



REPORT

Supporting Students, Staff, and YOU Over Winter Break

The countdown is on: winter break is less than a month away. As the winter break approaches, many look forward to time off from school and work—but for some, the idea of time away can bring mixed emotions. For students and staff alike, the break may not always evoke the same sense of joy. As a leader in your district or school, it's important to acknowledge the complexities of the families and staff you support. Equally important is making sure you take time to rest and recharge over winter break.

Take Care of YOU

Prioritizing your own well-being may not always come naturally, but it's essential if you're to be at your best for others. As you prepare for winter break, think about how this time can be restorative. In a [2023 EdWeek article](#), some superintendents shared their plans for the break: spending time with loved ones, enjoying hobbies, or simply unwinding with a favorite show. Others talked about reflecting on the first semester and preparing for the next.

We encourage you to carve out time for whatever brings you joy, even if it's just for a brief period. Travel and time with extended family can be stressful, so make sure you don't return in January feeling more overwhelmed than when you left. Before you head into the break, consider these strategies from a [2019 Edutopia article, *How to Make the Most of Winter Break*](#):

- Designate days when you won't check email or engage in work-related tasks.
- Write down your work "to-dos" early in December and aim to check off as many as possible before break.
- Create a list of fun activities you'd like to enjoy during your time off.
- Make plans with colleagues—but keep the focus on enjoying each other's company, not on work. These non-work interactions can strengthen collaboration when you return.
- Pick up a non-work-related book to read. You don't need to be at the beach to enjoy a "beach read"!
- Reflect on the first semester and set one professional goal for the second half of the year.

Take Care of Students

In the weeks leading up to winter break, check in with counselors, teachers, and staff to identify students who might be feeling anxious about the upcoming time away. A [2022 SchoolLinks article](#) emphasized the importance of preparing students for pre-break anxiety and ensuring a smooth post-break transition.

- Identify students who may need extra support during the break.
- Offer encouragement so that students feel seen and valued.
- Compile a list of local resources (e.g., mental health services, food pantries, meal programs, library hours) for families.
- Consider how your staff can help ease students back into a structured routine when school resumes. A gentle reminder of expectations, paired with grace in the first days of January, can help with the transition.

Take Care of Staff

Just as students may face anxiety about the break, staff can experience similar stress. Tools shared in a [2021 We Are Teachers article](#) are just as relevant for staff as they are for students.

- Be mindful of how you talk about winter break. Not all staff may be excited about the upcoming time off. Be a listening ear for those who may be feeling stressed.
- Encourage staff to practice self-care, and share what you're doing to prioritize your own well-being. When you lead by example, you empower others to do the same.
- While we often assume staff are capable of finding resources, offering support shows you care. Share a list of available resources to assist staff during the break.
- Reach out to staff who may be anxious about the time off—a quick text or email to let them know you're thinking of them can go a long way in reinforcing strong relationships.

You have a precious opportunity to take time away from school before heading into the second half of the year. Use this break to relax, reflect, and recharge for a successful and invigorating 2025!

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Executive Director's Message from Lisa Remy Year-End Reflections to Prepare for 2025



As we approach the end of 2025, many of us look forward to the opportunity to rest and recharge over winter break. For school and district leaders, this time is not only a chance to step back from the daily demands, but also to reflect on the semester and celebrate the impact you've made so far.

Take a moment to ask yourself: *What am I proud of this school year? How is my school or district better because of my leadership?* Reflecting on these questions allows us to recognize and celebrate the ways we grow and help others grow through our work.

One highlight for me this semester has been facilitating a district women-in-leadership mastermind group. Over six sessions, I've had the privilege of learning alongside incredible female leaders as we explored topics they identified, such as building cohesive leadership teams, well-being, enhancing communication, and tackling timely challenges. These sessions provided a space for shared learning, meaningful feedback, and professional growth. I deeply value this model of professional learning—it's a powerful reminder that when leaders support one another, we all level up.

Another highlight has been the [SAI Leadership Coaching Program](#). Serving as a coach has been transformative for me, and I've seen firsthand how coaching accelerates leadership growth. Each session begins with the leader identifying their priorities, then creating a personalized focus for reflection and action. Coaching provides a structured and flexible framework to build expertise, refine leadership skills, amplify impact, and navigate complex challenges. It's a reminder that professional growth is a journey—and coaching is a valuable tool for charting the path forward.

