

The Missouri ADMINISTRATOR

ISSUE 2 | WINTER 2026

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE MISSOURI ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS



LEADING WITH PURPOSE

Honoring Dr. Travis Bracht:
2026 Missouri Superintendent
of the Year

PLUS

The Relentless Advocate:
Honoring the Legacy of
Gary Sharpe

Spotlight: School District
of Washington

Student Feature: Madison
Paxson

The logo for the Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA). The letters "MASA" are in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. To the right of the letters is a stylized graphic of horizontal lines of varying lengths, resembling a staircase or a modern architectural element.

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HOW TO REACH US

EDITORIAL SUBMISSIONS:

Letters, article ideas, and nominations for features (District in Focus, Student Spotlight, etc.) may be submitted for consideration. Submission guidelines are available upon request.

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MISSION STATEMENT:

Our mission is to develop and support effective public school leaders who positively impact the lives of Missouri students.

Inside MASA

EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the second issue of MASA's brand-new magazine. When we introduced this publication last fall, we weren't sure exactly how it would take shape. Starting something from scratch always comes with a bit of uncertainty, a lot of learning, and more than a few moments of "let's see where this goes." But now, with the second issue in your hands, it is already clear that this magazine has a purpose and a personality of its own.



What has surprised me most in these early months is how quickly this publication has become a place of connection. As districts have opened their doors and shared their programs, their people, and their ideas, we've been able to see the incredible range of work happening across Missouri. Every submission, every conversation, and every visit gives us a deeper appreciation for the creativity and care that drive public education in our state.

This issue reflects that growing momentum. It highlights districts leaning into innovation, students taking the lead in meaningful ways, and leaders finding steady footing in a complex and ever-changing landscape. Pulling these pieces together reminds me that even in challenging seasons, there is so much good happening in your schools every day.

Thank you for reading, for sharing your work with us, and for supporting the early growth of this brand-new publication. We're just getting started, and I'm grateful to be building it alongside you.

Chelsea Blair
Editor, Missouri Administrator

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RISING *to the Challenge*

2026 Annual Spring Conference

March 18-20, 2026 | Margaritaville Lake Resort, Lake Ozark

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 - Curriculum and instruction
 - Communication and public relations
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- Updates from education partners
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MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

WINTER UPDATES

As we move through the second half of the school year, MASA continues focusing on the work that directly supports you—whether that’s tracking legislative developments, advancing our strategic plan, or preparing opportunities for meaningful connection. Member engagement has been incredibly strong this winter, and we appreciate the time, energy, and expertise you continue to bring to our shared work.

Legislative Outlook

The legislative session continues to evolve, and MASA is carefully monitoring the FY27 budget conversation. While Governor Kehoe has released his recommendations, those figures are not final, and a tighter fiscal landscape means adjustments are likely as the process unfolds.

To stay abreast of the latest developments in the Capitol, please watch for the Legislative Bulletin every Monday, and consider joining Scott Kimble’s weekly Legislative Zoom calls at 8:30 a.m. or 11:30 a.m. These briefings provide timely, practical updates designed specifically for superintendents navigating rapidly changing information.

Strategic Planning Update

MASA’s strategic planning work continues with strong member involvement and thoughtful leadership. With facilitation by Dr. Lori Van Leer of The Breakthrough Coach, MASA staff and the Strategic Planning Task Force completed PESTLE and SWOT analyses, and member survey feedback is now being reviewed.

The Task Force’s next meeting will be March 13, where members will begin reviewing the emerging themes and goals that will guide MASA’s work for the next five years. Throughout this process, one

message has remained clear: MASA is all of us, and your voices are shaping the direction ahead.

School Finance Focus Group

A group has convened to take a deeper look at the financial pressures districts are facing and explore how best to support Missouri school leaders in this work. Facilitated by Dr. John Jungmann and co-chaired by Dr. Curtis Cain and Dr. Adam Friga, the School Finance Focus Group first met in November to establish purpose and direction through a SWOT analysis.

The group met again on January 29 to revisit those responses and begin refining its primary goals. The conversation centered on how MASA can best support superintendents at every stage of their careers by strengthening financial literacy, improving communication around school finance, and empowering stakeholders to speak with confidence in their local communities.

The group will reconvene in the coming weeks to review draft strategies, and we look forward to sharing practical tools and resources as this work progresses.

Spring Conference Preview

Our biggest event of the year—the MASA/MOSPRA Spring Conference, March 18–20 at Margaritaville—is quickly approaching, and final preparations are well underway. This year’s conference will feature inspiring keynote speakers, a strong lineup of breakout sessions, and plenty of opportunities to collaborate and reconnect with colleagues from across the state.

We are also introducing a brand-new evening activity: Music Bingo, a fun and relaxed way to unwind after a full day of learning. And as always, the annual

Awards Banquet will serve as a meaningful moment to honor outstanding administrators, districts, and students making a difference in Missouri public schools.

To help you navigate the event, download the MASA mobile app, where you’ll find conference presentations, detailed schedules, room assignments, and more. Additional conference information is available at: <https://www.masaleads.org/ol-masa/page/spring-conference>. If you haven’t registered yet, now is the time—Spring Conference registration closes March 10.

Member Support

A reminder that MASA is here whenever you need us:

- Superintendent Hotline: 573-415-6996
- Crisis Communications Hotline: 573-637-3855
- General Assistance: 573-638-4825

Closing Thought

We know this stretch of the school year is demanding. Thank you for the leadership you provide every day—and for the partnership, collaboration, and trust you bring to MASA. We look forward to seeing you at Spring Conference and continuing this important work together. ■

- *The MASA Team*



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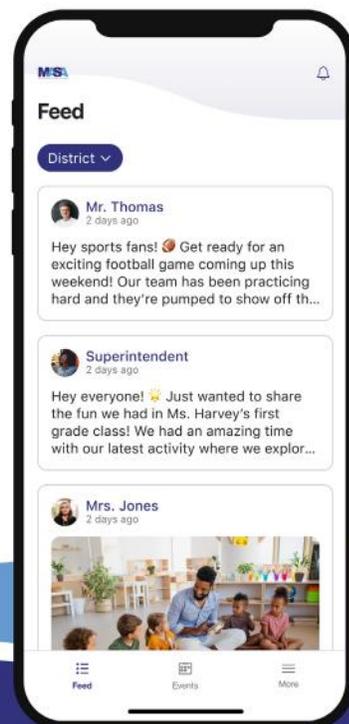
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Stories Worth Sharing

Celebrating Missouri's Public Education

BY DR. MARK PENNY

Every time I visit a district, I am reminded of something important. The heart of public education in Missouri is not found in our buildings, buses, or budgets. It is found in the stories of people who show up every day for students. These stories reveal who we are, what we value, and why our work matters. They deserve to be shared.

As of this publication, I have had the privilege of visiting five districts. In each one, I witnessed something remarkable. Students leading. Teachers lifting one another up. Administrators creating opportunities where they did not exist before. Communities partnering with their schools in ways that strengthen both. In every place I visited, the story was different, yet the spirit was the same. Dedicated people doing meaningful work for the youth in their communities.

Highlighting these moments is one of the reasons we are so proud of the new direction of our magazine. By featuring districts, programs, and student voices across Missouri, we hope to create a publication that reflects the excellence happening statewide. These stories remind us that public education is far stronger and far more hopeful than the headlines often suggest. They show what you already know to be true. Great things are happening in your districts every single day.

I want to encourage you to tell your stories as well. Share the moments that make you proud. Lift up your staff and students. Celebrate the progress you are making. When you take time to communicate your work, you help your stakeholders see the full picture. In a season filled with uncertainty, that clarity matters.

I also know that it is not an easy season. Many of you have described it as feeling like a foxhole. The legislative landscape is unpredictable. The budget forecast presents challenges. It is natural to feel the strain. Yet even now, you are leading your districts with steadiness and purpose. You continue to make decisions that keep students at the center. That commitment inspires us.

As you look ahead, I encourage you to stay connected to your communities. Engage your stakeholders. Keep lifting up the good work happening in your buildings. Take a moment to breathe when you can. You are not alone in this work. MASA is here to listen, to partner with you, and to provide the support and resources you need to navigate what comes next.

Thank you for the leadership you provide every day. Thank you for welcoming me into your districts. And thank you for continuing to tell the story of public education in Missouri. It is a story worth sharing, and it is a story worth celebrating.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark S. Penny". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dr. Mark S. Penny

Executive Director

Missouri Association of School Administrators

“*By featuring districts, programs, and student voices across Missouri, we hope to create a publication that reflects the excellence happening statewide.*”

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER



Be the Voice That Builds Understanding

BY JERRY GIRDNER

In Missouri, conversations about school finance rarely happen in formal settings. More often, they take place in the bleachers at a basketball game, in the grocery store aisle, or while waiting in line at the gas station. Someone leans in and says, "Hey, can I ask you something about the school?"

Superintendents live in those moments. These small, everyday conversations are where trust is built and clarity replaces confusion. Right now, those encounters matter more than ever. Our state is entering a period of significant financial transition. The current foundation formula is fully funded today, but pressures continue to grow. State revenue is softening. Tax cuts are limiting long-term capacity. Costs for transportation, insurance, and education rise faster than the formula meant to support them.

Communities feel these effects, but they often don't understand why. At the same time, people are exposed to a constant stream of information about public education, and not all of it is accurate.

In this environment, your voice is still the clearest one your community trusts.

What People Want to Know

Missourians care deeply about their schools. They attend concerts, support bond issues, show up for ball games, and rally behind teachers. They want to understand what's happening:

- Why do budgets feel tight when the formula is "fully funded"?
- Why does Missouri rely so heavily on local taxpayers?
- Why don't we pay teachers more?
- Why do short-term dollars help now but not fix long-term challenges?

