

# *The Missouri* **ADMINISTRATOR**

INAUGURAL ISSUE | FALL 2025

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE MISSOURI ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS



## **STRONGER TOGETHER**

Building a movement of  
leadership for Missouri's children

## **LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR TOMORROW**

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# Contents

FALL 2025 - INAUGURAL ISSUE

## Inside MASA

- 4** EDITOR'S NOTE  
BY CHELSEA BLAIR
- 6** DIRECTOR'S DESK  
**Stronger Together**  
Building a movement of leadership for Missouri's children  
BY DR. MARK PENNY
- 8** PRESIDENT'S LETTER  
**Laying the Groundwork for Tomorrow**  
BY JERRY GIRDNER
- 10** EVENT CALENDAR
- ## In Focus
- 12** DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT  
**Building Futures in Owensville**  
How a rural district is elevating CTE with innovation and impact  
BY CHELSEA BLAIR
- 16** LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT  
**Building a Culture of Aligned Impact that Sticks**  
BY DR. DEANNA ASHBY
- 20** STUDENT FEATURE  
**A Recipe for Compassion**  
A fourth grader's mission to feed classmates and inspire a community  
BY CHELSEA BLAIR
- 22** CRISIS CORNER  
**Growing Through the Storm**  
A superintendent's playbook for crisis, recovery, and resilience  
BY CHELSEA BLAIR

## Insights

- 26** MONEY MATTERS  
**Education, Funding, & the Future**  
BY DR. KYLE KRUSE
- 28** LEGISLATIVE BRIEF  
**Stronger Schools, Stronger Communities**  
BY SCOTT KIMBLE
- 30** LEGAL EDGE  
**Across the Aisle for Public Schools**  
BY DUANE MARTIN
- 32** WELLNESS WISDOM  
**Breaking the Stigma**  
A new era of student mental health
- 34** POLICY & PRACTICE  
**ADA Title II Compliance**  
What superintendent's need to know  
BY CHELSEA BLAIR
- 36** LEGACY LENS  
**The Long View**  
Leadership, planning, and service in public education  
BY DR. BERNARD DUBRAY
- 38** MEMBERSHIP UPDATE  
**Building Connection, Value, and Support**  
BY THE MASA TEAM



ON THE COVER: Dr. Penny and Mr. Girdner in Princeton's High School gym.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

### 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.

I can't help but smile as I write these words for the very first issue of *The Missouri Administrator*. What began as an idea has taken shape as a publication devoted entirely to telling your stories, the stories of Missouri's school leaders, our educators, and the students whose lives are changed by your work every day.



In these pages, you'll find a reflection of who we are: innovative, resilient, and deeply committed to the success of our schools and communities. From spotlighting districts that are breaking new ground, to celebrating student voices and highlighting transformative programs, our goal is simple: shine a light on the people and ideas that make Missouri education extraordinary.

This magazine belongs to you. It's a place where your successes are celebrated, your challenges are acknowledged, and your vision for the future is shared with colleagues across the state. My hope is that each issue leaves you inspired, connected, and reminded that you are part of something bigger, a community of leaders who wake up every day determined to make a difference.

Thank you for all you do, and for letting us be the ones to tell your story. Here's to a new tradition, and to the many issues yet to come.

*Chelsea Blair*

Editor, Missouri Administrator

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# *Stronger Together*

## Building a movement of leadership for Missouri's children

**D**ear Colleagues, As we step into a new chapter together, I am filled with gratitude, excitement, and an unwavering sense of purpose. This inaugural issue of *Missouri Administrator* is more than a magazine, it is a reflection of who we are as a community of leaders, learners, and advocates for Missouri's children.

Our work is not easy. Each day, you carry the weight of decisions that shape the lives of students, families, and communities. You balance the demands of academics, safety, innovation, and equity - often under intense scrutiny and in the face of challenges that seem to grow by the year. Yet time and again, Missouri's superintendents and administrators rise to the occasion with courage, creativity, and conviction.