"As we near the midpoint of the school year...and look at a new calendar year approaching...I encourage you to think about the ways you are helping others grow. Who are you mentoring, coaching, or inspiring?"

In both experiences, I've seen how intentional support and development can help leaders grow—and how those opportunities have helped me grow, too. So, as we near the midpoint of the school year...and look at a new calendar year approaching...I encourage you to think about the ways you are helping others grow. Who are you mentoring, coaching, or inspiring? It might be someone who needs clarity, confidence, or encouragement to take the next step—and you might be the leader who helps them move forward. Be bold in nurturing the next generation of school leaders.

As you prepare for what January will bring, now is an ideal time to connect with your elected officials. The legislative session begins after the new year and goes until early May. Taking time before January to send a congratulatory note, regardless of your alignment with their positions, can lay the groundwork for meaningful relationships. These individuals will shape education policy in the coming legislative session, and building positive connections now can open doors for productive dialogue and advocacy.

Whether or not you are someone who writes New Year's Resolutions, I think we can all take time to reflect on 2024. Appreciate the growth you've seen for yourself, your colleagues, and for students, and continue that momentum into the new year. Thank you for your leadership and for the many ways you grow those around you. Wishing you a restorative and reflective holiday season!

Why Attend SAI's District Meeting?

Each school year, members of the SAI team travel to visit with administrators whose districts are associated with each AEA.

These meetings:

- offer opportunities for administrators to connect and network with each other.
- provide time for SAI to share timely information and advice.
- allows SAI to collect face-to-face member feedback from across the state.

Complimentary lunches are provided for each meeting. Registration is required to prepare for adequate seating and meals. View dates to the right to mark your calendar for when SAI will be visiting your area.

Meeting Dates

December

- 3: Prairie Lakes
- 4: Green Hills
- 5: Central Rivers

January

- 15: Heartland
- 16: Keystone

February

- 6: Mississippi Bend
- 13: Grant Wood

March

- 5: Great Prairie
- 13: Northwest

Who Do You Know Who Could Be A Future Administrator?

As a current administrator, you can probably remember the person who first reached out and challenged you to consider if administration would be the next step in your career. That individual probably saw skills and passion in you that perhaps you had not yet even considered were vital to school or district administration.

It's time for you to be that person for someone else! Invite a potential future administrator to register for the following free three-session workshop.



Three FREE Video Conference Sessions:
Jan. 15, Jan. 29, and Feb. 12, 2025 from 5-5:45 p.m.

Join a community of teachers and school staff considering the school administrator role. Through three interactive video conferencing (Zoom) sessions, you will begin to build a network among other aspiring school administrators, assess your personal strengths and areas for growth as a future leader, explore emotional intelligence and the importance of understanding and managing emotions as you consider transitioning to working primarily with adults.

Additional session focus topics will be determined by the group based upon interest, need and timing. This will be a fantastic opportunity for current building and district leaders to encourage or nudge a strong leader within your school or district to consider the role of a school administrator.

Facilitator: Al Neppl, SAI Associate Professional Learning Director

Encourage your colleague to register online at sai-iowa.org/events.

Upcoming Events

January

- 10: Every Leader a Coach Short Stack #1
- 15: Aspiring School Administrator Workshop #1
- 17: Every Leader a Coach Short Stack #2
- 22: Elementary Principals Mastermind Group #1
- 24: Every Leader a Coach Short Stack #3
- 29: Aspiring School Administrator Workshop #2

- 30: Rewiring Perceptions of Discipline #1
- 31: Every Leader a Coach Short Stack #4

February

- 4: Take 30: Retention Revolution
- 5: Elementary Principals Mastermind Group #2
- 6: Rewiring Perceptions of Discipline #2
- 6-7: Executive Leaders
- 11: Virtual School Law Conference
- 12: Aspiring School Administrator Workshop #3
- 19: Elementary Principals Mastermind Group #3
- 20: Rewiring Perceptions of Discipline #3

In Memoriam

Please email lbuck@sai-iowa.org to share In Memoriam names that we can include in future publications.

