educational leader and advocate committed to student-centered teaching, leadership development, and community partnership. Blending scholarship with heart, she supports early-career educators, mentors future administrators and promotes excellence in teaching and learning throughout South Carolina.

Small Wins

So, the Texas study suggests some small wins for the Alternative Certification Route. To some degree, we have seen some wins in South Carolina. Likewise, BloomBoard, a talent development provider, is posting wins in training and retention in its teacher pipeline models in Georgia, New Jersey and Illinois. To get these wins, it is paramount to understand the various models, programs, pros and cons. To sustain those wins, everyone needs to be aware of the effective ways to strategize while building the teacher pipeline. One way is to focus on the targeted placement of teaching candidates. Strategic use of alternative pathways (PACE, Carolina CAP, APEC, Teachers of Tomorrow, etc.) can strengthen staffing in STEM and secondary subjects. Another way is continuous monitoring of what's working and not working in each program. Monitoring program quality (non-profit vs. for-profit) is key to sustaining student growth. And finally, as Superintendents, Personnel Administrators, Principals and Recruiters, we absolutely must realize and emphasize that mentoring and retention ensure long-term teacher effectiveness.

Why It Has to Work

All things considered, school districts are promoting their community members, paraprofessionals and career changers in hopes of finding great talent for our classrooms. The notion of growing our own has never been so prevalent. Superintendent of Darlington County Schools, Dr. Matthew Ferguson, said, "The truth is, we're competing for talent in a tough market. But what sets us apart has to be meaning. When people see the impact they can make in a Darlington County classroom—or any rural classroom—they see that teaching isn't just a job. It's a calling worth committing to." Therefore, we must continue through innovation and strategy in Human Resources and education at large to find the best pathways to those individuals who are born to teach. They are the ones willing to take up the charge, grow their capacity and move to proficiency. It has to work because our children are depending on our efforts to build the teacher pipeline and place quality teachers in front, alongside and behind them.

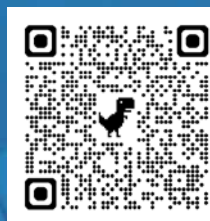


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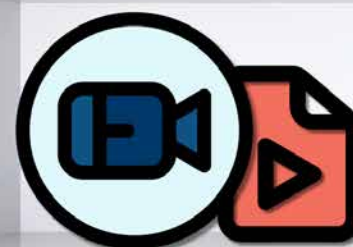
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WHY THEY STAY: CONVERSATIONS THAT COUNT

By Tamela Crawford, Ed.D., Chief Human Resources Officer, Highland Park ISD, Dallas, TX

Teacher turnover is a pressing national concern that continues to affect instructional quality, staff morale and district finances. Across the country, the challenge of retaining educators disrupts instructional continuity, increases workloads for remaining staff and weakens school culture. Replacing a single teacher also carries a significant financial burden, costing districts between \$11,860 in smaller systems and up to \$25,000 in larger ones. This makes turnover not only a people challenge but also a substantial budgetary concern for school systems of every size.

Recent national data reveal that teacher attrition remains high despite targeted efforts to improve retention. In 2025, 16% of teachers planned to leave the profession by the end of the 2024–25 school year, a decrease from 22% the previous year (RAND Corporation, 2025). While this decline suggests modest progress, it also reminds districts that ongoing effort is needed to help teachers feel supported, valued and connected to their work so they choose to stay and grow in the profession.

Sustaining a strong and inspired teaching workforce requires more than simply filling vacancies. It demands intentional efforts to understand why educators choose to stay and to strengthen the sense of connection and purpose that keeps them engaged. For school district HR professionals, the challenge is shifting focus from replacing departing staff to creating conditions that inspire loyalty and longevity. One proven approach is the use of check-in and stay interviews, which provide meaningful opportunities to listen, build trust and address concerns before they lead to turnover.

Moving Beyond Exit Interviews

Most HR leaders are familiar with exit interviews, but by the time those conversations occur, the district has already lost talent. Check-in and stay interviews shift that timeline, creating space for proactive dialogue that addresses concerns, reinforces satisfaction and strengthens a sense of belonging long before a resignation letter appears.

- Check-In Interviews typically occur with new hires, often within the first semester or year, to assess how well expectations are being met, clarify communication and identify areas where additional support could improve the onboarding experience.
- Stay Interviews are conducted with experienced staff to explore what motivates them to remain, what challenges they face and what might cause them to consider leaving. These conversations help leaders better understand engagement drivers and areas for improvement.

Both approaches are rooted in the belief that retention depends on listening early and often. By understanding what keeps employees connected before they decide to leave, HR leaders can take meaningful action to strengthen commitment and reduce turnover.

Designing Meaningful Conversations

Planning is essential to ensure these interviews lead to meaningful and actionable insights. When designing questions, HR leaders should be intentional about identifying the key information the district needs to gather and ensuring that responses align with broader strategic goals and priorities. The goal is to craft questions that inspire genuine reflection and honest dialogue. Each question should be purposeful and thoughtfully constructed to encourage employees to share their experiences openly and with authenticity.

To support this process, consider the following key principles when developing interview questions:

- 1. Clarity and Relevance** - Questions should connect directly to the employee’s experience, engagement and satisfaction.
- 2. Open-Ended Framing** - Prompts should invite deeper insights and personal reflection rather than yes/no responses.
- 3. Psychological Safety** - Use neutral language and emphasize confidentiality to create an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing candid feedback.
- 4. Alignment to Goals** - Ensure each question supports districtwide initiatives, strategic priorities and professional learning objectives.

The following examples demonstrate how these principles can be applied in both Check-In and Stay Interviews, helping HR leaders ask questions that promote reflection, trust and actionable feedback.

Check-In Interview (New Hire)

1. How well have your expectations of working in our school district been met so far? Are there any differences between what you expected and what you’ve experienced?
2. How would you describe the overall culture and climate of our district so far and are there any areas that feel especially positive or that you think could be improved?
3. If you could change one aspect of your onboarding or day-to-day experience to make your transition smoother, what would it be?