At MASA, our mission is simple but profound: to stand with you, to equip you, and to amplify your voice. This magazine is one more way we seek to do just that. Within these pages, you will find stories that celebrate innovation, spotlight solutions, and share the lived experiences of colleagues who understand what it means to walk in your shoes.

We are building something together, not just an organization, but a movement of leaders committed to the success of every child in Missouri. And as we look ahead to the future, I am convinced of this truth: our greatest strength is not found in any one individual, but in the collective wisdom, resilience, and faithfulness of this community.

Thank you for the privilege of serving alongside you. Thank you for your

**“Our greatest strength is not found in any one individual, but in the collective wisdom, resilience, and faithfulness of this community.”**

steadfast leadership in times of change. And thank you for reminding me daily that the future of Missouri's children is bright because of the leaders who champion them.

This is our beginning. Let us move forward with boldness, vision, and a renewed commitment to lead with both head and heart.

With deep respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark S. Penning". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Executive Director  
Missouri Association of School Administrators

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# *Laying the Groundwork for Tomorrow*

BY JERRY GIRDNER

**A** new school year brings both anticipation and reflection. For superintendents, it is a reminder that decisions carry weight, relationships matter, and the success of our students is shared by entire communities.

Across Missouri, rural, suburban, and urban leaders face different challenges, yet all share a common purpose. The work requires perseverance, creativity, and most importantly, collaboration. One of our greatest strengths is the ability to lean on colleagues and on MASA. Together, we form a network of support that strengthens each leader and strengthens public education.

### **Advocacy & the Formula**

Advocacy is not about fighting others but working with legislators and community leaders to ensure strong schools in every community. This year, Missouri begins rewriting its school funding formula for the first time since 2005.

Updating multipliers, shifting from attendance to enrollment counts, and reconsidering hold harmless provisions will affect districts differently. Nearly half of

Missouri districts currently receive funds through hold harmless. As changes unfold, MASA will help ensure superintendents understand the details and can explain them locally while contributing meaningfully statewide.

### **Investing in Growth**

Advocacy sets direction externally, but professional learning builds strength internally. MASA is committed to creating opportunities for superintendents to deepen their knowledge in areas such as finance and operations—the systems that keep schools running smoothly. Leaders who develop confidence in these areas are better prepared to guide districts through complexity and change.

### **Leadership in Transition**

This year also marks a transition for MASA. Dr. Doug Hayter, who guided the association with wisdom and integrity since 2016, is deeply appreciated for his service. On July 1, we welcomed Dr. Mark Penny as Executive Director. A past MASA President, Dr. Penny brings energy, vision, and a hands-on leadership style

that reflects MASA's mission to invest in leadership and member support.

### **Looking Ahead**

The strength of MASA is found not only in programs, but in people. By investing in one another, MASA members build stronger districts, stronger leadership, and stronger schools for Missouri's children.

The work ahead is significant with funding changes, rising expectations, and the daily responsibilities of leading schools, but the future is bright. There has never been a more important time to serve as a superintendent, and never a more important time for MASA to stand at the center of growth and advocacy. Together, we are laying the groundwork for tomorrow.

### **Princeton R-V Fun Facts**

**Location:** 13 miles south of the Iowa line

**Students:** 314, K–12

**Size:** Covers 309+ sq. miles, among the largest in Missouri

**Innovation:** All 6 bus routes run on electric school buses

**Celebrity:** Birthplace of Calamity Jane

**County:** 2nd-least populous in MO

**Unique Feature:** Indoor pool & gym for school and community use

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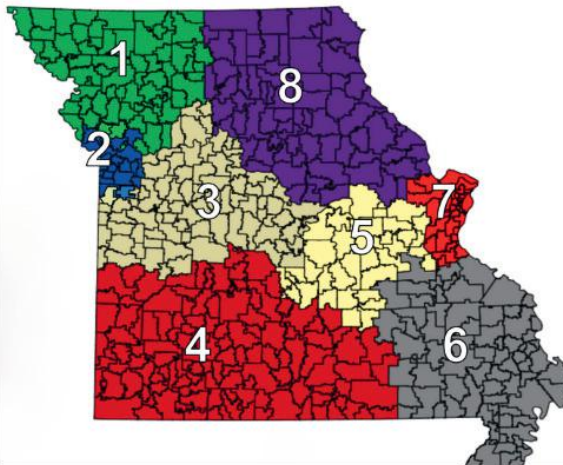
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# EVENT CALENDAR