These are community conversations, not political debates. They are honest explanations of how schools operate and why decisions matter.

Your Role as a Trusted Voice

When these conversations find you in public places, don't let the opportunity pass. Sometimes people approach with frustration or confusion. Sometimes the questions are pointed. A calm, positive response can change the entire tone of the moment.

People appreciate honesty and clarity. They appreciate a leader who listens first. Even challenging conversations become productive when we lean into them instead of avoiding them.

Your circle of influence is larger than you realize. It includes parents at ball games, retirees after Rotary, business owners who support your programs, county commissioners who want updates, teachers who want to understand the budget better, and students who watch how you lead. Every one of these interactions shapes understanding.

It's important to remember that the responsibility for safeguarding the future of our schools does not rest on superintendents alone. The decisions made in the coming months will shape communities long after any of us have moved on. That is why our role is not to carry the entire message, but to help our communities understand it and speak for themselves. When parents, business leaders, retirees, and local partners can clearly articulate why school funding matters, their collective voice becomes far more powerful than any single administrator's. Strong communities, not individual leaders, are what sustain strong public schools.

Plan for Both Informal and Formal Communication

You don't need a formal presentation every time someone approaches you, but it should still be part of your plan. Quick conversations build trust, but communities also deserve structured explanations that

provide clarity for everyone at once.

Town halls, board updates, civic group presentations, budget workshops, and clear written communication are important tools. These formal efforts don't replace the value of a quick conversation in the bleachers or at the grocery store. Together, they create a complete approach.

The Bottom Line

As lawmakers consider budget priorities and as conversations continue about the future of school funding, people will look to us for guidance. Some will ask questions. Many will not. That's why we must continue educating, explaining, clarifying - and when the moment calls for it, sounding the alarm.

Be the voice that helps your community understand, not fear. Be the voice that explains, not complicates. Be the voice that builds trust, not division. Our communities are ready to listen. They simply need us to speak.

Thank you for your leadership across Missouri. Your willingness to engage, even in unexpected moments, strengthens our schools and strengthens public education throughout our state.

With respect,

Jerry Girdner
MASA Executive Committee President
Superintendent, Princeton R-V

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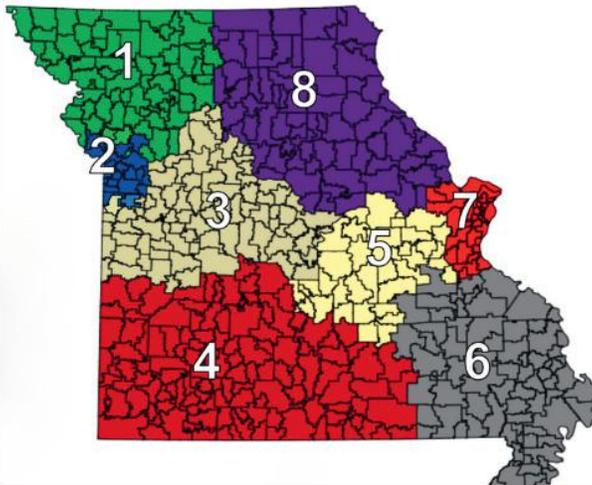
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EVENT CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

- 04 - Southeast Regional Meeting, Cape Girardeau
- 06 - Southwest Regional Meeting, Springfield
- 06 - Personnel Workshop, Jefferson City
- 11 - GKC Regional Meeting, Kansas City
- 12-14 - AASA National Conference on Education, Nashville
- 13 - Missouri Breakfast, Nashville
- 13 - Missouri Reception, Nashville
- 13 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 16 - MASA Office Closed - President's Day
- 17 - South Central Regional Meeting, St. James
- 17 - MASA Advanced Leadership Program, Fort Zumwalt
- 18 - West Central Meeting, Warrensburg
- 19 - MASA Advanced Leadership Program, Jefferson City
- 20 - MASA Advanced Leadership Program, Chillicothe
- 23-24 - Women in Leadership Summit, Osage Beach
- 25 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Macon
- 26-27 - Missouri Superintendent Academy, Jefferson City
- 27 - Greater STL Regional Meeting, St. Louis

MARCH

- 04 - GKC Regional Meeting, Kansas City
- 04 - Southeast Regional Meeting, Holcomb
- 10-11 - MASA Workshop: School Finance Workshop, Jefferson City
- 12 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 17 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Macon
- 17 - MASA Executive Committee Meeting, Osage Beach
- 18 - MASA Advanced Leadership Program, Osage Beach
- 18-20 - MASA Spring Conference, Osage Beach
- 20 - MASA Business Meeting, Osage Beach
- 23 - Women in Leadership Cohort, Jefferson City

APRIL

- 01 - Southeast Regional Meeting, Poplar Bluff
- 03 - MASA Office Closed - Good Friday
- 08 - Greater KC Regional Meeting, Kansas City
- 09 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 10 - Southwest Regional Meeting, Point Lookout
- 15 - West Central Regional Meeting, Warrensburg
- 21 - South Central Regional Meeting, St. James
- 22 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Macon
- 23-24 - Missouri Superintendent Academy, Jefferson City
- 24 - Greater STL Regional Meeting, St. Louis

MAY

- 01 - Southwest Regional Meeting, Bolivar
- 13 - GKC Regional Meeting, Macon
- 14 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 19 - South Central Regional Meeting, St. James
- 25 - MASA Office Closed - Memorial Day



MORE DETAILS ONLINE



*Events are current as of publication.
For the most up-to-date details, visit
masaleads.org/events or scan the QR.*



SAVE THE DATES

2026-27 EVENTS

MASA Masters Golf Tournament
June 1, 2026

Aspiring Superintendent Cohort
June 24-25, 2026
October 13-14, 2026

AASA Legislative Advocacy Conference
July 7-9, 2026

Gale Bartow Memorial Golf Tournament
September 21, 2026

Emeritus Reunion
October 2, 2026

Missouri Superintendent Academy
October 15-16, 2026
February 18-19, 2027
April 22-23, 2027

MASA Business Meeting
October 23, 2026

Women in Leadership Summit
February 8-9, 2027

MASA/MOSPRA Spring Conference
March 17-19, 2027



Your Voice Matters in the Future of Missouri's Public Education

BY SENATOR TRACY MCCREERY

Thank you to the school administrators, superintendents, central office leaders, principals and teachers across Missouri. You are really the hidden gems of each and every community. Balancing every part of a school district, from budgets to staffing to curriculum and policy compliance, you are the future-focused leaders that work tirelessly every day to ensure your communities, districts, teachers, and students have the resources they need to be successful. Though there is often little appreciation shown for your time, hard work, and dedication, know that the public sees it, feels it, and appreciates it. You are the core of our public education system, impacting every student and future leader and deserve immense gratitude for providing the cornerstone of success for our communities, state, and nation.

I am especially grateful for your expertise and tireless efforts during these times of monumental change in education policy. I don't need to tell you how impactful changes

to things like the foundation formula or property tax structures will be to the work you do. It is more important now than ever that administrators and educators alike are involved in advocacy. Each of you has a unique local level perspective to share with state policymakers to help us understand the real-life impacts policy work will have in your districts. You know your students. You know your communities. You know intimately how legislative decisions will affect them. Policymakers like me need your expertise. With your help we can enact policies that will support students and communities across the state. Maximizing school district and student success requires a broad network of allies committed to strengthening public education, and advocates like you can make that difference.

With looming discussions about rewriting the foundation formula and changing the state's property tax structure, you know firsthand the impact that will be felt on the bottom line and on the resources available

to every Missouri school district and student. We must work together to defeat policies that will undermine public education and champion policies that usher in public school success. Engagement through advocacy is vital to the success of public education in Missouri. With advocacy we can make sure that every district and student has access to the quality education that they deserve.

Thank you to all the education professionals across Missouri. Thank you for your tireless work and for sharing your expertise with legislators so we can make informed decisions when it comes to education policy. You really are the unsung heroes working to advocate for the future of Missouri and empower our students to be the best they can be. ■



From the Classroom to the Capitol

BY SENATOR MIKE HENDERSON

Education has never stood still. Long before smartphones, computers, and constant connectivity reshaped our classrooms, I began my career in public education, learning firsthand that change is the only constant in schools.

I spent thirty-one years in public education, with more than twenty of those years as an administrator. I have sat where you sit. Today, I am in my tenth year serving in the Missouri legislature, which has given me the rare privilege of seeing education from both sides of the coin. Those two chapters of my life impact each other every single day. When I walk into the Capitol, I carry classrooms, hallways, and faculty meetings with me. When I speak with educators, I understand the weight of their responsibility because I once carried it myself.

The landscape of education has changed dramatically over the course of my career. I remember when a paddle was still part of the discipline conversation. I remember when students didn't carry cell phones in

their pockets, and when technology did not follow us home at night. I am not saying what we did in the past was better, only that it was different. Change is inevitable. Some changes we welcome, others we struggle to accept, and a few we wish could stay frozen in time. What has never changed, however, is the commitment of educators to do what they believe is best for students.

Over the years, I have heard people say that public education is under attack. I don't believe that to be true. Educators continue to be respected across the political and ideological spectrum. Interestingly, when I was a practicing administrator twenty-five years ago, I felt the same pressure and wondered then if we were under attack. With the benefit of time and perspective, I realize I was wrong.

Education will always feel intense because educators work with what parents care about most: their children. That reality brings scrutiny, high expectations, and sometimes criticism. It also brings meaning

and purpose. The pressure to provide the very best for every student is not a burden educators shy away from; it is one they accept willingly and carry with them every single day. I know that responsibility well.