Stay Interview (Experienced Staff)

1. How has your role changed since you joined the district and what supports would help you continue to grow in ways that align with our goals for retention and teacher success?
2. What keeps you most engaged and motivated in your work and what could the district do differently to sustain that motivation over time?
3. If you could adjust one thing about your current role or campus experience to make your work more fulfilling, what would you change and why?

Coordinating Effective Check-In and Stay Interviews

Conducting check-in and stay interviews with intention and consistency ensures the process is meaningful, productive and aligned with district priorities. Each conversation should foster trust, transparency and genuine connection. When employees feel heard, valued and supported, they are more likely to share honest feedback that leads to meaningful improvement.

1. Preparing in Advance - Before scheduling interviews, work with campus principals or department leaders to identify which employees will participate. Offer teachers a flexible window of time, such as one week with several available slots, so they can choose what works best with their teaching schedule. This approach shows respect for their time and helps minimize scheduling stress. Also, share the interview questions ahead of time so teachers can reflect and come prepared. This will foster transparency and more thoughtful, authentic conversations.

2. Setting the Intention - When sending the invitation, clearly communicate the purpose of the interview. Emphasize that the goal is to learn from the employee’s experience, not to evaluate performance and to gather feedback that supports retention, growth and teacher well-being. This sets a collaborative tone and reinforces that the district values each teacher’s perspective.

3. Creating a Comfortable Environment - Whenever possible, interview in the teacher’s own space, such as their classroom or office, to create familiarity and ease. A comfortable, natural environment helps reduce formality and encourages authentic conversation. Begin with light, welcoming dialogue to build rapport and set a positive tone before moving into the discussion questions.

4. Structuring the Interview - Keep the conversation focused yet relaxed. Ideally, each interview should last between 20 and 30 minutes, allowing time for meaningful discussion without feeling rushed. Be attentive and flexible, listening actively and asking follow-up questions that show genuine interest in the employee’s experiences and ideas.

5. Ensuring Confidentiality and Data Integrity - At the start of the meeting, reassure the employee that their feedback will remain confidential. Explain that identifying details will be redacted before data is shared outside of HR. Summarized trends and insights will be communicated to the appropriate departments, such as professional learning, compensation or leadership development, to address systemic needs and celebrate successes.



Turning Feedback into Action

Collecting feedback is valuable only when it leads to meaningful change. The true impact of check-in and stay interviews comes from what happens afterward, when the information is analyzed, communicated and used to improve the employee experience. By turning insight into action, HR leaders demonstrate that teacher voices matter and that their perspectives directly shape district practices, culture and retention efforts.

HR teams should:

- **Compile and Analyze Data** - Look for trends across grade levels, campuses and years of service.
- **Share Findings Transparently** - communicate themes to principals and leadership teams so action can occur at both the district and campus level.
- **Close the Loop** - Teachers need to see that their input leads to real change, whether through improved communication about processes, clarified compliance expectations or revised professional learning supports.
- **Celebrate Success** - Share teacher voices publicly using campaigns like #WhyIChoose[District], reinforcing the community and culture that keep educators invested.

From Retention to Recruitment: Sharing the Story

The insights gathered through check-in and stay interviews don’t just strengthen retention; they can also fuel recruitment strategies and culture-building efforts across the district. When districts listen deeply and act on employee feedback, they uncover authentic stories worth



sharing that highlight what makes their schools exceptional places to attend, work and grow.

1. Use Feedback to Shape Recruitment Tools - Transform what you learn from staff conversations into messaging that reflects the real experience of working in your district. Incorporate teacher voices and themes from interviews into recruitment materials, career pages and onboarding communications. Candidates respond to authenticity and demonstrating that your district understands and supports educators’ needs helps attract like-minded professionals who will thrive in your culture.

2. Foster a Positive Culture and Climate - When teachers see their feedback turned into visible change, it builds trust and strengthens morale. Recognize and celebrate improvements, big or small, that come directly from employee input. This cycle of listening, acting and acknowledging creates a climate where people feel heard and empowered, deepening the sense of belonging that keeps great teachers invested.

3. Amplify Success Through Storytelling - Use social media and district communication channels to spotlight the great things happening every day, led by your own staff. Feature classroom innovations, mentorship moments and teacher highlights that show your district’s values in action. A consistent, positive message across platforms not only uplifts current employees but also attracts potential candidates who see your schools as inspiring, supportive communities.

A Call to Action for HR Leaders

In education, people are the work. Retention is not a side project; it is the core of building sustainable, thriving

schools. As Dr. Andy Hargreaves reminds us, “Teachers don’t just stay because of pay. They stay when they feel valued, supported and part of something that matters.” For HR professionals, this means creating consistent opportunities to listen, learn and respond to teachers’ experiences. By embedding check-in and stay interviews into the rhythm of HR practice, districts can foster trust, address concerns early and build a culture where great educators choose to stay.



Dr. Tamela Crawford serves as Chief Human Resources Officer for Highland Park ISD in Dallas, Texas. She leads efforts to recruit, support and retain exceptional staff across all departments, fostering a culture where every employee feels valued, supported and inspired to make a lasting impact.



Jordan
The New Educator

BEYOND ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL:



Tina
The Tenured Teacher



Ron
Retiree Rehire

USING AI PERSONAS TO RETHINK STAFF BENEFITS

By Gretchen Lawn,
HR Consultant, ESC of
Northeast Ohio



Kendra
Central Office Specialist

Take a hard look at your benefits offerings. Do they truly meet the needs of everyone you serve? Probably not. That’s because “everyone” isn’t one group. Your workforce includes new teachers, veteran bus drivers, paraprofessionals balancing second jobs and retirees working part-time for insurance. Yet many school systems still design benefits as if every employee values the same things in the same way. Savvy HR leaders are starting to use AI-powered personas to design packages that actually meet people where they are.

What Is a Persona?

A persona is a fictional yet data-informed representation of a typical employee group. It captures who they are, what they value and what they need most. Personas help you segment your workforce in a way that makes sense. Suddenly, “staff” become people you actually recognize.