## OCTOBER

- 01 - Southeast Regional Meeting, Cape Girardeau
- 08 - West Central Regional Meeting, Warrensburg
- 08 - GKC Regional Meeting, Kansas City
- 09 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 10 - Emeritus Reunion, Jefferson City
- 13 - MASA Office Closed - Columbus Day
- 14-15 - Aspiring Superintendent Cohort, Jefferson City
- 17 - Greater STL Regional Meeting, St. Louis
- 21 - South Central Regional Meeting, St. James
- 23-25 - MSBA Fall Conference, Crown Center, Kansas City
- 24 - MASA Business Meeting, Crown Center, Kansas City
- 29 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Macon

## NOVEMBER

- 04-05 - MASA Workshop: Evaluating the Budget, Jefferson City
- 05 - Southeast Regional Meeting, Poplar Bluff
- 06-07 - Missouri Superintendent Academy, Jefferson City
- 07 - MASA Workshop: Understanding Health Insurance, Jefferson City
- 11 - MASA Office Closed - Veterans Day
- 11 - South Central Regional Meeting, St. James
- 12 - GKC Regional Meeting, Kansas City
- 13 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 19 - West Central Regional Meeting, Warrensburg
- 19 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Macon
- 20-21 - MASA Executive Committee Meeting, Jefferson City
- 21 - Southwest Regional Meeting, Springfield
- 21 - Greater STL Regional Meeting, St. Louis
- 24-28 - MASA Office Closed, Thanksgiving Break

## DECEMBER

- 03 - Southeast Regional Meeting, Farmington
- 08 - Women in Leadership Cohort, Jefferson City
- 09 - MASA Workshop: Student Transportation Success, Jefferson City
- 11 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 17 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Macon
- 22-31 - MASA Office Closed, Christmas Break

## JANUARY

- 01-02 - MASA Office Closed, New Years
- 08 - Northwest Regional Meeting, St. Joseph
- 14 - Greater KC Regional Meeting, Kansas City
- 19 - MASA Office Closed - Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
- 21 - West Central Regional Meeting, Warrensburg
- 23 - Greater STL Regional Meeting, St. Louis
- 28 - Northeast Regional Meeting, Jefferson City
- 28 - South Central Regional Meeting, Jefferson City
- 30 - MASA Executive Committee & Region Presidents Meeting, Lake Ozark



**MORE DETAILS ONLINE**



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*Together, let's lead with courage.*



# Building Futures in Owensville

## How A Rural District is Elevating Career and Technology Education with Innovation and Impact

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

**A**t Owensville High School, Career and Technical Education (CTE) isn't just about course offerings. It's about creating real opportunity for students in a rural community who deserve access to the same pathways as their peers in larger districts.

Years ago, Gasconade County R-II School District laid the foundation with early Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) initiatives that introduced students to tools like 3D printers and hands-on design projects. One student prototype, a shatterproof display case, was so effective it was picked up by a company that now produces and installs the cases in stores around the world.

But the real transformation began post-COVID, when Superintendent Dr. Hardy and her team noticed something important. Students were missing foundational skills needed to succeed in trade-based courses and careers. In response, the district developed a "Foundations of Skilled Technical Sciences" course. This early-level class now gives freshmen and sophomores the chance to learn essential skills like reading a tape measure, operating entry-level machinery, understanding ladder safety, and using basic tools properly.

"Sometimes kids go into those upper-level junior and senior classes, and you have to stop and go back to the basics," said Dr. Hardy. "We wanted to

equip them with those skills up front so they can hit the ground running."

The result is a growing program that includes multiple career pathways, including auto tech, screen printing, woodworking, and a "Pathways to Paraprofessionals" program that helps students interested in education graduate ready to step into paraprofessional roles.