From my seat in the Missouri Senate, I have one clear request of those still in our schools: do not be afraid to advocate for the students in your district. If you don't, no one else will. Your representatives and senators need to hear directly from you about the challenges you face. Just as importantly, they need to hear about your successes, too. Share the victories of your teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, secretaries, and bus drivers. Tell the stories of students who are thriving. Education and policymaking are strongest when they are connected. My years in education have shaped how I legislate, and your voices help shape the future of our schools.

Together, we can ensure that as education continues to evolve, our commitment to students never wavers. ■

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TEACHING TO AN *Empty Chair*

BY MIKE LODEWEGEN

Accountability systems are meant to help the public understand school quality. Parents, community members, policymakers, and taxpayers depend on accreditation and assessment data to get a sense of how schools are performing. Yet Missouri's current accountability and accreditation system misses that mark. It produces numbers, but not clarity, which leaves many people frustrated and unsure of what those numbers truly represent.

As Missouri reconsiders its accountability frameworks and explores a possible move to A-F school ratings, it helps to remember that test-based accountability is not new. It shaped much of the No Child Left Behind era. One lesson from that period still applies today: when context disappears, test scores are asked to explain more than they reasonably can.

Test based accountability systems place enormous pressure on teachers when assessment outcomes are treated as direct reflections of school quality. When those outcomes are shaped by factors outside a teacher's control accountability can feel disconnected from professional responsibility. Over time, that disconnect contributes to burnout and challenges in both recruitment and retention. We have lived with versions of this reality for more than twenty years.

Student attendance is a clear example of the challenge. Attendance

is the gateway to instruction and directly influences learning outcomes and assessment results. Schools are evaluated on outcomes even when a significant share of students had limited access to instruction.

If assessment results are meant to give the public a clear picture of school quality, then it is reasonable to ask how test scores should be interpreted when a sizable portion of students missed large amounts of instructional time. In those cases, test results may say as much about student attendance as they do about the effectiveness of the teachers and schools responsible for educating them. That distinction matters when we label schools.

Because public education is a major public investment, communities reasonably expect that investment to support instruction delivered to students. When chronic absenteeism becomes widespread, schools continue to carry staffing, transportation, and operational costs for students who are not regularly in the building.

Chronic absenteeism reshapes the classroom for students who are present. Like disruptive behavior, rising absenteeism forces districts to create new programs, hire additional staff, or redirect existing resources just to keep up with inconsistent participation.

Without clearer context, accountability data can blur whether

outcomes reflect instructional quality or the inefficiencies created by persistent nonattendance. This is not an argument for excluding students from assessments or overlooking the barriers that prevent some from attending school. Their data remains essential for understanding needs and guiding interventions. The question is how that data should be used when the goal is to evaluate instructional quality.

For school leaders, my challenge to you is a practical one. Run local MAP results alongside attendance patterns. What insights do you gain? How might this inform instruction? How might this help communicate the quality of the instruction going on in your district? How might this inspire parents to get their kids to school?

As we move into a system that emphasizes test scores, one thing is clear: showing up matters in everything we are trying to measure and accomplish.



Mike Lodewegen is the Director of Government Affairs for the Missouri Council of School Administrators. Email: mike@mcsa.org



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A Shared Commitment to Missouri's Students

BY DR. ADAM FRIGA

When superintendents from across Missouri gather to talk about school finance, the conversation quickly moves beyond numbers. It becomes a reflection of shared values: how to ensure every child, in every community, has access to the resources needed to succeed. That commitment was evident during the first meeting of the School Finance Focus Group, a strong and diverse team of district leaders working together for the common good of Missouri's students.

Walking out of that meeting, I felt something powerful: optimism. Everyone in that room was on the same page, ready to lean in and make a difference together. Despite the many challenges before us, from the ongoing school foundation formula rewrite to complex legislation and fiscal pressures, it was clear that Missouri's superintendents remain fully engaged and deeply committed to serving their students and communities. True to the spirit of educators, we will do what we have always done: answer the call with an all-in approach. We may not have every answer, but what matters is that we continue to collaborate, advocate, and lead with purpose.

My key takeaways from that first meeting were threefold:

1. The next 18 months will be pivotal for public education in Missouri. The funding formula rewrite will shape the long-

term financial foundation for Missouri's schools, and we must advocate for a model that reflects best practices and the realities facing districts today.

2. Our communities continue to be strong and trusted partners. Their consistent support, demonstrated through the passage of local bond issues and tax levies, reflects a deep commitment to advancing student learning and strengthening our schools. This partnership is a testament to the confidence Missourians place in their public education system. As leaders, we must continue to build on that trust by leveraging these relationships and clearly communicating the need for sustained state support that matches the local investment in our students' success.

3. We have exceptional leadership across the state. It is an honor to serve alongside such talented and passionate superintendents who are devoted not only to educating students, but also to advocating for the future of public education.

This is our moment. The next 18 months give us a rare opportunity to influence decisions that will shape Missouri's schools for years to come. That kind of progress will not happen by accident. Advocacy works best when it is shared, not carried alone. Superintendents cannot be the only voice at the table.

By engaging community members and trusted partners to speak alongside us, we strengthen the message and build the broad support our students and schools deserve. When those voices join ours, we create momentum that leads to meaningful, lasting change.

The strength of this group is not just in the ideas. It is in the unity and determination of Missouri's superintendents. Together, we can shape the future that honors our shared commitment to students and secures the future of public education in every community. ■



Dr. Adam E. Friga is the superintendent of Oran R-III School District, MASA's Executive Committee President-Elect, and serves as co-chair of the MASA School Finance Focus Group.

House Bill 2304 Tees Up Big Expenses for Small Districts

BY JULIA WALKER

House Bill 2304, which would require parental consent before implementing certain changes to IEPs, will increase programming and legal costs for districts statewide, but smaller districts will be hit hardest.

HB 2304 will require districts to incur significant costs in two ways: programming costs and legal bills.

Under the current law, your special education team does not need parental consent to make big changes to a student's IEP, like changing a student's placement to a private provider. When this kind of change is necessary, it means that the district is not able to serve the student within the district. Under the proposed law, if the parent does not consent to the change, the district must either figure out how to serve the student in district or file a due process complaint to ask a hearing commissioner to order that the change in placement be made.

The first option, figuring out how to serve the student in district, will leave smaller districts scrambling to find staffing support for students who often need one-on-one support and therapeutic and related services during the day. Staffing for these programs has always presented a challenge, but the challenge is even more pronounced with the current teacher shortages. Resource shortages are not new, particularly in rural areas. If the bill passes, districts will likely have to become even more savvy with pooling resources and sharing talent.

The second option is no more appealing. Legal expenses for due process hearings could be significant. The easiest cases may be resolved prior to a hearing. But if there is little room for compromise, such as in questions of placement where a student cannot be served in district, the cost of a hearing can easily range from the low-to-mid five

figures, and even more if the parents are represented by legal counsel. In addition to parent's attorney's fees, which a district can be required to pay if parents prevail at hearing, there is the matter of the district's legal costs. While parents may be awarded their attorney's fees if they prevail at hearing, there is no provision that awards districts their fees if they prevail. The costs of the due process complaints brought to override the lack of parental consent will be left to the districts. If the district has to file due process in just a handful of cases, legal costs could easily reach six figures.

The legal obligation of serving the student stays with the district even if the consent bill passes. That means that parents can still demand that the district provide their student with a free, appropriate, public education, while withholding the consent that would be required for them to do so.

The impact also extends to simpler cases. Without consent to move a child from the general education classroom, teachers will need to balance the needs of both general education and special education students in the general education classroom. While some districts may be able to adapt, the limitation on qualified staff will likely be problematic for districts already struggling with staffing shortages.

The same problem exists if a child no longer needs services. The bill would require parental consent for a reduction of services, which can place the district in the position of having to continue to provide services to a student who no longer needs them or filing a due process complaint to stop services.

While dollar amounts are significant, there are other costs. If passed, the implied minimization of expertise will likely take a greater toll on morale, recruitment, and retention.

The students don't fare much better under consent procedures. If a parent refuses the reduction of services, a student can miss out on greater participation in the general education environment. If a parent refuses an increase in services, the student will struggle to make progress in an environment that is not adapted to his or her specific educational needs.

Although the trend in education nationwide is to give more power to parents, all is not lost. Some version of the parental consent bill has been before the legislature for the past several sessions and has yet to pass.

Parental participation is a hallmark of the IDEA. Whether or not the bill passes, that law assures parents have a seat at the table in making decisions about their child's IEP. When there is disagreement, however, the schools need to have some level of authority to make a decision in a child's educational interest, just as they are able to do in nearly every other educational context—from discipline to grading practices to classroom assignment. The IDEA already contains provisions that allow parents to contest IEP team decisions. Giving them the power to unilaterally block educational decisions that are being made for their child impedes the efficient and effective operation of schools. ■



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WELLNESS WISDOM

Wellness for Superintendents Leading Well by Being Well

BY DR. JAMIE BURKHART

School superintendents carry one of the most demanding roles in education. Constant decision-making, steady leadership, and navigating unexpected crises can make it easy to place personal wellness last. Yet the truth is simple and essential: to lead well, we must be well.

WORK-LIFE HARMONY VS. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

“Work-life balance” often feels unrealistic for superintendents. The role includes predictable busy seasons and unexpected emergencies that require immediate attention. True balance, where every part of life receives equal time each day, is rarely attainable.

A more sustainable approach is work-life harmony. Harmony comes from intentional communication with family about schedules and expectations, acknowledging that some seasons demand more while others allow time to reconnect. It is not about perfection, but understanding, flexibility, and shared support.