- **Jordan, the New Educator:** First-year teacher, single, motivated by professional growth and mental health supports.
- **Tina, the Tenured Teacher:** Balancing teenage kids and aging parents, values family medical coverage and schedule predictability.
- **Ron, the Retiree Rehire:** Semi-retired bus driver working part-time for extra income and insurance continuation.
- **Kendra, the Central Office Specialist:** Ambitious, tech-savvy, craves flexibility and professional development.

Start With Data You Already Have

Don’t overthink it. Start with what’s within reach. Exit and stay interviews reveal authentic insights about what employees value, what’s missing and what would make them stay or leave. If you don’t have interview data, deploy

a targeted survey asking about priorities, challenges and benefit preferences. Keep it short (five to ten questions) to maximize response rates. If surveys aren’t feasible, use demographic data you already have: employee age ranges, roles, tenure and local community demographics.

Turn Data Into Personas

Tools like ChatGPT, Gemini or Claude can synthesize your data patterns into actionable personas in minutes. The key is crafting effective prompts.

Example Prompt:

I’m an HR Director at a K-12 school district. I have exit interview data from the past year. Here are the comments regarding offered benefits: [paste comments].

Please identify the main themes and patterns. Also, please create five to seven detailed employee personas based on this data. For each persona, include: name, role type, key motivations, main challenges and likely benefits priorities.

Sample AI Output:

Persona 1: “Kelly,” the Early Career Teacher

Role: Elementary or Secondary Teacher
Key Motivations: Making an impact, building career skills, achieving financial stability
Main Challenges: Student loan debt (\$30,000 to \$80,000), high cost of living, limited savings
Benefits Priorities: Student loan repayment assistance, competitive starting salary, affordable housing programs, mental health support, professional development stipends

Persona 2: “Robert,” the Pre-Retiree

Role: Teacher, Administrator or Experienced Support Staff
Key Motivations: Legacy, financial security, smooth transition to retirement
Main Challenges: Retirement readiness anxiety, healthcare costs, knowledge transfer
Benefits Priorities: Retirement planning services, phased retirement options, retiree healthcare coverage, catch-up retirement contributions, mentorship opportunities

You can refine, combine or co-create personas with your leadership teams to make them more authentic. But don’t stop with simply developing personas. The real value comes from applying them.



Put Your Personas to Work

Think of these options as different ways to test your benefits ideas before making changes.

Compare needs against current offerings.

Prompt AI: You are an HR strategist. Given these personas [paste] and our current benefits offerings [paste], what are we missing?

This approach starts with your existing strengths. By highlighting what's already working, you can spot gaps that might be easy to miss. The result is a clearer picture of which additions or adjustments could make your total rewards package more valuable.

Test benefit ideas before you launch.

Prompt AI: You are an HR strategist. Given this persona [paste], please predict how they might respond to the following new benefit ideas: [list ideas]. Rank each benefit from one to five in potential appeal and explain why.

This allows you to gauge potential interest and impact before implementation.

Create Reliable AI-Generated Personas

Your first personas may not be perfect and that's OK. The goal is to keep refining until the patterns start feeling familiar.

Be specific with your prompts. The more context you provide (actual data, district characteristics, regional factors), the more useful your personas will be.

Don't stereotype. Personas are tools for empathy and strategy, not boxes to put people in. Use them to understand your workforce better, then let that understanding guide more thoughtful, inclusive benefits planning.

Update regularly. Workforce needs change. Revisit and refresh your personas at least once a year or after major shifts. And remember: Personas are tools for empathy and strategy, not boxes to put people in.

Ready to Try It Out?

Here's a simple roadmap to get started.

1. Choose your data source: Start with what's accessible: exit interviews, stay interviews, surveys or basic demographics.

2. Organize what you have: Pull your information into a single, simple document or spreadsheet.

3. Use AI to analyze: Apply the prompt template above to help identify trends and traits.

4. Create your first personas: Generate three to five realistic staff personas that reflect your workforce.

5. Put them to work: Test one of the persona-based strategies to assess and strengthen your benefits.

Starting small is key. Even one week of focused effort can lay the groundwork for more data-driven, personalized HR practices that better support every member of your school community.

AI isn't replacing HR expertise. It's accelerating it. When you pair your human insight with AI's ability to detect patterns, you shift from reactive benefit management to proactive employee experience design. Each persona brings your workforce into sharper focus and helps you design benefits that attract, retain and truly support the people who serve your students every day. That's not just better HR. It's thoughtful, people-centered leadership.



Gretchen Lawn is an HR Consultant with the Educational Service Center of Northeast Ohio, where she supports more than 50 school districts across the region and designs and facilitates professional development for HR directors statewide. With over 25 years in education, she specializes in

human capital strategy—helping districts streamline hiring, improve efficiency and conduct staffing and compensation audits. In recent years, she's become a leading voice in integrating artificial intelligence into K-12 HR systems, helping districts use AI for onboarding, professional development and decision-making. Gretchen's work bridges traditional HR expertise with modern innovation, showing how technology can make school HR more strategic, responsive and human.



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REWRITING THE RETENTION PLAYBOOK:

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

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

Across the nation, schools are losing educators faster than they can replace them and the cost of inaction is mounting. In response to this urgent challenge, the American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA) has released *Rewriting the Retention Playbook: Shifts to Build a Sustainable Educator Workforce*, a new white paper developed through the 2025 National Educator Shortage Summit.

This annual event brings together national education leaders, researchers and practitioners to co-design actionable solutions to address educator shortages across the P-20 continuum. The report calls for a fundamental rethinking of how schools, preparation programs and state agencies attract, support and retain educators across every stage of their careers.

The Playbook identifies six key shifts, grounded in research and practical innovation from the field, to move from short-term fixes to long-term, systemwide strategies. The shifts are designed to be scalable across local, regional and state contexts.