Dr. Hardy shared stories of students whose lives have already been changed by these programs. One recent graduate approached his former teacher at a fall football game to say thank you. He'd landed a full-time job with a local screen-printing company, complete with benefits, insurance, and retirement. "That's why we give students



*Auto Tech*



Students work on a project in the screen printing class.

# Screen Printing

these experiences,” said Hardy. “It’s about making sure they are successful once they leave our school.”

Another student is currently working at a local auto shop while still enrolled in high school, building his resume and preparing for post-secondary certification at Linn State Tech. These real-world connections are no accident. Owensville is actively aligning its programs to the workforce and has secured DESE (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) grants to help fund equipment upgrades in both auto tech and screen printing.

With those grant dollars, the school is purchasing a new dynamometer and dyno room for safer, more advanced diagnostics in the auto tech lab. For screen printing, students will soon be using a DTF (direct-to-film) printer, which allows for high-quality, high-

volume production that reflects what students will encounter in the field.

“We actually started both of those programs using used and donated equipment,” said Hardy. “There’s always a way to get started. Don’t wait for the perfect moment. Look for grants, ask for help, think outside the box, and just take the first step.”

In the future, Owensville hopes to evolve its woodworking pathway into a full construction trades program, recognizing the need for skilled laborers as the current workforce continues to age out. The district is also exploring dual credit options with East Central College, hoping to offer college credit beginning in spring 2026.

When asked what advice she would give to other rural districts looking to expand CTE, Dr. Hardy emphasized knowing your community. “Take the pulse. See

where your kids are going after graduation and what they really need. If we’re really here for the kids, then we have to give them what they need to be successful.”

Owensville High School is proving that big things can happen in small towns. With a blend of heart, hustle, and hands-on learning, they’re not just preparing students for the future. They’re building it. ■



Dr. Jeri Hardy is the superintendent for Gasconade County R-II in Owensville, MO.  
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# Building a Culture of Aligned Impact that Sticks

BY DR. DEANNA ASHBY

In today's fast-moving K-12 landscape, strategic improvement of culture cannot be a project for another day, but instead, it must be woven into daily work. The culture is either helping or hindering that work every single day. "Aligned impact" is about more than test scores and graduation rates. It is about building a district where every employee, from the bus driver to superintendent, knows their role, feels supported, and sees how their work contributes to student success. Creating this culture is not a mystery; it is a choice, and it is built with intentionality.

A recent Gallup poll reported, "Only two in 10 senior leaders say that recognition is a major strategic priority at their organization" (Gallup, 2023). This is a leadership gap educators cannot afford if we want to keep great people. Recognition is not something "nice to have" but a "must have."

### Why Change is Hard & Three Steps to Make it Easier

If you have ever tried to introduce a new process, such as a new bell schedule, you know change resistance is real. People do not resist change because they are stubborn; they resist change because they are

human. Change disrupts comfort, challenges habits, and often triggers fear of failure.

As a leader you must help your team see themselves as a vital part of the change. Explain why the change is needed before initiating the change itself. Share stories of success from peers. Start with small wins with changes so stakeholders build confidence before tackling bigger shifts.

### Listen to Remove Barriers

One of the fastest ways to build trust and alignment is to "round" with staff and act on the feedback gained from these rounding meetings.

Leader Rounding is a structured, intentional way to receive and implement changes. Set aside time each week to meet with a few employees across different roles.

### Ask four core questions:

1. What is working well?
2. What are the barriers getting in the way of your work?
3. Who has been especially helpful to you lately?
4. As a leader, how can I be helpful to you?

Supt. Matt Pearce of Republic School District put it this way: *"I firmly believe in the power*

*of rounding with all employees face-to-face. To me, picking up rounding after 25 years in education has made such a huge difference for culture, staff, and transparency."*

Document the feedback, act on it quickly, and circle back to share progress. This kind of listening helps address one of the most critical intrinsic motivators Gallup highlights which notes that, when employees feel connected to their co-workers and assist in finding meaning in their work, change will be effectively employed.

### Rethinking New Employee Onboarding

Gone are the days when onboarding meant handing a new hire a handbook and pointing them toward the coffee maker. The districts winning the retention game treat Day 1 (and Day 30, and Day 90) as relationship-building opportunities.