THE POWER OF MINDSET AND RELATIONSHIPS

Wellness extends beyond schedules to mindset and relationships. A positive mindset helps reframe stress and sustain perspective. Strong relationships with colleagues, mentors, friends, and family provide encouragement, accountability, and grounding when challenges arise.

Dr. Sarah Wisdom, Superintendent of New Bloomfield R-III, emphasizes the connection between leadership and wellness:

“For me, a big part of that is building strong leaders around me. Investing in the people on our team not only strengthens the organization, but it also creates space for balance. When we empower others to lead, we create capacity for ourselves to breathe, think, and be present.”

She also reminds us that wellness must be nurtured at home as well as at work:

“Relationships are at the core of my personal wellness, too. The power of connection — with colleagues, mentors, and especially family — grounds me. I make it a point to protect time for my family because it refuels me and keeps me centered. When I’m well at home, I show up better at work.”

This intentional focus on mindset and boundaries is echoed by many Missouri superintendents who are practicing wellness in real and tangible ways.

Dr. Mindy Hampton, Superintendent of Oak Grove R-VI, shares how small, consistent habits help her remain grounded:

“I assume positive intent, set boundaries around email and social media, and lean on my faith during difficult times. I focus on the good happening across our district and look for calm in the chaos. My family, travel, and laughter with friends help me disconnect and recharge.”

Dr. Billie McGraw, Superintendent of Hamilton R-II, reflects on the daily practices that support her well-being:

“Remember why you’re here—be present with your people. Put family first. Trust that ‘this too shall pass.’ Make time for friends, take care of your body, and give yourself grace when you miss the mark. Tomorrow is a new day.”

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SUPERINTENDENT WELLNESS

Here are practical ways school leaders can focus on being well physically, mentally, and emotionally:

Physically

- Build regular movement into your day.
- Protect sleep as a non-negotiable.
- Stay hydrated and choose nourishing foods.
- Schedule routine health checkups.

Mentally

- Block time for reflection and planning.
- Practice mindfulness or breathing

techniques.

- Engage in ongoing learning.
- Focus on one task at a time when possible.

Emotionally

- Invest in relationships that uplift you.
- Identify a trusted accountability partner.
- Celebrate small wins.
- Set boundaries around technology

FINAL THOUGHT

Dr. Sharonica Hardin-Bartley, Superintendent of the School District of University City, reminds us:

“You can’t pour from an empty cup. Leadership requires the emotional and physical capacity to support others, and that begins with caring for ourselves.”

Wellness is not a luxury for superintendents; it is a necessity. When leaders care for themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, they model resilience and balance for their staff and students. By cultivating work-life harmony, maintaining a healthy mindset, and leaning on strong relationships, superintendents don’t just sustain their leadership—they strengthen it.

Because leading well begins with being well. ■



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CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

Proactive Communication Planning Helps Districts Maintain Trust in a Crisis

BY JERRY GALLAGHER

It's 7:45 a.m. on a Tuesday. A bus accident has just been reported. Parents are calling, social media is buzzing, and the local news wants a statement. In that moment, every second counts, and the way you communicate can make or break trust.

Crises don't wait for a convenient time. They happen fast, and they rarely follow a script. For school leaders, the challenge isn't just managing the situation; it's keeping families informed, calming fears, and ensuring accurate information reaches the right people before rumors take over.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH

In today's world of instant information, silence isn't neutral; it's damaging. When families don't hear from you quickly, they'll fill the gap themselves, often with speculation or misinformation. That's why proactive planning isn't optional; it's essential.

Mid-Buchanan R-V Superintendent April Campbell knows this firsthand. "You don't want the community to create its own story," Campbell said. "When I think about what needs to be communicated, I focus on clear, concise language that explains what is occurring and how the district is addressing it."

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Campbell emphasizes that speed matters just as much as accuracy. "When a crisis

occurs, it is important to communicate as soon as possible," she said. "Timing is everything."

A strong crisis communication plan gives leaders a roadmap: who gathers information, who approves messages, and how updates will be shared as the situation evolves. It also ensures you're thinking about different audiences (students, families, staff, and media) because each group needs tailored messaging.

THE REALITY FOR SMALLER DISTRICTS

For rural and smaller districts, the challenge is even greater. Limited staff often means administrators handle both the crisis and the communication. "I am not only trying to manage the crisis among students, staff, and perhaps the community, but I am also thinking through how to communicate with parents," Campbell said. "That can be difficult because I am being pulled in so many different directions."

SUPPORT WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST

That's where MASA's partnership with the Donovan Group comes in. This service provides live counsel with experienced communication professionals, custom parent and staff messages, media statements, talking points, and more.

"Being able to talk with someone about

what is occurring is helpful because they might come up with different ideas for communicating," Campbell said. "In a small district, you don't have anyone to bounce ideas off; you're the only PR person for the entire district."

YOUR NEXT STEP

Don't wait for a crisis to test your plan. Start now. Review your communication protocols, identify your key messengers, and make sure your team knows the process. And if you need extra support, MASA is here to help.

Learn more about MASA's crisis communication services at masaleads.org/o/masa/page/crisis-comms. ■



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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT



MASA and FranklinCovey Education Launch MASA Advanced Leadership Program for Missouri School Leaders

BY LANCE WHEELER

The Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA) is excited to announce a new MASA Advanced Leadership Program with FranklinCovey Education, creators of world-renowned leadership content and Leader in Me, to bring high-impact, in-person leadership training to school administrators across Missouri.

This collaboration is grounded in a shared commitment to elevate leadership capacity in Missouri schools. It builds on MASA's mission to support public school leaders who positively impact student lives and aligns with its priority to expand high-quality professional development statewide. This program equips Missouri school leaders with tools to navigate complexity, lead change, and improve student outcomes—critical skills for today's educational landscape.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THAT STRENGTHENS LEADERSHIP AT EVERY LEVEL

The MASA Advanced Leadership Program sessions will draw from FranklinCovey Education's most trusted leadership content, beginning with The 4 Essential Roles of Leadership. These in-person sessions are designed to provide Missouri's superintendents and central office leaders with actionable tools for navigating complexity, building trust, and empowering others to lead. FranklinCovey Education's programs are built on timeless principles of human

effectiveness, equipping leaders to see differently, lead effectively, and create results that matter. Future sessions will provide a deeper dive into each of the 4 Essential Roles of Leadership, ensuring participants build mastery over time and apply these principles to real-world challenges.

"School leadership is one of the most challenging and rewarding roles in education. At MASA, we understand the importance of equipping leaders with tools that help them inspire trust, lead with clarity, and create positive change. This partnership with FranklinCovey Education is about investing in people, because when leaders grow, schools and students thrive," said Dr. Mark Penny, Executive Director of MASA.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR MASA MEMBERS

- **In-person professional development** opportunities focused on leadership effectiveness, trust-building, and school culture.
- **Content tailored for educational leaders**, delivered by FranklinCovey facilitators with deep experience in PK–12 settings.
- **Support for MASA's strategic goals**, particularly in building statewide leadership capacity and equipping leaders for the challenges of modern public education.

"Franklin Covey Education is excited

to support MASA in their journey to grow both personal and professional leadership acumen in school district leaders across Missouri" says Lance Wheeler, FranklinCovey Client Partner for Missouri. "In this day and age with Portrait of a Graduate, District CSIP work, Success-Ready Student Network and other initiatives, these leaders need help narrowing their focus and determining what is the most important for them to accomplish. Helping them build their own personal capacity is a key step to tackling these challenges that our district leaders face."

NEXT STEPS

Details about the sessions, registration, and logistics are available on the MASA website: masaleads.org/o/masa/page/advanced-leadership. Together, MASA and FranklinCovey Education are investing in what matters most: the development of effective leaders who shape strong schools and help every student thrive. ■



Lance Wheeler is the Client Partner, Missouri and Iowa of FranklinCovey. You can email Lance at lance.wheeler@franklincovey.com.



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Pause, Reflect, Connect

Looking Back to Lead Ahead

BY DR. DEANNA ASHBY

In September 2022, I had the pleasure of writing an article for AASA School Administrator magazine titled, “Pause, Reflect, Plan: A leadership coach on overcoming feelings of exasperation and regaining the ‘why’ of our work in education.” At the time, districts were working to reestablish normalcy post-COVID. Now, as we enter 2026, the practice of pausing and reflecting remains just as essential, but with a new lens: Pause, Reflect & Connect: Looking Back to Lead Ahead.

In conversations with school and district leaders across the country, one theme is clear: the work can feel like a constant pull from one task, challenge, or priority to another. Some call it a “black hole in space.” Others describe it as a “busyness trap.” Yet without meaning, activity does not equal impact.

The Pause Principle captures the value of reflection:

“What sleep is to the mind and body, pause is to leadership and innovation. Pause transforms management into leadership and the status quo into new realities.” (Cashman, 2012).

Intentional pause points create space to ask strategic questions like: What are we celebrating? Where are we stuck? These moments help leaders assess, recalibrate, and set meaningful goals.

Missouri Superintendent of the Year, Dr. Travis Bracht, reinforces this idea:

“In order to continually improve throughout the school year, it is critically important to pause, reflect, learn and realign. When we take time to learn from our progress and challenges, we strengthen our purpose and renew our commitment to helping every student grow. Reflection isn’t a break from the

work, it’s what helps us move forward with clarity and intention.”

Improvement begins by stopping long enough to learn. As Ahlstrom reminds us, leaders must know where they are and where they are headed. He encourages three clarifying questions (Ahlstrom, 2015):

- Where am I?
- Where am I going?
- How am I going to get there?