- 1. Development & Career Management** – From linear advancement to dynamic career pathways that allow educators to grow without leaving the classroom.
- 2. Employee Experience & Leadership** – From selecting managers to developing leaders who prioritize people, culture and engagement.
- 3. Well-Being & Work-Life Integration** – From reacting to burnout to building proactive, holistic well-being systems.
- 4. Compensation & Benefits** – From focusing on salary alone to transparently communicating the full value of total rewards.
- 5. Recognition & Appreciation** – From isolated awards to a culture of daily, inclusive appreciation.
- 6. Strategic Retention** – From fragmented efforts to unified, data-driven strategies that align policies, practices and partnerships.

Each shift is illustrated through real-world examples from districts and state agencies across the country—ranging from Florida’s Teacher Career Bridge and Missouri’s on-site wellness clinics to Ohio’s statewide Human Capital Resource Center. These innovations showcase how districts can strengthen the educator pipeline while improving morale, engagement and workforce stability. To amplify impact, the Retention Playbook urges education leaders to view retention not as a one-time initiative, but as a shared responsibility across the P-20 continuum. By aligning systems, investing in people and fostering cultures of care

and recognition, schools can ensure that every student is taught by a well-prepared educator who chooses to stay.

The playbook is designed as a practical tool for school district leaders, state agencies, educator preparation programs and policymakers. It can support planning conversations, program design and policy alignment at every level of the education system. Organizations are encouraged to use this resource in conjunction with the reports and tools developed during previous Educator Shortage Summit convenings, including 5 Shifts to Address the Educator Shortage and Mapping a Journey to Address the National Educator Shortage. Like the summit itself, the Playbook is intended to evolve. AASPA will continue to collect, refine and share promising practices as part of a national learning community committed to educator workforce sustainability. To download the full report or explore related tools, visit EdShortage.org.



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 K12 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.

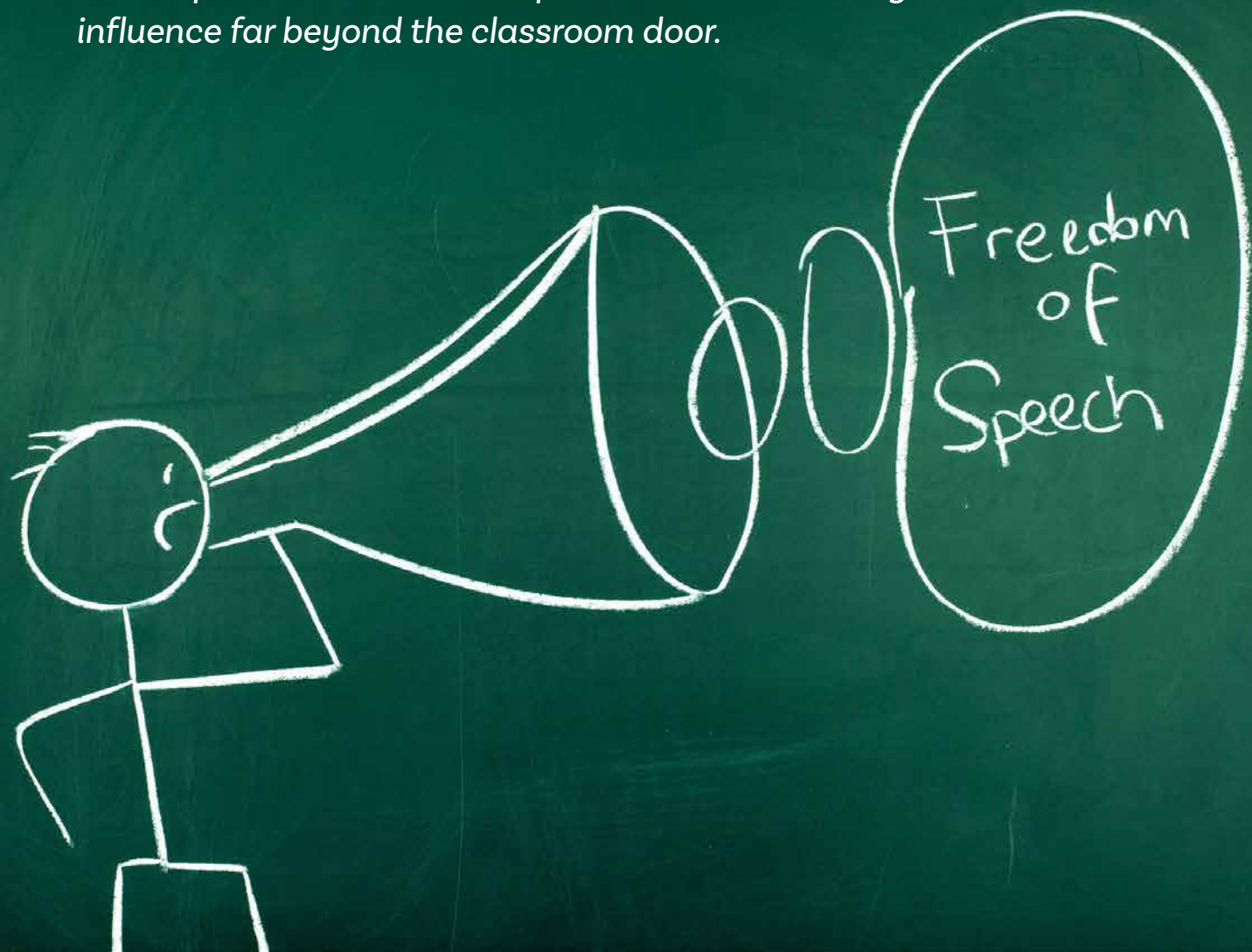
FROM TITLE VII TO TIKTOK: WHAT EVERY SCHOOL HR LEADER SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FREE SPEECH

By Dr. Meagan Booth, Supervisor of Employee Relations, Knox County Schools

When Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, no one imagined a world where a 15-second video could upend a school district before the morning bell.

Yet, here we are.

Today's HR leaders navigate daily collisions between social-media platforms and Title VII in ways the original framers of workplace law never anticipated—educators carry their influence far beyond the classroom door.



A casual post, a reaction video or a trending sound can instantly reach parents, students and the broader community. What one employee views as free expression, another may see as misconduct. HR leaders must interpret decades-old legal standards and apply them to real-time decisions under public scrutiny.