### Some best practices from school and district leaders:

- Role-specific job shadowing so employees see the job in action before they start.
- Structured pre-start supports—a welcome email, a buddy system, or even a short video from the superintendent



- Mentoring for all roles—not just teachers. This means pairing custodians, bus drivers, or special education assistants with experienced colleagues.

The 30/90-Day Check-In is a retention secret weapon. Early check-ins are like preventive maintenance for your workforce. Within 30 days, you can catch issues while they're small: unclear expectations, lack of resources, or feeling disconnected. By 90 days, you can celebrate wins, assess training needs, and deepen relationships.

These check-ins also help tackle the recognition gap. Gallup reports, *“One in four employees in Gallup’s database strongly agree that they have received recognition or praise for doing good work in the last week.”* That is only 25% of the workforce! If your new hires are hearing meaningful feedback in those early days, you are already ahead of the curve.

### Recognizing and Re-Recruiting Your Team

Recruitment does not end when the contract is signed. The best leaders “re-recruit” their people regularly. That means:

- Recognizing great work in staff meetings and newsletters that align to the district’s core values.
- Thanking people for going above and beyond.
- Checking in about their career goals and showing a path forward.
- Using the power of the pen by writing a thank you note that is timely, specific, and authentic.

Recognition is not just a feel-good gesture; it is directly tied to performance. Gallup’s research shows that intrinsic factors like enjoying work, feeling connected to co-workers, and finding meaning and purpose in the job boost productivity. If you are recognizing people in ways that foster connections, you are building a stronger, more aligned culture.

### Your Next Steps

If you want to start building a culture for aligned impact tomorrow, try this:

1. Block 60 minutes this week to do leader rounding with three employees you do not normally interact with.
2. Review your onboarding process and identify one or

- two improvements you can make before the next hire
3. Recognize three employees once a week.

These small steps, done consistently, create the momentum you need to make strategic improvement a part of daily life in your school or district.

**Bottom line:** A culture of aligned impact does not just happen. It is built through intentional leadership, deep listening, early and ongoing support, and recognition that every role matters. District and school leaders valuing every role, collecting and using data, and modeling expected behavior is powerful. When we get this right, we do not just fill vacancies, we keep the incredible people who make a difference in the life of students every day. ■



Dr. Deanna Ashby, a retired superintendent, serves as Senior Executive of Partner Development with Studer Education in Hanson, Ky. Email: [dashby@studereducation.com](mailto:dashby@studereducation.com)

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# a recipe for Compassion

A fourth grader's mission to feed classmates and inspire a community

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

**A**t just nine years old, Ruby Mills isn't just making cookies, she's making change. The Central R-III fourth grader has spent the past two summers fundraising for her classmates, turning sweet treats and heartfelt ideas into tangible help for students in need. What began as a simple lemonade stand in her front yard has now become a full-blown mission fueled by compassion, cookies, and a can-do spirit that rivals most adults.

In 2023, Ruby raised \$1,265 through lemonade sales to help pay off her school's negative lunch balances. This year, she pivoted to baking cookies, chocolate chip and M&M chocolate chip, to be exact, with help from her mom. Her goal? Support the district's Backpack Program, which provides meals to students on weekends when school lunches aren't available.

"I just felt really bad for people when they don't have enough food to feed their families," Ruby shared. "That's really, really sad. So I want people to have food."

With that simple, selfless desire, Ruby raised **over \$2,000**, a staggering number, especially compared to typical donation events. As Superintendent Dr. Zech Payne noted, "We put on big events like Cover the Cruiser that involve entire communities and still raise just a little more than what Ruby did on her own. That's how special this is."

Principal Ryan Ruble agrees. "She is a quiet leader who leads by example. Ruby walks with a maturity and confidence that's rare. She embodies everything we try to teach, especially compassion."

Ruby's cookie fundraiser didn't just raise money; it raised awareness. Her Facebook video (created with help from her mom) inspired friends, families, and even strangers to donate. Her idea sparked conversations and planted seeds for future student-led acts of service. "Most students, even older ones, don't think like this," Dr. Payne said. "Ruby does."