Start now, right where your feet are planted. Build a consistent practice to pause, reflect, and connect with those closest to the work. The Iceberg of Ignorance reminds us that leaders are often furthest from the problems that matter most. Connecting directly with employees provides critical insight into what is working and what is not.

Many superintendents schedule one-on-one pause points with principals and district leaders to review data, examine outcomes, and identify next steps grounded in both results and relationships. Tools like Rounding for Purpose strengthen trust and visibility while uncovering actionable insights.

Questions such as:

- What barriers are making your work harder?
- What tools, training, or resources would help you succeed?
- Who has been especially helpful to you in this work?...give leaders an authentic understanding of what employees need.

Finally, pausing creates room for gratitude. As new superintendent Dr. Jana Parker shares: “Pause to notice what’s good. Pause to recognize the people who make this work possible. Pause to be grateful for one another, for the small wins, and for the moments that remind us why we do what we do.”

Gratitude doesn’t remove challenges, but it changes how we face them. It shifts the energy, strengthens connection, and reminds us that progress is not only about results, but the heart we bring to the work each day (Parker, 2025).

In a world where leaders are pulled in a hundred directions, the greatest gift we can give our organizations is to slow down long enough to see what truly matters. Pause to gain perspective. Reflect to gain clarity. Connect to gain strength. When we do those three things consistently, we don’t lose time, we gain purpose.

After all, the pause isn’t a break from leadership. It’s where leadership begins. ■

“Pause to gain perspective. Reflect to gain clarity. Connect to gain strength.”



Dr. Deanna Ashby, a retired superintendent, serves as Senior Executive of Partner Development with Studer Education in Hanson, KY. Email: dashby@studereducation.com.

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The Principal Connection:

BUILDING THE BRIDGE BETWEEN SYSTEMS, SCHOOLS, AND STUDENT SUCCESS

BY J ANDERSON

The Power of the Principal

Every successful district shares one constant — strong principals who turn vision into action and connect people to their purpose. The principal's office is more than a workspace; it's the hub where the district's mission meets the daily reality of students and teachers. When a principal leads with clarity, consistency, and care, every layer of the system benefits — from central office to classroom to community.

While superintendents and boards establish direction, it's the principal who operationalizes the vision. They build the culture, shape expectations, and nurture the environment where teachers feel supported and students feel known. In short, they are the human bridge between district systems and student success.

Understanding the Principal's Work

The work of today's principal has evolved far beyond managing buildings. Principals serve as instructional leaders, culture builders, communicators, and systems thinkers. They interpret policy, inspire practice, and maintain balance — all while supporting the emotional, academic, and social growth of their communities.

I've been a guest in many schools, and one question continues to surface as I visit districts: Are principals considered site leaders, or are they considered district leaders who happen to be assigned to a school? The difference may appear subtle, but the mindset matters. When principals are viewed and view themselves as district-level leaders, their influence expands. Their work aligns more closely with district priorities. Their voice strengthens system-wide decision-making. And their leadership carries forward the through line from policy to practice to student experience.

The strongest systems understand this. They see their principals as district leaders with school assignments, not building managers. And they invest in them accordingly.

What Principals Need Most from Their Superintendents

Superintendents set the tone for how principals experience their work. The most effective partnerships between superintendents and principals share four essentials:

- Clarity. Principals thrive when district goals are defined and priorities are

transparent. Ambiguity breeds frustration. Clarity frees principals to align building goals with district vision.

- Trust. Trust gives principals permission to lead. It allows for innovation, reflection, and the occasional mistake that leads to learning.

- Access. Principals need a seat at the table when decisions shape instruction, staffing, or culture. Their perspective connects system thinking to the lived experience of teachers and students.

- Connection. Regular, meaningful dialogue, not just supervision, builds relationships that sustain leadership. A superintendent who checks in to listen, not just evaluate, sends a powerful message of support.

When a superintendent invests in the development of a principal, they multiply their impact across every classroom in the district.

The Through Line: Leadership That Flows

Leadership connects every layer of the system. The actions of superintendents, principals, and teachers form a through line that shapes the experience of students.

When a principal models reflective learning, teachers can practice professional vulnerability, so that students can experience authentic growth.

When a principal builds belonging, teachers can invest in relationships, so that students can thrive in community.

When a principal aligns systems to mission, teachers can focus on learning, so that students can achieve their fullest potential.

This through line is both strategic and human. It flows best when communication, trust, and shared learning anchor the relationship between superintendent and principal.

Learning by Doing: The Paradigm in Practice

At MAESP, our leadership development is grounded in the School Leader Paradigm, a framework that sees leadership as both "Becoming" and "Doing." The Paradigm emphasizes growth through practice, learning by doing. It focuses on how leaders think, act, and reflect. It reminds us that technical knowledge is only part of the work; the deeper growth happens when leaders

engage, collaborate, and apply learning within their context.

Through mentoring, coaching, and professional networks, Missouri's principal associations, MAESP and MoASSP, are embedding this mindset statewide. Principals aren't just learning about leadership; they are living it. Each session, reflection, and collaboration strengthens their ability to align culture, systems, and learning. We grow leaders not through position, but through practice.

An Invitation and Thank You for Superintendents and District Leaders

Great districts grow great principals, and that growth begins with the relationship between the superintendent and the leaders they support. When superintendents recognize principals as strategic partners rather than middle managers, the work feels shared. When they invest in principal learning, reflection, and connection, the entire system benefits. Support for principals takes many forms—intentional conversations, opportunities to lead, access to networks of learning, and public and private affirmation. Each action strengthens a principal's confidence, clarity, and sense of belonging within the district's leadership team.

This work is both strategic and relational. Superintendents shape the conditions in which principals lead, learn, and thrive. When they extend an invitation to grow together, schools flourish, teachers feel supported, and students experience the fullness of a healthy, aligned system. Thank you for investing in your school principal(s) and for strengthening the leadership pathway that shapes every classroom and every child's experience. ■



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Strengthening Board Relations: A Superintendent's Most Strategic Investment

BY KEVIN SANDLIN

In Missouri schools, the relationship between a superintendent and the Board of Education isn't just important—it's foundational. Boards set direction, superintendents lead execution, and communities feel the impact of how well those two forces work together. When the relationship is strong, districts move forward with clarity and confidence. When it's strained, even the best initiatives stall.

Strengthening that partnership is not accidental. It is intentional, ongoing work rooted in communication, trust, and shared purpose. As our school landscape evolves—tight budgets, community polarization, legislative shifts—the superintendent-board relationship becomes even more crucial. Here are several strategies to cultivate a healthy, productive governing partnership.

1. Communicate Early, Often, and Clearly

A board should never be surprised. The most effective superintendents set communication rhythms that keep their boards informed without overwhelming them. Weekly updates, pre-meeting summaries, and timely alerts about emerging issues build confidence and reduce speculation. Clear, concise communication also signals respect for board members' time and decision-making responsibility.

Just as importantly, superintendents benefit from asking board members how they prefer to receive information. When communication reflects their preferences, engagement increases.

2. Establish Clear Roles—and Revisit Them Often

A significant portion of board-superintendent tension stems from confusion about roles. The board governs; the superintendent administers. Yet in practice, the boundary can blur.

Annual governance workshops, role-clarity discussions, and policy reviews ensure that everyone understands where authority rests. When superintendents proactively initiate these conversations, they model professionalism and help the board operate as a cohesive strategic body rather than individual actors.

3. Build Trust Through Transparency

Transparency is not about sharing everything—it's about sharing the right things at the right time for the right reasons. This includes openly discussing challenges, providing data that supports recommendations, and acknowledging mistakes quickly. Transparency shows the board that the superintendent is a partner, not a gatekeeper, and it accelerates trust-building.

4. Invite the Board Into the Why, Not Just the What

Boards approve policies and major decisions, but they thrive when they understand the "why" behind them. Allowing board members to view school programs or initiatives, review district data, or hear directly from staff empowers them to make informed decisions that align with district priorities.

Superintendents who connect board actions back to student outcomes—consistently and clearly—help shift conversations away from politics and toward purpose.

5. Build Board Capacity as Community and Legislative Advocates

One often overlooked responsibility of the superintendent is helping board members grow as ambassadors for the district. A well-informed board member becomes a powerful voice in the community—correcting misinformation, building trust, and reinforcing the district's vision in everyday conversations.

Superintendents can strengthen this ambassador role by:

- Providing key talking points for community events and conversations
- Ensuring board members understand district successes, challenges, and priorities
- Offering updates on legislative issues affecting Missouri schools
- Preparing board members to speak confidently with representatives and senators
- Encouraging participation in school board conferences and regional advocacy efforts

When board members feel equipped and confident, they amplify the superintendent's message. Their voices—trusted by neighbors, civic groups, and local leaders—carry tremendous influence, particularly during legislative sessions or when public education is under political pressure.

6. Remember That Relationships Are Built One Interaction at a Time

Expressing gratitude, acknowledging the difficulty of a board member's volunteer role, and recognizing their contributions to district progress strengthen trust and alignment. Missouri board members are navigating heightened scrutiny and complex community dynamics; knowing their work is valued matters.

A strong board-superintendent relationship is not merely a leadership skill—it is an organizational advantage. When trust runs high and communication is healthy, districts weather challenges with resilience and move forward with unity. Superintendents set the tone. And when that tone is grounded in clarity, transparency, and mutual respect, the entire system thrives. ■



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School District of Washington

Where Community, Industry, and Education Move in the Same Direction

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

You can feel it almost immediately when you arrive in Washington, Missouri. The historic brick downtown feels cared for, the streets feel intentional, and then, just beyond the charm, you notice something else—massive manufacturing plants rising around the edges of town, humming with activity. The contrast is striking: a small-town heart surrounded by the engines that sustain it.