The result is a new frontier in employee relations, where the lines between personal and professional aren't just blurred but livestreamed.

HR professionals and school attorneys know the rules that shape employee conduct, but most teachers don't realize how easily a social-media post can move from personal expression to legal exposure. What feels like "after-hours content" still lives under the umbrella of workplace law when it affects students, colleagues or the district's reputation.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act remains the foundation for all employment-related protections. It prohibits discrimination, harassment and retaliation based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. When an employee posts something that demeans a protected group—even off the clock—that content can create a hostile work environment under Title VII if coworkers or students see it. Intent doesn't matter as much as impact.

Then comes the First Amendment, which adds another layer of complexity. Public-school employees do have free-speech rights, but those rights aren't unlimited. The courts have long held that speech connected to an educator's official duties isn't protected, and even personal speech can lose protection if it disrupts school operations or erodes public trust.

HR and legal teams spend their careers balancing those boundaries. Teachers usually don't. They think "I'm off duty" or "I'm speaking as a private citizen." But when that speech undermines relationships, triggers complaints or compromises equity, it stops being private. The best protection isn't a policy buried in the employee handbook. It's helping staff understand that the same principles that guide professionalism in the building apply online, too.

The real challenge isn't that educators misuse social media. It's that the rules of online culture move faster than school policy can keep up with. A post meant for friends can surface in a parent Facebook group by dinner. A private account isn't really private when screenshots circulate in minutes.

For HR, the hardest cases aren't the obvious ones. They're the gray areas where a staff member's online persona clashes with the district's professional standards. A dance video in school apparel. A sarcastic meme about parents.

A political comment that goes viral. Each forces HR to weigh intent, disruption and credibility in front of a community.

Most teachers and principals don't know where the line is, or that a line even exists. They post as parents, coaches and citizens, unaware that public employment changes what "off duty" really means. HR's role is to make that boundary clear and to guide staff in understanding how public service extends beyond the school day. Here are a few things to remember:

1. Educate Before You Investigate - Digital conduct should be part of professional learning, not just the aftermath of a complaint. HR can build awareness into onboarding and annual training so staff understand how online behavior connects to workplace standards and public trust. When expectations are known, they are more likely to be met.

2. Define What "Professional" Means Online - Telling employees to "be professional" is not enough. Policies should name specific examples that cross the line, such as sharing student information, using school logos in personal content or making public comments that target families or colleagues. Clarity protects both the employee and the district.

3. Apply Standards with Consistency - Employees notice when rules are enforced unevenly. HR must evaluate every situation using the same criteria: impact on students, disruption to operations and harm to credibility. Fairness is what turns a difficult moment into a teachable one.

The goal is not to control personal lives but to preserve the integrity of public education in a world where every employee represents the district both in person and online.

The digital world isn't going away, and neither is the expectation that educators model good judgment. HR leaders can't stop every viral moment, but they can create a culture where employees understand how their words, images and actions reflect the district's values. The most effective HR teams don't just enforce policy; they teach the boundaries that keep professionalism intact in an online world.



Dr. Meagan Booth holds a doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies from the University of Tennessee and brings experience as both a principal and HR leader. She writes about generational leadership, organizational culture and the evolving role of HR in public education.

BEYOND PANIC HIRING: BUILDING TALENT PIPELINES THROUGH DATA AND PERSONAL CONNECTION

By Ashley Kitten, Director of Human Resources/Title IX Coordinator,
Upper Dublin School District, Maple Glen, PA

Tell me I'm not the only one who's had that 3 a.m. wake-up anxiety thinking about all the unfilled positions in the district. Paul, the principal, can't take one more day being short those three special education aides in his building. Tammy, the transportation director, is desperate for more drivers—otherwise, field trips and sports “just can't run.” The pressure is real. And every time we start to make progress, a new wave of resignations hits, sending us right back into that reactive cycle all over again.

What if we could break that cycle and get ahead of these challenges by combining things we already have access to – our data and relationships?



Technology helps us work more efficiently, but the heart of recruitment is still a fundamental truth: people want to work for people who make them feel valued. This article explores how to blend data-informed strategies with authentic, personalized recruitment to build sustainable talent pipelines.

If you're saying to yourself, What data? We have more useful data in our departments than you may think; we just need to step back and take a look at it. Some of the easy data points to take a look at right away are retirement eligibility lists, historical turnover patterns, patterns in leaves of absence, how long positions typically remain open and themes for why resignations are occurring.

If we start to shift our mindset from “I'll post when it's open” to “We know it's coming, what can we do now?”, you should see some immediate gains. For example, if you know you have a Physics Teacher who can retire in the next year or two, start to target schools and recruiting fairs with that certification/program. Make connections now that will benefit you in the future. There have been countless times in my career that I have made sure to seek out a hard-to-fill certified Teacher and introduced myself, traded contact information, and reached back out to them for an open position. Data tells us where to focus our energy, but it's what we do with the data that makes the difference.

We all know that everything circles back; fashion and hiring trends are not excluded. The time has returned that digital-everything, while efficient, isn't always the answer. Candidates are craving for employers to connect with them and make them feel wanted for the position. If you're thinking to yourself; I don't have time for this; let me assure you, you do! It's not about huge time commitments and grand gestures. It's about quick, human responses with their name rather than form letters that haven't been updated in years. Also, following up with candidates you don't hire but are interested in is a great way to keep connections.

We recently put this into practice in a hiring campaign for Bus Drivers. There's no secret that there is a driver shortage and candidates with this skillset have their pick of employers. We wanted to make our district that easy choice for them. We saw that SEPTA (Philadelphia's public transportation system) was cutting back on routes, which gave us an opportunity to engage with available candidates. Through targeted messaging, we emphasized the unique rewards of working in public education: stability, community impact, etc. We met candidates where they were, literally and figuratively. Through these measures, we will be fully staffed in the Transportation department by the end of 2025. I don't know the last time our Transportation Department was able to be a full team.