When asked what advice she'd give to other students who want to help, Ruby didn't hesitate: "Start by thinking what you want to raise money for, and what you want to do to help. Then make a video and send it to all your friends and family."

Although her family's busy fall schedule has paused cookie production for now, Ruby is already planning a holiday comeback, "Maybe a Christmas platter!" she said with a smile. Muffins might even make the menu next year.

As for what the future holds? Ruby says she wants to be a teacher or a marine biologist. But whatever path she chooses, there's no doubt she'll be making waves and probably baking cookies along the way.

Ruby Mills, we're in awe of you. You remind us what one kind, determined heart can do. ■

If you'd like to join Ruby in supporting the Central Snack Initiative Backpack Program, you can mail or drop off donations at:

Central Administration Office  
200 High Street  
Park Hills, MO 63601  
ATTN: Central Backpack Program



Ruby proudly holds her donation check for the CSI Backpack Program with Dr. Zech Payne, Superintendent (L), and Assistant Superintendent Lori England (R).



P.E. Teacher Andrea Huff (L) enjoyed supporting the cause by purchasing Ruby's cookies.

# GROWING *through* THE STORM

## A Superintendent's Playbook for Crisis, Recovery, & Resilience

BY CHELSEA BLAIR

**W**hen an EF-2 tornado struck the Perry County School District 32 campus just before midnight on March 14, 2025, it wasn't just buildings that were shaken. Every student, staff member, and leader found themselves in uncharted territory. But by sunrise the next morning, Superintendent Dr. Fara Jones had a plan in motion.

"We had damage at my home too, but I just needed to get to campus," she recalled. What she and her husband found confirmed her fears, the high school was deemed unsafe to enter. But by the following weekend, her administrative team had already developed and launched a full-scale recovery operation. What they accomplished was nothing short of remarkable.

### **A Plan With No Blueprint**

Perryville's high school serves approximately **700 students**, and suddenly, none of them had a building. "We didn't have a plan for what to do after a building is destroyed," Dr. Jones admitted. "Most schools don't. We prepare for lockdowns, drills, safe rooms, but not what happens if those rooms are gone."

So her team built one from scratch. They restructured the entire district, reallocating space across buildings, converting central office space back into classrooms, even relocating administrators off-site to make room. "Our elementary teachers gave up their classrooms so high school teachers could come in and continue instruction. Art teachers went on carts. Staff stood up and said, 'Let's get

started.' We evacuated a building in a day," she said.

### **The Heart of the Response: Students First**

Throughout the crisis, one priority stayed crystal clear: students must stay together and finish the year in person.

"After COVID, we knew the connection just isn't the same online. The quality of instruction isn't the same. Being in person is where the magic happens," she said.

Despite the disruption, students responded with grace and even optimism. "They said it felt like college, going to different buildings for each class," Dr. Jones laughed. "We were worried, but they rolled with it."

## Lessons in Leadership

The effort required full-scale collaboration with administrators, directors, transportation, IT, food services, even city partners. Because of significant damage of the maintenance facility, they were crippled and couldn't handle emergency clean-up efforts. "We had a good team, but we realized we couldn't do it alone. We weren't experts in construction or disaster recovery. So we reached out to those who were."

That humility was key. "Leaders put a lot of pressure on themselves to know everything. But sometimes the strongest thing you can do is say, 'I don't know, but I'll find someone who does,'" she said.



Sections of the maintenance and IT facility collapsed into work areas, crushing equipment and vehicles under twisted metal and debris.



The board meeting room in the old high school was left uninhabitable after the tornado, with shattered windows, broken glass, and significant water damage throughout the space.



The high school experienced severe damage to the roof and wall, exposing classrooms and leaving piles of brick and debris scattered across the grounds.



Superintendent Dr. Fara Jones (center, in blue) joined district leaders and board of education members on-site to review progress and ensure the temporary school would be ready for students.



As recovery stretched into summer, Perryville brought in temporary learning structures to give high schoolers their own space for the new year. “Having seniors and fifth graders in the same hallway just wasn’t going to work long-term,” she joked. But behind the humor was relentless strategic effort and a deep love for her students and staff.