That contrast is not accidental. It is the visible result of a community where education, industry, and civic life are intentionally aligned.

For Superintendent Dr. Jennifer Kephart, that alignment begins with people. “This is my fifth year in the district,” she said. “Coming to Washington from Kansas City, I quickly realized this is a community that cares deeply. They are service-oriented and give back to every generation and every population.”

That culture of care is strengthened by economic reality. In a community of roughly 15,000 residents, Washington’s assessed valuation has surpassed \$1 billion, an extraordinary foundation that allows long-term investment in both city and schools. “It’s because there’s this amazing industry presence,” Kephart explained. “And that industry allows us to support our community and our kids in meaningful ways.”

From Industry to Identity

The scale of Washington’s industrial footprint often surprises visitors. Major League baseballs are manufactured, helmets painted, and custom bats are crafted for professional players. Advanced manufacturing, refrigeration and cooling systems, aviation

components, and industrial chemical testing operations anchor the local economy and play a role in global supply chains.

Yet for years, that economic strength and the school system existed side by side rather than together. When Kephart arrived, she sensed an opportunity to create deeper alignment. “I wanted to understand how our schools and businesses were connected,” she said. “So we started going to them.”

Those visits, listening first, not presenting, revealed a truth: the community wanted to invest in students, but no shared system existed to guide the work. What followed was not a new program, but a new way of working together.

Connect Washington: A System, Not a Slogan

That alignment now lives in Connect Washington, a framework that connects student identity, workforce needs, and community partnerships into one continuous pathway from early learning through graduation. Rather than functioning as a single program, Connect Washington serves as a shared structure uniting career exploration, workforce development, and student purpose.

The framework rests on three interconnected elements. A common language, using the Holland Code (RIASEC), allows students, educators, and employers to describe interests and work styles in the same way. Essential skills, aligned to the district’s ROCK values, ensure character and capability develop together. Personalized partnerships, now more than 180 strong, turn curiosity into real-world experiences. “We didn’t ask businesses for money,”

Kephart said. “We asked what was missing and how we could build something together.”

When Learning Meets Life

Once that alignment existed, learning began to look different. Agriculture students grow food for the community. Middle school students explore interests through embedded enrichment so no one is excluded by transportation barriers. High school students design, build, weld, market, construct, and problem-solve for real clients.

Students are rebuilding a monster truck, with students handling the frame, welding, engine work, graphics, and wrap design—a years long project. Others build homes, operate heavy equipment, and support local businesses through client-connected projects. “These aren’t simulations,” Kephart said. “They’re doing real work with real expectations.”

The district’s registered apprenticeship program now allows students to earn paid, transferable credentials before they graduate. For many, the future is no longer abstract, it is already unfolding.

When a Pathway Doesn’t Exist, They Build One

Not every career interest fits neatly into a traditional course catalog, and in Washington, that reality became an invitation rather than a limitation. When students showed interest in fields without formal pathways, the district chose not to wait for a program to exist, they created experiences instead.

Through Washington SOAR to STEM, students explore aviation through immersive sessions at district sites and the local airport. Through Fire Science,

they train with local first responders, learning emergency response and safety protocols through real-world simulations. “Students didn’t even know aviation was an option,” Kephart said. “Now they’re pursuing it as a career.” These programs reflect a simple belief: when students can see what is possible, they begin to believe it is attainable.

Diploma Plus: A Shared Promise

All of this work leads to one clear goal: every student graduates with direction. Through Diploma Plus, students earn college credit, industry credentials, apprenticeships, internships, client-connected projects, or entrepreneurial experience before leaving Washington High School. More than 70 percent of graduates already achieve at least one of these assets, and the district is working toward 100 percent. “I can’t look at a parent and say only some kids deserve this,” Kephart said. “Every student deserves to see a future they can step into.”

Building What Comes Next

In Washington, education is not a system operating beside the community—it is the community’s heartbeat. Here, students do not graduate wondering who they might become. They leave having already begun. They have tested their interests, built real skills, formed professional relationships, and discovered where they fit in the world beyond the classroom.

This is not preparation for someday; it is preparation for now. And in a town where industry surrounds a historic downtown, where service fuels innovation, and where every student is seen as essential to the future, Washington is not waiting for what comes next, *they are building it.* ■



A student panel shares their experiences of how SDOW helped them find their career path during a MASA visit.



A student works on a welding project in the Four Rivers Career Center.



Jennifer Kephart is the superintendent for the School District of Washington.
Email: jennifer.kephart@sdowmo.org



Dr. Mark Penny (L) and Dr. Kephart (R) in the podcast studio.



2026 MISSOURI SUPERINTENDENT OF THE YEAR

Leading with Purpose

Honoring Dr. Travis Bracht

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

When students in the Affton School District talk about their schools, they often mention something that does not show up on a report card. They talk about feeling seen. They talk about adults who push them, support them, and believe in their potential. At the center of that culture is Dr. Travis Bracht, 2026 Missouri Superintendent of the Year, and superintendent of the Affton School District since 2018. For Bracht, the superintendency is not a job that appeared overnight. It is the result of a lifetime shaped by schools, a careful progression through almost every level of educational leadership, and a deep conviction that public education must keep moving forward for the sake of the next generation.

Growing Up in the Schoolhouse

Education is part of Bracht's DNA. His mother worked as an elementary librarian, which meant his childhood rhythm was set by the school bell. He remembers spending long days in her building, going to his own classes, then returning to the library or the gym after school until she finished her work. "I grew up in school life, before school, during school, after school. It was what I knew," he reflects. His father added another important viewpoint. After a career in education, he became a small business owner and served on the local school board. That dual experience gave Bracht an early appreciation for both the internal and external perspectives that shape a district. Extended family members, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, also chose education. Surrounded by educators and school conversations, Bracht's path was not accidental. It was formed in the hallways and classrooms he had known since childhood.

A Career Built Step by Step

Bracht began his professional journey as a high school science teacher, first at Hazelwood Central High School and later at Francis Howell North. Many teachers prefer juniors and seniors, but he gravitated to freshmen. He enjoyed watching students arrive as eighth graders in mindset and leave as emerging young adults. That visible

transformation reinforced his belief in the power of strong teaching and consistent relationships. While at Francis Howell, he participated in the district's administrative training program. That experience opened the door to leadership roles, and over time he served as:

- Dean of Students, focusing on student discipline and family communication
- Associate Principal, supervising core academic departments and supporting instruction
- Director of Assessment, gaining a systemwide understanding of student performance
- Director of Curriculum, guiding teaching and learning across content areas

Each position added a layer of understanding. Each role allowed him to learn the pressures and possibilities at different levels of the system. "I have been fortunate to spend just the right amount of time in each position," he says. "Long enough to learn the work deeply, improve something, and feel ready for the next step."

In 2012, Bracht joined Affton School District as assistant superintendent. For six years, he worked alongside the superintendent, board, administrators, and teachers as the district sharpened its focus on continuous improvement and strategic growth. When the superintendent position opened in 2018, the Board unanimously chose Bracht to lead. That decision signaled confidence not only in his leadership, but also in the shared work already underway.

A Culture of Continuous Improvement

When Bracht describes Affton, he is quick to say it was already a good district when he arrived. The story he tells is not about fixing what was broken, but about pushing what was already strong. "There was a mix of board members, principals, teachers, and staff who wanted to ask, 'We are good. Now what can we do even better?'" he says. That mindset led to a deliberate focus on continuous improvement. One early initiative involved a five-year training plan to build staff capacity in improvement practices. After two years, teachers asked if the district could

accelerate the rollout so that everyone could be on the same page sooner. That request became one of the district's first bold moves under this new culture. It reflected a staff eager to work with common tools, common language, and shared expectations.

Another signature initiative was expanding Project Lead The Way into the elementary and middle grades. The district began with gifted classrooms but quickly recognized that the experience should reach all students. Today, Affton offers creative problem-solving opportunities for every student from Pre-K through seventh grade, with pathways available in eighth grade and beyond. What began as a pilot has become a defining characteristic of the district's approach to STEM, problem solving, and future readiness.

Communication as a Leadership Practice

Bracht is widely recognized for his communication, especially his willingness to be visible, accessible, and transparent. Ironically, he initially resisted the idea of being on camera. "When I first became superintendent, I told our communications director I was not doing videos," he admits with a smile. "I preferred written communication." The COVID 19 pandemic changed that. When schools were disrupted and families could not gather in person, he recognized that people needed to see and hear from their superintendent. The solution evolved into a weekly podcast that features more than 300 students and staff members each year. Each episode highlights classroom activities, clubs, achievements, and programs that might otherwise remain under the radar. "Everyone knows the score from Friday night," he says. "Not everyone knows about the elementary students who stay after school to write stories and publish them in a book. Our job is to lift up those stories too." For Bracht, communication is not just about information. It is about trust.

He often reflects on advice he received from a veteran superintendent, who framed trust as a series of small investments. In some situations, a leader may only be able to earn a "penny" of trust at a time, yet over



Dr. Bracht is the proud host of the district podcast, *Affton Unplugged*.



Dr. Bracht receiving the Superintendent of the Year Award with Dr. Penny.

months and years those small investments accumulate. “You cannot always make everyone happy, especially in difficult situations,” Bracht explains. “But you can be honest. You can be clear about what you are doing and why. You can be trusted.”

That approach was especially important during the pandemic, when decisions were complex and emotions ran high. Bracht focused on explaining the district’s reasoning and, just as importantly, on honoring staff by giving them time to prepare before changes were implemented.