Another success story we recently experienced was with another hard-to-fill group: our Cafeteria/Playground Assistants. Throughout the years, we have collected employees willing to work a day or two a week, but not able to commit to full weeks, building our sub list. Upon reaching critically low staffing in this position, we took action. Personal phone calls were made to each substitute, active or not. We invited them to visit different buildings in the district. We offered them training with current Assistants. We continually thanked them for helping out in our great time of need and the result; we are far better staffed today than at the beginning of the school year. Those subs became interested and comfortable in different buildings and decided to work additional days because they felt more connected after the personal touch.

These were not expensive or time-consuming strategies, but they were intentional, personal and relationship-based. This small investment in time returned huge results for us. I strongly suggest segmenting candidate pools to help keep in touch to foster these relationships. Those segments can look like substitutes, preferred applicants or referred applicants. I would suggest setting reminders to follow up with candidates during meaningful times for you and/or the candidates.

I have a saying that I share with friends and family all the time, “If you stay ready, you don’t have to get ready.” This is so applicable in the recruitment and hiring process. If you spend a little time being proactive, you spend so much less time being reactive.

Here are some short-term pipeline builders and long-term infrastructure strategies you can try to see what works for you and your team. Short-term solutions include Substitute to staff conversion, opportunistic recruitment and targeted campaigns for critical shortages. Longer-term solutions include University partnerships, grow-your-own programs and leaning on alumni networks.

Strategies for utilization of your substitute pool are to start regular check-ins with long-term or subs who frequently work. They may be open to a more permanent opportunity if they feel like the district values their work. These employees may be open to these opportunities if there is a streamlined application process for internal employees and if there are any mentorship or training opportunities. By monitoring nearby businesses and being ready for closures or layoffs, you may have a leg up in recruitment efforts. Additionally, by identifying your top three hard-to-fill positions and creating specific recruitment materials for each, you will be amazed at what a difference it makes.



Ashley Kitten is the Director of Human Resources and Title IX Coordinator at the Upper Dublin School District as well as the President of EPASPA (Eastern Pennsylvania Association of School Personnel Administrators). Ashley has a passion for problem-solving and being a resource for employees

and colleagues. Ashley’s core belief is that no problem is unsolvable and that maintaining a strong network of colleagues is vital to success.



For longer-term solutions, one of our regional affiliate groups (EPASPA) is working to partner with universities for a more beneficial relationship in the hiring and recruiting process. EPASPA is partnering with local higher education institutions for a College Partnerships Roundtable to provide benefits to K-12 and higher education. We will be discussing student-teacher placements with hiring intentions, classroom observation opportunities, career fairs specific to education candidates, adjunct teaching opportunities for district leaders and other practicum placement opportunities.

We could explore an entire article on grow-your-own programs and while this may be one of the more expensive strategies suggested here, it has to be touched on. Paraprofessionals are an untapped resource for your next wave of Special Education Teachers. This could be explored through various vendor and/or university partnerships.

Also, don’t underestimate the power of your alumni networks. Work with your schools, communication professionals and/or social media pages to stay connected to alumni; you never know who may want to “come home” for their next career move! These ideas and partnerships are not transactional; they are relational and benefit all parties.

Remember, no problem is unsolvable. Here’s the good news: you don’t have to figure this all out on your own. Your colleagues are a great resource. Share what works, ask for help and build something together with a neighboring district. Not every strategy will work in every environment. My suggestion: start with one data point, make one personal call, build one partnership. Just try something. Failure is an option, as long as you learn from it.



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LOSS OF COLLEAGUES: HELPING FACULTY THROUGH EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED GRIEF

By Stacy P. Martin, Ed.D., Assistant Professor & Middle Level Program Director, NCAA Faculty Athletics Representative, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC & Dr. Shelley Hamill, Professor, Master Certified Health Education Specialist at Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

Kristi and Abbigail passed away within three days of one another in the spring of 2023. Working with colleagues who make you feel valued and appreciated is a gift and losing them can be devastating. At this stage in life, most of us have experienced grief in some capacity, but what happens when loss is experienced in the workplace?



Kristi was a force of nature. She never met a stranger, was a huge Jets fan, WrestleCon loyalist and devoted dog mom and wife — just a few of the many qualities that made her unforgettable. Her degree in sports law underscored her expertise in standing up for what was right, and she did not hesitate to make the case. In August of 2023, she was diagnosed with late-stage ovarian cancer. As our department chair, she was a strong leader and didn't want us to worry, but...Those of us who knew her best had a bit more insight into what was to come. However, it came much more quickly than expected for all of us.

Abbigail's smile and laughter could light up any room. As a passionate professor, she cultivated an inclusive and welcoming classroom where every student felt valued. That same warmth extended to her colleagues and her Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sisters. Her office door was always open and conversations with her were never just small talk. When Abbigail asked, "How are you doing?" She wanted details and more specifically, she wanted to know how you were feeling. One morning, suddenly, she was gone.

Though they worked in different departments, they were both part of our college. As colleagues and friends of these wonderful women, our hope in writing this piece is to offer suggestions on how to help students, faculty and administrators support one another through such difficult times.

The experience for these two deaths was different — one expected and one unexpected and while the considerations we propose are critical to processes administration use to respond to a death within the education setting, we will also describe them from the two perspectives. There are often established protocols to support students during times of grief; however, faculty and staff are frequently overlooked. Our focus, therefore, will be on providing support for faculty and staff.

Things to Consider

Communication

Whether you work on a college campus or in a K-12 school, administrators are the key conduits for messaging to faculty, staff and students within their respective areas. When tragedy occurs, the shock will create a sense of numbness for a period but having an understanding and a plan for how the news is delivered is important. Further, knowing the requirements and expectations from the human resources perspective ahead of time is also important. Think about it. You are an administrator/friend dealing with the same shock and grief as those you lead, but also having to navigate through policies you may not know in the process.