### Three Takeaways for Leaders

#### 1. Be Prepared

“Most schools have great emergency response plans. But ask yourself, if your buildings were suddenly gone, what would you do next? Write that plan now.”

#### 2. Build the Right Team.

“Surround yourself with people who are creative, selfless, and ready to lead in chaos. Then trust them.”

#### 3. Ask for Help.

“You won’t know everything. You don’t have to. Reach beyond your inner circle and tap into the expertise around you.”

Dr. Jones’s leadership hasn’t gone unnoticed. A 25-year veteran Missouri administrator, she missed walking across the MASA stage to receive her service award because she was managing the fallout of a tornado. “I’ve helped coordinate those awards for years,” she laughed, “and the year it’s mine, I’m leading recovery.”

Still, she wouldn’t change a thing.

“The storm was hard. But what it revealed about our staff, our students, and our community? That was extraordinary.” ■

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“ We can rebuild buildings. But what we gained in resilience, there’s no blueprint for that.”



Dr. Fara Jones is the superintendent for Perry County School District 32 in Perryville, MO.  
Email: [fjones@pcsd32.com](mailto:fjones@pcsd32.com)



An aerial view shows the large temporary school facility that now houses 22 classrooms and common areas for students. The smaller structure on the left, one of four, houses a variety of classrooms and administrative offices.



Construction crews worked quickly inside the temporary structure, building classrooms to replace spaces lost in the storm.



Students and teachers adapted to their new learning spaces, bringing energy and focus back into the classroom.



The temporary building buzzed with activity as students filled the new hallways on the first days back in session.

# Education, Funding, & the Future



BY DR. KYLE KRUSE

**T**hese are interesting times for Missouri school finance. Over the last five years, school districts in Missouri have had unprecedented access to covid-era federal funds, and remarkable flexibility in how those funds could be used. Times have changed however, and things are now returning to a more “normal” pattern. Going forward, there will be the continual (and normal) tension between state revenues and the budget requests from state agencies.

## Update on State Revenues

There is a daily report that compares current state general revenue to what was received in the prior year. By watching that report, we can gain some insight into the state of the economy. During July and August, revenues fluctuated generally between -2% and +2% compared to the prior year. As of Sept. 4, 2025, revenues are approximately 6% ahead of the prior year. This is not a huge gain, but it is encouraging to see revenues ahead of last year.

## The Good News

The good news for school funding is that the legislature approved, and Governor Kehoe signed, a budget for 2025-2026 that includes full funding for the foundation formula as well as full funding for transportation.

## The Bad News

The bad news is that the state of Missouri is gradually using up the covid-era budget surplus, and general revenues are still relatively flat. As we move into the future, the funding required to sustain the foundation formula will continue to increase, and it may be a challenge for general revenue to keep up.

## Having Perspective

As we return to some version of “normalcy”, remember that schools and superintendents have faced these challenges before, and will undoubtedly face them again. There have been times when formulas were not fully funded. There have been times when formulas were fully funded, or were even funded above the

level of “full” (1990s). There have been times when transportation was underfunded (for almost three decades), and times when transportation was fully funded (only in recent years.) Remember that whether it’s a time of plenty or a time of austerity, schools and superintendents have always worked to make sure students receive the best education possible.

## Being Pragmatic

As a school superintendent or financial officer, it’s important to be as pragmatic as possible. District finances must be carefully monitored. If there is deficit spending, it must be short-term and there must be a plan to return to a balanced budget. District reserves need to be maintained at an appropriate level. If it becomes necessary to reduce expenditures, do so in a way that is careful and well-reasoned, but also make sure the cuts are sufficient to address the problem. If a new program is proposed, make sure there are revenues to support the program. And above all, check your

district's financials regularly. If the actual revenues or expenditures are deviating from what was budgeted, work to understand why and take appropriate action.

### Communicating Often and Communicating Well

As financial decisions (or any significant decisions) are made, it's important to communicate what is happening and why. Too often, though, school leaders may not be communicating often enough, and they also may not be communicating well enough.