Recognition That Reflects a Community

At the MASA Awards Banquet, when Bracht’s name was announced as the 2026 Missouri Superintendent of the Year, he felt the weight of the moment. His heart raced. His mind turned quickly to the people who had shaped him, especially his family, and to the colleagues who share the work in Affton every day. “Very rarely does a superintendent get to sit, listen, and reflect while others talk about the district’s work,” he says. “This recognition is not about one person. It is about what we are doing together.” He hopes the award shines a light on Affton’s commitment to both its history and its future. “People do not want slogans. They want honesty, courage, and hope.” The district has served its community for more than a century. Bracht wants Missourians to see that long history as a foundation, not a finish line. “We are proud of our past,” he says. “At the same time, we are focused on the next great generation. Today’s students need to thrive just as much as those who came before them, and that requires us to stay sharp and keep improving.”

Hope for Public Education and Advice for Future Leaders

Despite well-known challenges, Bracht remains hopeful about the future of public education in Missouri. His optimism is rooted in the character of the people who choose



Dr. Bracht visiting with students in the Project Lead the Way class.

to serve in schools. “Teachers and staff do not quit on kids,” he says. “Whatever resources we are given, we will use them. That is simply who educators are.” For rising leaders who aspire to the superintendency, he offers several pieces of advice. First, he encourages them to learn from everyone around them, regardless of title or role. Every person in a district holds knowledge that can strengthen the system.

Second, he stresses the importance of authentic leadership. While it is wise to learn from great leaders, he believes communities respond best when they see their superintendent leading in a way that aligns with their true character.

Finally, he believes leaders must be willing to say, “I do not know yet,” while also reminding the community that the district has solved hard problems before and will do so again. “People do not want slogans,” he says. “They want honesty, courage, and hope.”

A Life Beyond the Office

Away from the central office, Bracht refuels through running and spending time with his wife and their dog, Graeson. Running is part fitness and part mental reset, an hour where everything else stops. The couple also enjoys traveling, including trips across Europe and adventures closer to home, such as snowmobiling in Yellowstone and touring the United States in a rented Sprinter van. Those experiences outside of school help sustain the energy, perspective, and balance needed for the work of leading a district.

As superintendent of the Affton School District and Missouri’s 2026 Superintendent of the Year, Dr. Travis Bracht embodies steady, student-centered leadership. His story is one of intentional growth, continuous improvement, and genuine hope for what public schools can accomplish when communities and educators pull together for the next generation. ■

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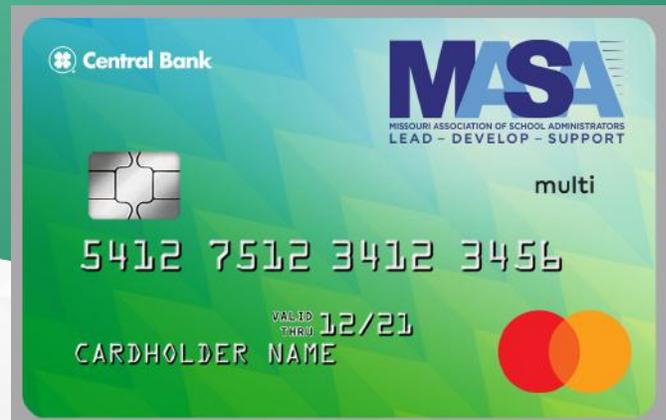
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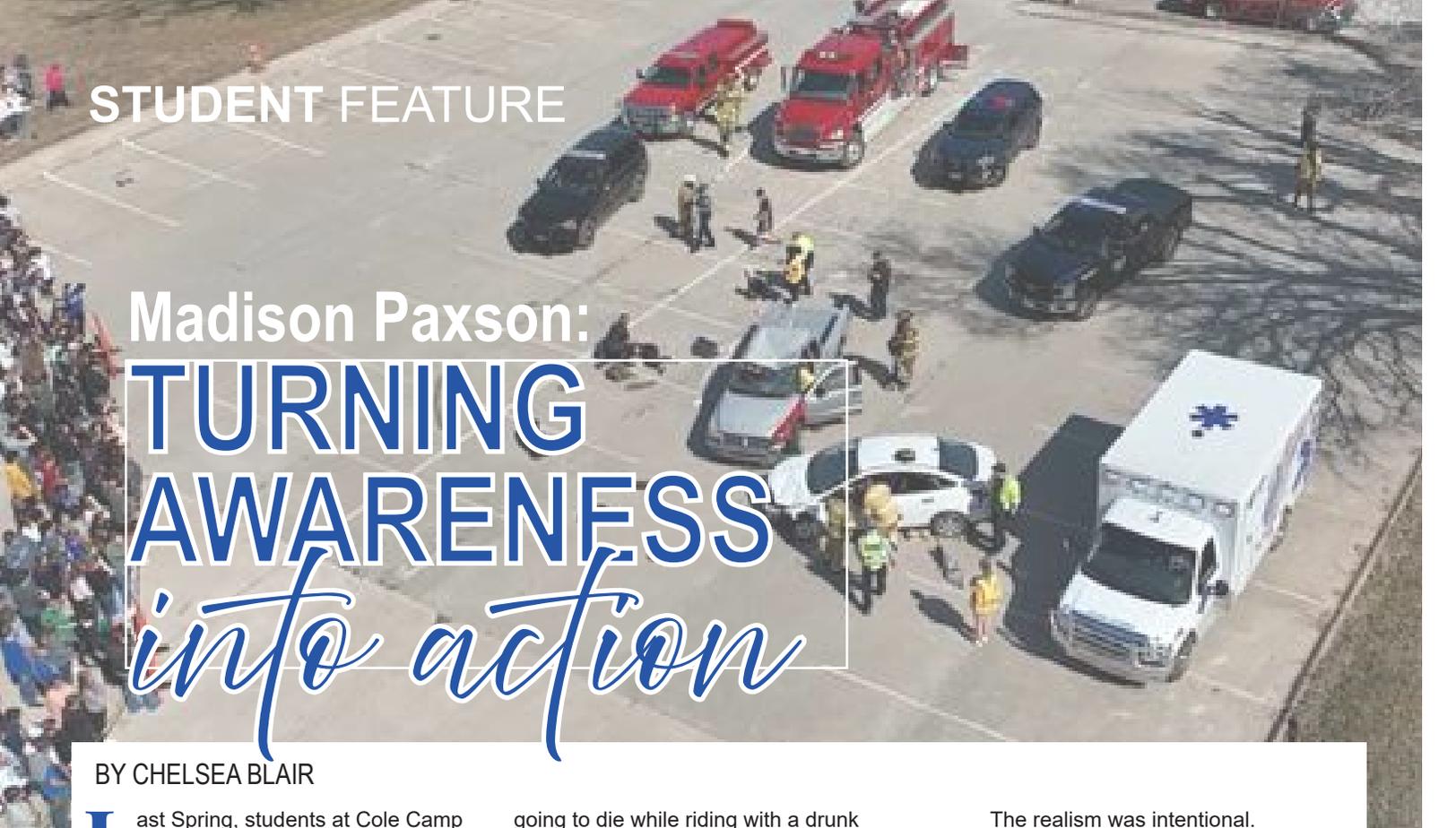


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Madison Paxson: TURNING AWARENESS *into action*

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

Last Spring, students at Cole Camp R-I High School stepped outside to a scene they will not soon forget. Crumpled vehicles stood frozen in a simulated crash. Emergency sirens pierced the air as first responders rushed into action. Classmates lay motionless on the pavement, some crying out, others eerily silent. What students were witnessing was not a routine drill planned by adults, but a powerful, student-led initiative designed to confront the realities of impaired driving. The mock crash was planned, coordinated, and led by Madison Paxson, a junior determined to make her peers pause before making a life-altering decision.

Madison organized the event through FCCLA (Family, Career and Community Leaders of America). What began as a STAR Event project quickly grew into a community-wide effort involving school administrators, staff, law enforcement, emergency responders, and dozens of volunteers. All were brought together by one student's vision and a willingness from her school and community to trust student leadership.

Personal Motivation

Madison's inspiration was deeply personal. One evening, she received a late-night text from a friend who feared they were

going to die while riding with a drunk driver. Though her friend survived, the experience left a lasting impression. "We're a rural school," Madison explained. "When students don't have a lot to do on the weekends, sometimes that's the choice they make. I wanted them to really see the consequences before getting behind the wheel." Rather than relying on statistics or lectures alone, Madison envisioned something immersive, an experience that would stay with students long after the school day ended.

From Idea to Impact

Turning that vision into reality required careful planning and coordination. Madison took the lead by partnering with her FCCLA advisor, Shanda Miller, Corporal AJ Silvey, Sedalia Police Department, and Fire Inspector Jamie Volk and securing support from school administrators, and Christina Hess, Superintendent. From there, the project expanded rapidly. Working alongside local experts, Madison coordinated more than 30 volunteers, with upward of 50 community members contributing on the day of the event. Firefighters, EMS personnel, law enforcement officers, dispatchers, the local health department, a funeral director, and student volunteers serving as makeup artists all played key roles.

"I wanted them to really see the consequences before getting behind the wheel."

The realism was intentional. Previously wrecked vehicles were used to stage the scene. Student actors portrayed injuries and fatalities. A live 911 call played over loudspeakers as first responders arrived. School counselors and additional support staff were on hand throughout the day to assist students who found the experience emotionally overwhelming. "It was treated as real from start to finish," Madison said. "I didn't even expect it to impact me the way it did."

A Community Effort

While Madison led the initiative, she is quick to credit the collective effort behind it. The project became a powerful example of what can happen when schools and communities rally around student leadership. "I had support from people I never imagined," she shared. "Administrators, teachers, students I'd never talked to before, community members. I've never seen anything like it."