The SAI Report is published for association members and select community and business leaders by School Administrators of Iowa. The views expressed in the SAI Report do not necessarily reflect SAI opinion nor does acceptance of advertising imply SAI endorsement. Your comments and suggestions are welcomed.

Laine Buck
Communications Director
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Legal Vortex with Matt Carver, legal services director

"It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like..."

As we enter December, your families and community may celebrate a variety of religious and cultural holidays. As an administrator, it can be challenging to know how to best honor your students' and staffs' practices and beliefs while acknowledging the prominence of the Christmas holiday.

I'm not going to tell you how you should address this topic within your own school district, but I do want to share what is permissible. It's then up to you to decide what's best for your specific community.

While the United States' Supreme Court's 2022 decision in [Kennedy vs Bremerton School District](#) (coach praying) case is not directly on point regarding religious holidays, I do believe it is instructive and has opened to more religious expression during the holidays — by both students and staff.

Even prior to the Kennedy case, it was sometimes overlooked that the courts have permitted numerous Christmas decorations due to the secular manner in which this holiday has been celebrated over the years. From *Frosty the Snowman*, *Rudolf*, and the *Charlie Brown Christmas* TV shows to the vast majority of December advertisements about Santa and toy-buying, Christmas in the United States has both secular and religious connections.

I often receive calls this time of year seeking guidance on what students and staff are allowed to do in celebrating their personal religious or cultural holiday. By answering a few questions in this column, it may give your administrative teams information to help in your decision-making process.

May students decorate their lockers with religious décor during the holiday season?

As long as they are following building policy regarding decoration of lockers, then the answer is yes. For instance, if your building does not ever permit students to tape or attach decorations to lockers, then you may certainly prohibit decorations during the holiday season, as well. However, if you allow students to decorate their lockers for fun or even to celebrate school-sponsored events like Homecoming, then students are allowed to decorate their lockers in a manner that celebrates their holiday of preference. Locker decorations are clearly an expression of a student's beliefs and not the schools', so the Supreme Court would likely give a great deal of deference to this form of expression. Prohibited speech might be that which is openly hostile to other students if they do not share the same beliefs.

May staff members have religious decorations, such as a small nativity scene, placed on their desk/work area?

Let me first start by saying what is permitted for students may not be the same for staff. That is because in my legal opinion, courts would consider students a captive audience on school grounds. Therefore, they are automatically exposed to what a staff member may have placed on a wall or desk.

Although a school leader can allow staff to express their personal beliefs in part of their classroom or work area, such staff speech has its limits. I would approach this just as I have shared how schools should approach other speech, such as rainbow flags. The location and prominence of such an item is key.

While a small nativity scene or rainbow flag in an area near other personal items (e.g., photos of family or friends, banners for favorite teams, etc.) is likely permissible, I believe that a court would opine that students should not be forced to look at those displays or images throughout a teacher's instruction in class, when placed on the wall immediately behind where the teacher instructs, and when those items are of a size or nature that makes them impossible to ignore. This is when the captive audience concern would likely outweigh the staff member's speech rights.

May school employees decorate the lobby with a Christmas tree and lights?

Yes. This has actually been permitted for many years by our courts. The current Supreme Court would undoubtedly give even more deference to displays relating to the historical context involved with such celebrations in the United States.

That being said, December is a great time to celebrate many different holidays in your schools, and I know that you want to make your buildings welcoming for all of your families and staff. With this in mind, I am certainly not suggesting that holiday decorations and celebrations should be constrained to the month of December. Just as it would be permissible to display some Christmas decorations in December, it would likewise be permissible to put up decorations for other holidays at different times during the year.

It's up to you to decide what you want to do for your school and community. Just because something is permissible doesn't require you to do it.

continued on page 5

May our students and staff wear holiday sweaters or other attire during the holiday season?

Your students may wear holiday attire as long as they do not have hostile messages. As far as staff, if the attire otherwise fits your dress code, then it is my opinion that staff members may also wear Christmas, Hanukkah, or other religious attire.

May a staff member say "Merry Christmas" to another staff member or a student?

If a parent/guardian, student, or fellow staff member has asked for you not to share such a message with them during work hours, then I would respect the request. However, staff don't need to ask for permission prior to saying "Merry Christmas", "Happy Hanukkah", or something similar if it is done at a time and manner that is historically appropriate.