Possible suggestions:

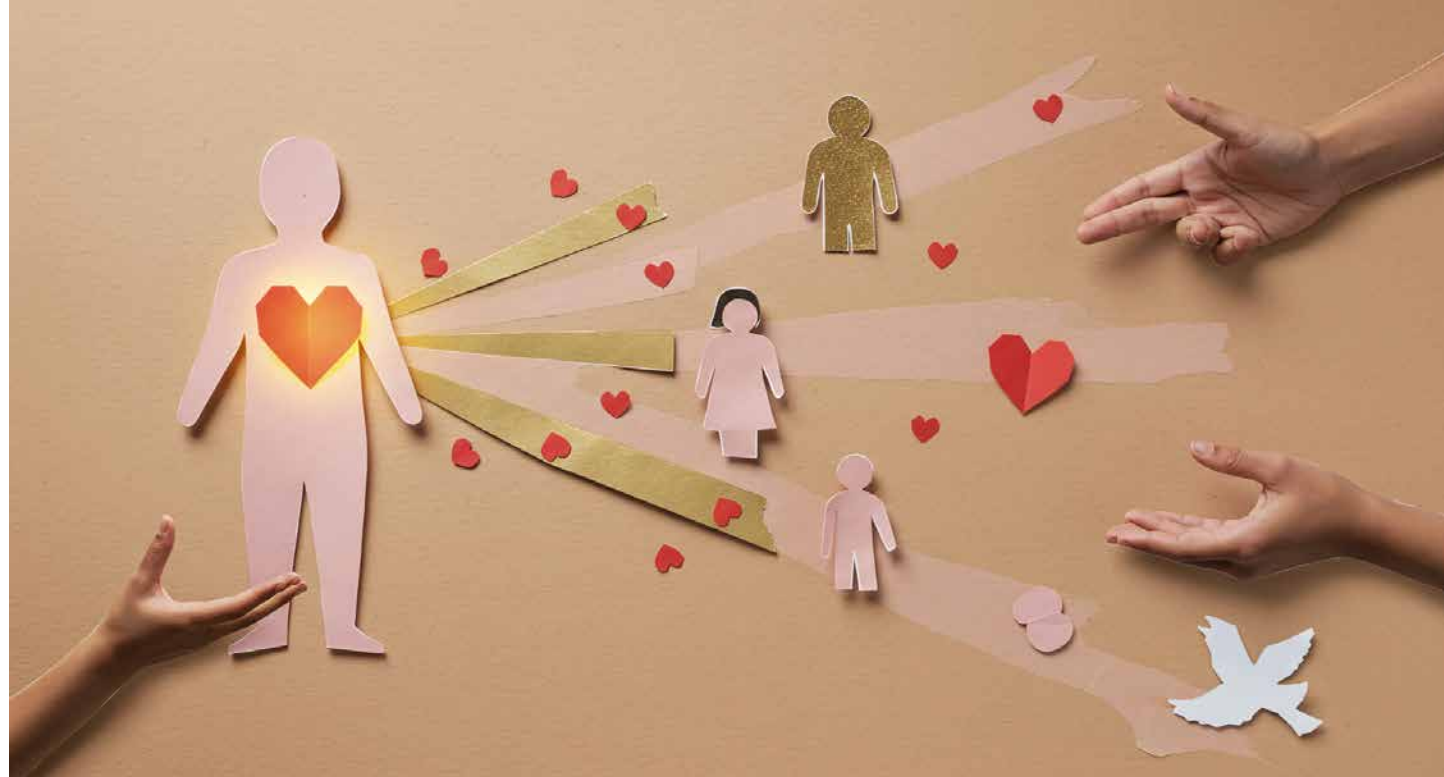
- Know the "rules" ahead of time. While no one anticipates facing these situations, it is important to recognize privacy laws and HR policies strictly guide what can and cannot be communicated publicly. Consider asking HR to provide a training session on appropriate communication protocols.
- Understand that delays in making announcements and communicating information may be perceived as a lack of care. Be prepared to communicate as promptly as possible while following the guidelines — even if you cannot share all the details. In today's social media environment, information travels quickly. There can be a lot of information passed behind the scenes and you need to respect both the family's wishes and institutional policies.
- If your school has a standard protocol for acknowledging a death, be sure to initiate that protocol as soon as possible — even if a full statement has not been released. For example, lowering the flag to half-staff or posting a black ribbon on the school's website.
- If the death is expected, consider "pre-planning" by writing an announcement in advance, even if just an outline. Be sure to include the family in the final edits for their input and approval.
- If the death is unexpected, consider asking for input from those in a position to assist in writing the announcement such as a colleague close to the person, a counseling professional and/or a family member.

Initial Support and Self-Care

As a leader, when dealing with the loss of a colleague, it is important to balance caring for others with caring for yourself. As a reminder, when you model self-care, you not only protect your own well-being but also set an example for your students and faculty. The physical and emotional toll of grief compounded with fast pace of academic life can make it easy to neglect rest, nutrition or mental health needs. Make room for moments away from it all, whether it is a walk outside, time away from the office or a conversation with a friend. Encourage colleagues and students to do likewise, reminding them that stepping back is not a sign of weakness but an essential part of sustaining the capacity to support one another.

Possible suggestions:

- It takes a "team" of perspectives — don't be afraid to talk with others and solicit their thoughts and perceptions as situations arise.
- Talk with a counseling professional to generate ideas for supporting faculty/staff and students during this time.
- Identify someone to focus on student support. As an administrator, you may see the big picture, but you cannot do everything. Enlist your team members for help but also recognize that you may need to reach



outside of your college/school for additional support from community and professional organizations.

- Be intentional about checking in with faculty/staff in both the immediate and days to come. As the grief process continues, there will be different needs, and those brief check-ins and shows of concern go a long way.
- As a leader, don't forget you are also facing your own grief and need to process it. Find trusted people with whom you can talk and find support. Don't be afraid to ask for grace from those around you. We are all human and trying to navigate through these situations to the best of our ability.

In the Days and Months Ahead: Other Considerations

While communication is critical in navigating the immediate aftermath of a loss, there are also other important considerations that go beyond announcements and messages. There's no timeline for the grief process, and while the initial shock and notification may settle in, there is an emotional impact that still lingers. In the next section, we'll explore how to create spaces for mourning, acknowledge the ongoing effects of grief and ensure that the roles and responsibilities left behind are thoughtfully managed. These actions, while perhaps not as immediately visible, are just as essential in honoring both the faculty member that has been lost and the continued wellbeing of those who remain.