The mock crash served a dual purpose. In addition to raising student awareness, it provided hands-on training for emergency responders, an opportunity rarely available in rural communities. More than 200 students witnessed the event, along with community members who attended.

Follow-up surveys revealed that the majority of students reported the experience significantly challenged their

thinking around impaired driving. Months later, Madison continues to hear from peers who vividly recall the scene and its message.

Leadership Through Resilience

After the event, Madison presented the project as part of FCCLA's STAR Events, earning recognition at the state level and an invitation to share her work nationally at a student expo in Orlando, Florida.

While she did not advance to national finals, Madison says the experience taught her resilience and perspective. "I learned that I can handle more than I thought," she reflected. "There were sacrifices, long hours, and moments where I had to bounce back, but it prepared me for the future more than anything else could." That growth, she says, came from accepting responsibility while learning to rely on others. She now recognizes that balance as essential to effective leadership.

Looking Ahead

As Madison prepares to graduate, her future plans reflect the impact her school and educators have had on her journey. She plans to attend Missouri State University to pursue a degree in family and consumer sciences education, with long-term aspirations of becoming a school administrator. "The staff here shaped me immensely," she said. "Seeing how they supported me through this project made me want to do the same for someone else someday."

Madison's story is a reminder of what is possible when students are empowered to lead and when schools are willing to trust, support, and invest in their ideas. Through courage, collaboration, and a willingness to act, one student transformed a personal concern into a meaningful lesson that continues to ripple through her school and community. ■



Madison Paxson, bottom center, with friends who volunteered.



Madison, pictured front center in red, posing with community volunteers.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLE CAMP R-1 HIGH SCHOOL

The Relentless Advocate

Honoring the Legacy of Gary Sharpe

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

With insights from Roger Kurtz and Dr. Chris Straub

When you talk with people who worked closely with Dr. Gary Sharpe, one word surfaces again and again: relentless. It is said with admiration, a hint of awe, and often a smile. Dr. Sharpe was not a man who wavered easily or waited for permission. He believed deeply in public education, believed Missouri's school leaders needed a strong collective voice, and believed that progress required persistence.

To better understand Dr. Sharpe's impact and the legacy he left behind, I spoke with two people who knew him well and worked alongside him for years, Roger Kurtz, MASA Associate Executive Director (2000-2007) and Executive Director (2007-2015), and Dr. Chris Straub, MASA Associate Executive Director (1997-2000), School Finance Consultant, and Former MASA Past President (1990-91). Their stories helped paint a portrait not only of MASA's first executive director, but of a leader whose influence still shapes the association today.

From classroom to Capitol

Dr. Sharpe's career in education began long before MASA had an executive office or a legislative platform. He earned a degree in mathematics from the University of Missouri and started his professional life as a teacher and coach. He later served as superintendent in the Philadelphia and New Bloomfield school districts.

In 1976, he was elected to the Missouri Legislature, where he served until 1984. Even then, his commitment to public education stood out. According to Straub, Dr. Sharpe became known for adding amendments to the state budget that increased funding for schools. "He took

a lot of pride in that," Straub said. "Some of his fellow legislators even got a little competitive about it. It became a game of who could do more for education."

After leaving the legislature, Dr. Sharpe ran for Secretary of State. Though he did not win the race, it expanded his statewide relationships and reinforced his understanding of how policy is shaped behind the scenes.

A turning point for MASA

By the late 1980s, MASA was largely volunteer-driven and operating as a branch of the Missouri State Teachers Association. Advocacy existed, but it lacked structure and full-time leadership. That changed in 1988, when MASA members voted to hire an executive director and establish a more independent identity. "At that point, we realized it would be pretty foolish not to have a lobbyist," Straub said. "And most of us already knew who that person was going to be."

Dr. Sharpe was hired that August 1988 and became MASA's first executive director, a role he would hold for nineteen years. The early days required everyone to do a little of everything. MASA operated out of a small annex, with a limited staff and an ambitious agenda. He brought focus and discipline immediately. "He was relentless," Kurtz said. "When Gary started on something, he stayed on it. In board meetings, he had every agenda item written out, every point he wanted to make. He was thorough and he did not budge easily."

Among the first major actions taken by Dr. Sharpe was the formation of the Missouri Council of School Administrators (MCSA). MCSA served as the umbrella organization for MASA and later, the Missouri Association of Elementary

Principals (MAESP). He acted as Executive Director for MASA, MAESP and MCSA.

Over the course of his 19 years as the executive director, Dr. Sharpe was involved in virtually all legislative issues related to education in Missouri, including education choice, the Foundation Formula, Public School Retirement System, the Hancock II Amendment, and so many others. Likewise, he was a conduit of information for such initiatives as No Child Left Behind and the Reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Improving America's Schools Act.

Building an advocacy force

From the beginning, Dr. Sharpe believed MASA had an important role to play in supporting advocacy for public education. He focused on helping school leaders stay informed, aligned, and prepared to speak for themselves. His approach emphasized clarity about the issues and active engagement from superintendents across the state.

One of the most visible ways he did that was through MASA's legislative bulletins. He wrote them himself, often late into Thursday nights, so they could be printed and mailed on Fridays. The goal was simple: make sure members understood what was happening at the Capitol and why it mattered. "When Gary wanted to make a point, he used all caps," Kurtz said with a laugh. "You could hear him through the paper."

The bulletins were direct and plainspoken, reflecting his belief that school leaders deserved unfiltered information. While legislators sometimes bristled at the tone, Dr. Sharpe viewed transparency



Dr. Sharpe sitting at his desk in the office off Amazonas in Jefferson City. Notice anything missing?

as essential. “He believed in being clear about where MASA stood,” Straub said. “Not confrontational for the sake of it, but clear. He wanted superintendents to know the facts so they could decide how to engage.”

Dr. Sharpe also understood that effective advocacy depends on participation. Drawing on his background in the legislature, he helped establish the Missouri School Administrators PAC, the predecessor to what is now Better Schools for Missouri. Early contributions were modest, but the intent was long-term: create a structure that encouraged superintendents to stay involved beyond a single vote or legislative session. “He wanted people to understand that advocacy doesn’t stop when session ends,” Straub said. “It’s ongoing, and it works best when leaders are informed and willing to speak up.”

A home for the work

Dr. Sharpe’s vision extended beyond legislation. He wanted MASA to have a permanent home and a space that reflected the professionalism of the work being done. He led the effort to plan, fund, and build MASA’s current headquarters, down to the design details. “He was very specific about everything,” Kurtz said. “Colors, layout, finishes. He planned that building carefully, and honestly, it has held up beautifully.”

The building solved practical problems, too. It created dedicated meeting space for the executive committee and allowed MASA to expand professional development offerings. The large downstairs meeting rooms were designed

from the start to be rented and generate revenue to support the organization. “We didn’t have excess funds back then,” Straub said. “Gary was very fiscally conservative. He knew exactly where every dollar was going.” Fundraising for the building was often a personal effort. Dr. Sharpe called former MASA presidents and made his expectations clear. “People didn’t contribute because they felt pressured,” Kurtz said. “They contributed because Gary made them believe in what we were building.”

A structure that gave everyone a voice

One of his most enduring contributions is MASA’s regional structure. The association’s eight regions ensure equal representation on the board, regardless of district size or geography. “Superintendents from small districts used to tell me how surprised they were,” Straub said. “They realized quickly that their voice carried just as much weight as anyone else’s.” That balance mattered, particularly in rural Missouri, where MASA’s advocacy often served as the primary representation for school leaders.

The man behind the mission

Despite his intensity, Dr. Sharpe was deeply personal in his relationships. He was known for long pauses on the phone as he gathered his thoughts, then delivering his point with precision. He sang at weddings. He had an encyclopedic memory for names and faces. He worked long hours and expected others to do the same. “It was a different time,” Kurtz said. “But no one ever doubted his commitment.”

Dr. Sharpe retired in July 2007. By then, MASA had grown into a respected, influential organization with a strong advocacy presence and a clear sense of purpose. His legacy is not just found in policy wins or buildings. It lives in MASA’s willingness to speak plainly, to organize intentionally, and to advocate relentlessly for Missouri’s public schools. Through the memories of those who knew him best, it is clear that the foundation he built remains as strong as ever. ■

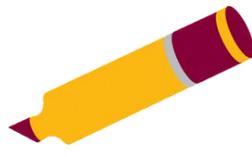


Missouri Council on School Administrators building where MASA and MAESP are housed in Jefferson City.



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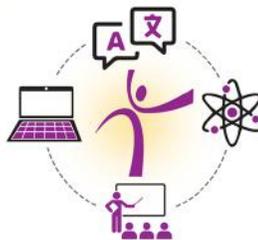
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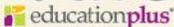
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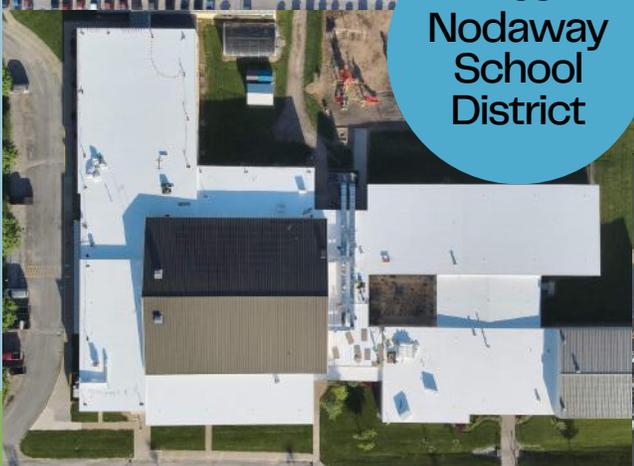
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