May staff decide to have a secret Santa event with their colleagues?

While no staff member should be required to participate in such an event or face reprisal for not participating, it is perfectly appropriate for them to start or continue a secret Santa gift exchange. The court would again touch on the historical and secular context of secret Santa gift-giving. I am not suggesting that staff should or should not do such things, but rather that it is legally permissible.

May schools have religion-associated school plays or music?

As long as the purpose of the play or music is not to evangelize others or promote that one or more religions is preferred over no religion, schools may allow such plays or music. Courts have long upheld such activities due to historical context and the artistic expression associated with those performances. However, I would consider the religious beliefs of particular students and families and work with those families if they prefer for their students to complete an alternate activity or assignment. They should not be required to participate.

I hope I've answered a few questions your district may face this time of year. It's a short month and I know you're busy, but feel free to reach out if you have any additional questions on this topic.

Stay safe out there and Go Irish!!!

Administrator of the Year Highlight: Superintendent Darwin Lehmann

We [announced in October](#) that Darwin Lehmann, superintendent of the Forest City and Central Springs Community School Districts, was been named the 2024-25 Iowa Superintendent of the Year by School Administrators of Iowa. To get to know him better, we asked Lehmann, **"What is one characteristic you believe every leader should possess?"** Here is Lehmann's response.

"The importance of and ability to collaborate with the different stakeholders. Collaboration is a fundamental characteristic that every leader should possess. The ability to effectively work with diverse stakeholders, including administrators, directors, teachers, non-certified staff, and community members, is essential for achieving organizational goals and fostering a positive work environment.

Here are some key reasons why collaboration is crucial for leaders:

- **Improved Decision-Making:** Collaboration brings together different perspectives and expertise, leading to more informed and well-rounded decisions.
- **Increased Efficiency:** By working together, teams can leverage their strengths and avoid duplication of efforts, resulting in improved efficiency and productivity.
- **Enhanced Innovation:** Collaboration fosters creativity and innovation by encouraging the exchange of ideas and the exploration of new possibilities.

- **Stronger Relationships:** Building positive relationships with stakeholders through collaboration can enhance trust, loyalty, and support.
- **Better Communication:** Effective collaboration requires open and honest communication, which can lead to stronger relationships and better problem-solving.

To be a successful collaborator, leaders should:

- **Build Trust:** Establish trust with stakeholders by being honest, transparent, and reliable.
- **Active Listening:** Pay attention to others' perspectives and actively seek to understand their needs and concerns.
- **Effective Communication:** Clearly articulate goals, expectations, and feedback.
- **Respect for Diversity:** Value and appreciate the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of stakeholders.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Be prepared to address conflicts constructively and find common ground.

By prioritizing collaboration, leaders can create a more positive, productive, and successful work environment that will have the greatest impact on our greatest resource, our STUDENTS."