Possible Suggestions:

- Identify places to grieve - both in the moment and in the future. Faculty and students may need to gather and grieve together in the first 24-48 hours of hearing the difficult news. These gatherings offer a safe and supportive environment to express emotions, share memories and feel connected. However, keep in mind that different groups may need separate spaces –

faculty may benefit from time together without students present, and students may need their own space to comfort each other. Administrators will need to assess the situation and consider various circumstances such as age of students, available locations and timing to determine what is most appropriate and supportive for all involved.

- Faculty may find comfort in having a place on campus where they can remember and honor a colleague months or even years after their passing. Consider creating a memorial that offers this space for remembrance, such as planting a tree, building a bench or painting rocks for a garden area.
- Conversations with family – be specific in asking what they would like with respect to a memorial. At the same time, be transparent about any institutional guidelines or constraints that may have an impact on what can be offered. Clear, yet compassionate communication ensures the process is both respectful and manageable for everyone.
- Transitioning roles is a delicate but necessary task. While people can't be replaced, their positions must be. Have a plan for how to approach each situation - some may require leadership changes, and others may change faculty responsibilities. Whenever possible, seek input from those most impacted by the changes during the decision-making process.
- Keep in mind that any new faculty hired during this time may not know about the situation or understand the full story of what has occurred. Be sure to reach out and offer them additional communication in order to help them support their colleagues.
- Reminders of lost friends and colleagues will be ever present - walking by their office, seeing their name or picture, or perhaps at an event they would have attended. Moments when people are asked about their

lost colleague may be difficult as well. Be cognizant of these reminders when interacting with faculty. We all experience grief in our own way and keeping an eye out for each other is essential to the healing process.



Grief, whether expected or sudden, touches every corner of our lives, especially when we lose someone who was not just a colleague but a friend. Helping a community cope with loss in the workplace requires thoughtful communication, compassion and careful planning. From understanding the technicalities of sharing the news to

ensuring those left behind have the space and support they need to grieve, administrators play a crucial role in leading the process; however, it is equally important to remember that grief is ongoing and personal. Maintaining a strong network of support and ensuring that memories of our lost colleagues are respected and preserved will go a long way in helping everyone heal. By addressing these concerns together, we can create a supportive environment that acknowledges the pain while continuing to move forward.



Dr. Stacy Martin is the Middle Level Program Director and an assistant professor in the College of Education, Sport and Human Sciences. She teaches and conducts research in middle level education and adolescent development. Dr. Martin earned her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of South Carolina. Her research interests include multicultural education, adolescent development and culturally responsive teaching in middle level education and she serves as the president of the South Carolina Professors of Middle Level Education.

Shelley Hamill, Ph.D. and Master Certified Health Education Specialist, is a professor with over 30 years teaching experience including elementary, middle and collegiate levels. She teaches various courses in Health and Health Education at the graduate and undergraduate level in the Department of Physical Education, Sport and Human Performance. Her areas of specialty include pedagogy and human sexuality.





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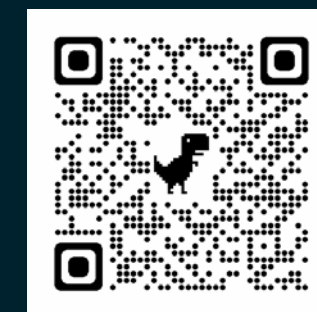
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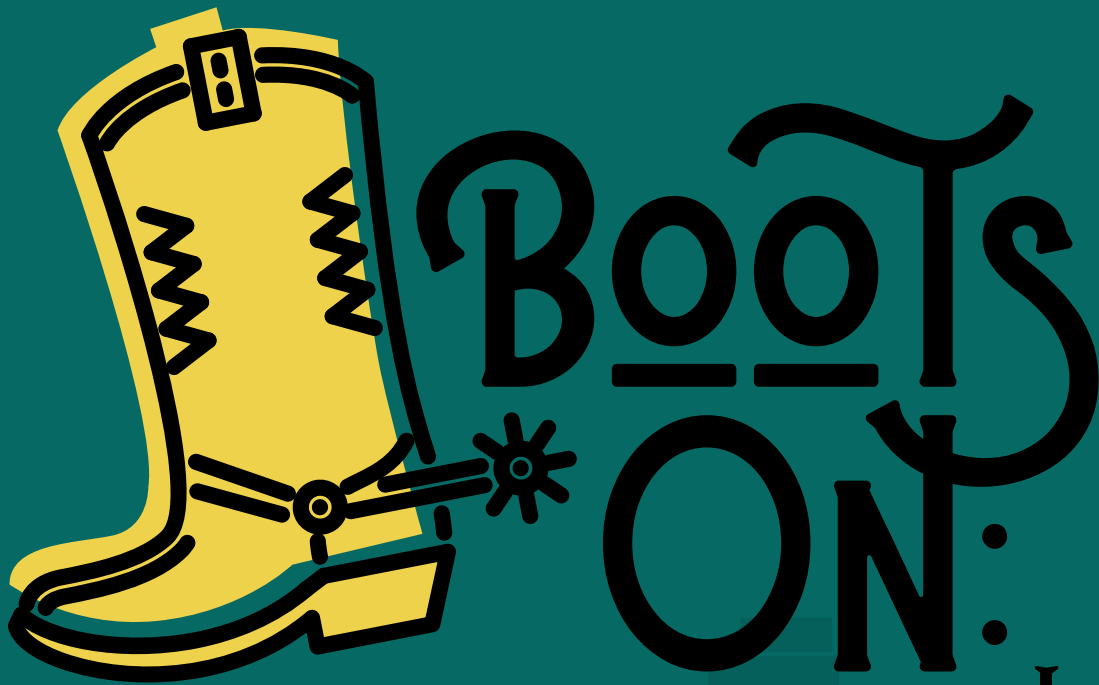
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