In Brief

Representative Council November Highlights



- Sept. 11 meeting minutes approved.
- Gabby Jones, a representative from SAI Platinum Corporate Partner Capturing Kids' Hearts (CKH) shared about CKH and the partnership they have with districts.
- Government Relations Director Dave Daughton summarized the Legislative Priorities and discussed each of the targeted areas. After discussion and a suggestion for a slight wording adjustment on the impact of inflation, the Council approved the priorities.
- Executive Director Dr. Lisa Remy provided an overview of the 2024-24 audit report.
- Remy facilitated a feedback focus group with the Council. They split the council into smaller groups to discuss questions on the services, resources, and communications SAI provides. They provided written and oral feedback to help guide SAI with strategic planning.
- In her report, Remy shared that she attended a University of Northern Iowa Superintendent's Advisory Committee meeting. She also attended an ISFLC Collaboration meeting. Remy also highlighted a November Executive Leaders Steering Committee meeting to brainstorm ideas for the upcoming February sessions. She wrapped up her report by sharing that Executive Committee approved the SAI offices to be closed from Dec. 23-Jan. 1.
- Finance Director Debbie Wrenn shared active membership is currently at 1,989, but she anticipates the number to grow as she adds Des Moines Public School members. Wrenn shared the Financials Report.
- Professional Learning Director Dr. Dana Schon led the group in an exercise about acknowledging "super powers", followed by an update on new *Mentoring Matters* blog posts, and an overview of October professional learning events. She previewed an exciting opportunity in June for a SAI/Franklin Covey Leadership Accelerator workshop on June 17-18. Schon thanked the Representative Council for their time and service. She finished her report by highlighting several meetings she and AI had in October to foster connections and future collaborations.
- Associate Professional Learning Director Al Neppel discussed the upcoming 50th Annual Conference to be held Aug. 5-7, 2025. He announced several speakers who are confirmed, including Wednesday's keynote speaker Michael Bungay Stanier, author of several books, including *The Coaching Habit*. He indicated the call for proposals process will soon begin for *Promising Practices*. Details regarding the conference, including the theme, will be updated on the SAI website in the coming weeks.
- Communications Director Laine Buck shared that Pella High School Associate Principal Derek Schulte was selected as SAI's High School Assistant Principal of the Year. She also provided an update on the remaining Administrator of the Year categories yet to be selected. Buck provided a summary of the member engagement for Principals Month and indicated the participation was much high than previous years. Twenty-four districts submitted 62 submissions of gratitude that were then posted and shared on SAI's social media channels. She then reminded the council that it's time for any active SAI member who is a general administrator and would like to run for SAI vice president should email Lisa Remy by Dec. 31. Buck wrapped up her report by showing the finalized 2023-24 Annual Report and highlighting the latest podcast interview with Winterset Community Schools on the topic of chronic absenteeism.
- Legal Services Director Matt Carver highlighted the recent legal labs. He also shared that he spoke at a UNI Superintendent's class on the topic of chronic absenteeism. He announced that he will be attending several upcoming district meetings to answer questions and provide updates on any timely topics. Carver finalized his report with an IPERS update.
- NAESP State Representative Rick Varney shared about upcoming conferences in March and July. He also highlighted NAESP's Federal Policy priorities. Varney explained that the NAESP Nominating Committee met virtually to review and select the candidates for NAESP Vice President for the 2025 election.
- NASSP State Representative Cindy Barwick shared resources for districts interested in supporting student councils or National Honor Society. Both hold national conferences.
- AASA Governing Board Representative Joe Stutting shared Iowa did lose a seat on the board because we are two members away from the number needed to secure the additional seat.

2023-24



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Legislative Notes

from Dave Daughton, government relations director

I hope you all had a great Thanksgiving holiday and break. With the election in our rearview mirror, it's time to look ahead. At the state level, Republicans not only held onto their majority, but they actually strengthened it. There will be, once again, a trifecta: the Governor's office, the House, and the Senate all hold the Republican majority. A few incumbents were defeated who previously were influential in education legislation, including Senator Zaun (R), Representative Buck (D), and Representative Cahill (D).

We are hopeful, based on conversations, that we will not see major education legislation at the state level like we have seen in the past few years, but only time will tell. At the federal level, conversations about the future of the Department of Education are at the forefront.

The House-Senate Legislative Committee recently met and selected the membership for the AEA Task Force. Their report to the Legislature is due at the end of the calendar year so they will need to work quickly in order to have an impact.

A major item coming up is the appointment of the membership and chairs for very important committees in each chamber. We do know that Representative Wheeler will continue as the House Education Committee chair, with newly-elected Representative Samantha Fett as the Vice-Chair. We continue to wait to see what happens in the Senate.

The members of the Education committee will hold subcommittee meetings on bills as well as full committee meetings. They determine what bills get to the floor for a vote. As we learn which senators and representatives will hold these roles, it will be important for us to reach out to them. We must help them understand how potential

legislation could positively and/or negatively impact schools and students. Many members will carry over from last year, but some will be new legislators. Keep an eye out for those assignments.

Both the House and Senate Democrats and Republicans will meet soon and caucus. This means they will chart their course of action for the session starting Monday, Jan. 13.

2025 Legislative Priorities

You can find detailed information on SAI's 2025 Legislative priorities both on our [website](#) and by [downloading a PDF](#).

The main points are:

- State Supplemental Aid (SSA)
- Employee Recruitment and Retention
- Preschool and Early Literacy
- Funding Equity
- Student Mental/Brain Health
- Education Savings Accounts, and
- AEA System support

We would encourage you to read through the priorities and data and use it as you see fit. While the priorities listed online and in the PDF are not all-inclusive, they do include the key points identified by the Legislative Committee. I wish to applaud the efforts of that committee. They had some great discussion of issues as we worked through the development process.

I would just encourage you to keep your eye on your mission as we move through the holiday season: the education of students. Take some time to enjoy what you do.

Please contact me if you have legislative questions and I will do what I can to answer them.

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The Latest in Learning with Dana Schon, professional learning director

What's Your Greatest Gift to Give?

The holiday season is upon us, and we can't seem to escape the avalanche of holiday ads and gift-giving promos stuffing our mailboxes, lengthening our scroll through social media, and interrupting live TV sports programming. When one such ad filled the space between quarters of the Chiefs game on Sunday, I asked my 27 year-old son what he wants for Christmas. "I really want a home-cooked meal." "How nice," I thought (before I began to question when I had last cooked a decent meal. The fact I couldn't remember was not a good sign). His wish reminded me that some of the most important gifts can't be purchased, and I wondered how aware we are of the gifts we have to give and how we feel we're doing in giving these gifts.

Let's start with the first question —what is your greatest gift to give? A frequent answer tends to be "time." I would argue that time belongs simultaneously to none of us and all of us. We do not literally have time to give, though whatever gift we do have to give often takes time. If your gut response was "time," go deeper. Think about what you do or how you show up during that time. That is the crux of it —that is your superpower, the thing people often say they appreciate about you, your unique contribution.

Maybe your greatest gift is listening. Maybe it's empathizing, or observing. Maybe you bring the energy, or maybe you calm turbulent waters with your steady presence. You might bring discernment to your team or perhaps you're a visionary, a strategist, or a researcher. Being clear about your greatest gift grounds you in your purpose. It sets you up to be intentional about giving that gift, which brings us to the second question: How do you feel you're doing giving your gift? Scale of 0-10 (and wherever you are is great).

What would it feel like to rate yourself at or near the top end of the scale consistently?

Call to mind opportunities in the past week you've had to give your greatest gift. Notice the feeling that you experience right now in bringing back those moments. Likely, you feel more connected to your purpose. Perhaps you feel more confident and impactful. Not only does giving your greatest gift benefit the people, places, and organizations who receive it, but it also fuels you. Giving your gift strengthens it and builds your energy and capacity to keep giving it. Set an intention to be mindful of opportunities to give your gift in the coming weeks and notice your impact.

You might also consider how to foster a gift-giving culture. Notice and name the greatest gifts of your staff and colleagues. Invite them to give their gift often whether it be empathy and appreciation for each student's experience, rigorous and engaging lessons, compassion, championing others, or partnering with all families. Giving their greatest gift allows them to experience a stronger connection to their purpose, more confidence, and greater satisfaction in the work they do.

What if staff, in turn, help students identify their greatest gift and create authentic opportunities for them to give these gifts? A gift-giving culture celebrates the greatest gifts each person brings and validates their positive impact. It nurtures a sense of belonging and a spirit of camaraderie throughout the organization.

May you be inspired by all of the great gifts around you and seek endless opportunities to give yours.

It's been SAId: Conversations on Leadership Podcast

In this episode of It's Been SAId, Dr. Lisa Remy talks to PTO Answers Founder Christina Hidek who provides helpful insight and advice on how schools can develop thriving partnerships with their PTOs or PTAs. Hidek shares pitfalls some schools face and how to overcome them to build a stronger community.

[Listen to this and previously recorded episodes.](#)

Free Resources for Connecting PTOs/Schools

- [PTO Family Engagement Opportunity Assessment](#)
- [Five No-Brainer Ways to Improve Teacher/Parent Relationships](#)

Connect with PTO Answers

- [Website](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Superstar PTO Leaders Facebook Group](#)

Call for Proposals: Annual Conference Promising Practices

Planning for SAI Conference 2025 is well underway! A significant part of the SAI Conference experience is our **Promising Practices Series** through which we spotlight success stories and lessons learned in local districts across Iowa.

Once again, we are calling for proposals for *Promising Practices*. We invite you to take a moment to reflect on what's going well, what lessons you've learned, and what would be of value to your colleagues. Then, we ask you to consider sharing your leadership with colleagues through a conference session.

Learn more about the process through these [Submission Guidelines](#) and plan to submit a [proposal](#).