For a communication to be effective, it has to be relayed often. That means sharing it on multiple occasions, to multiple audiences, and giving those audiences an opportunity to participate in the conversation. The audience needs a chance to ask questions and gain clarity

for communication to truly be effective.

Communicating well means that the information must be shared in a way that is understandable and clear. As a school leader, it's easy to forget that our audience has very little background in school finance or operations, and almost no knowledge of the acronyms that permeate our work. To communicate well, a school leader will need to provide background, context, and clear explanation. Essentially, the school leader needs to teach the audience, check for comprehension, and ensure understanding.

### Why We Do What We Do

In closing, please be reminded. What you do is important. The superintendent of schools is the one person with the most ability (and responsibility) to

make a positive impact on the future. What we do for students can change the course of their lives. Those students need their teachers and their schools, and they deserve our very best. You make an impact. What you do **MATTERS.** ■



Dr. Kyle Kruse is a retired superintendent and currently serves as the Deputy Commissioner of Financial and Administrative Services for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

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# *Stronger Schools, Stronger Communities*

Why superintendent advocacy shapes Missouri's future

BY SCOTT KIMBLE

I was lying in a hospital bed (waiting for wrist surgery) when I realized a piece of legislation that had recently passed in the Missouri Legislature (and was sitting on the Governor's desk for signature) would seriously harm a school district that was likely unaware of the bill. You see, the bill that had passed was tailored to one specific county. The school districts that sat primarily in the affected county were aware of the bill's harm. However, another district which had just a small portion of their district located in said county was likely unaware. I called the superintendent to ask if they had been made aware of the bill and its negative consequences for their district. Unfortunately, the superintendent was not aware. That is when I urged them to reach out to their state senator. They did, and the issue quickly rose to the Governor's attention. Days later, the Governor vetoed the bill.

That moment has stayed with me, not just because of the unusual setting, but because it underscored how vital it is for superintendents to stay engaged in the legislative process. In this case, I was tracking the bill as part of my role with MASA. But what if I had not made that call? What if the superintendent had not taken action? The outcome could have been very different.

As superintendents, legislative awareness and advocacy are not "extras" to fit in when we have time. They are central to our responsibility to protect students, staff, and communities. The choices made in Jefferson City ripple into every classroom, every budget, and every program. Staying informed is not just prudent. It is essential leadership.

Schools are the heartbeat of Missouri's communities. They are more than classrooms and textbooks. They are where

traditions are carried forward, where neighbors gather, and where pride takes root. Friday night football games, school musicals, service projects – these events unify communities across generations. When legislation strengthens schools, it strengthens entire communities. When schools are weakened, the damage is felt far beyond the school walls.

Parents and teachers rightly share their perspectives, but superintendents carry a unique vantage point. Superintendents see the direct consequences of state policy on local classrooms. Legislators often do not have direct experience in education. They rely on you to explain what their decisions will mean in practice. If you do not share that insight, critical decisions risk being made without the voice of those who understand the stakes most clearly.

Engagement in the legislative

process takes many forms. Sometimes it is testifying in hearings or responding to fiscal notes. Sometimes it is meeting with lawmakers in Jefferson City. Other times it is as simple as inviting a legislator to visit a classroom. Those firsthand experiences can shape policymaking in ways no white paper ever could.

Another important way to engage is by supporting Better Schools for Missouri, a political action committee dedicated to electing candidates who value public education. By contributing to this effort, we help ensure that leaders who share our commitment to strong schools are in positions to make key decisions. These contributions are not just financial. They are investments in Missouri's future.

Advocacy is not an add-on to the job. It is a natural extension of what it means to serve. Legislative decisions determine what resources are available, how success is measured, and what kind of environment our schools must operate in. When you speak up, you do more than influence policy. You protect the heart of our communities.

Stronger schools build stronger communities. Stronger communities build a stronger Missouri. And sometimes it all begins with one phone call. ■



Scott Kimble is the Director of Legislative Advocacy for MASA. Email: [Scott.Kimble@mcsa.org](mailto:Scott.Kimble@mcsa.org).

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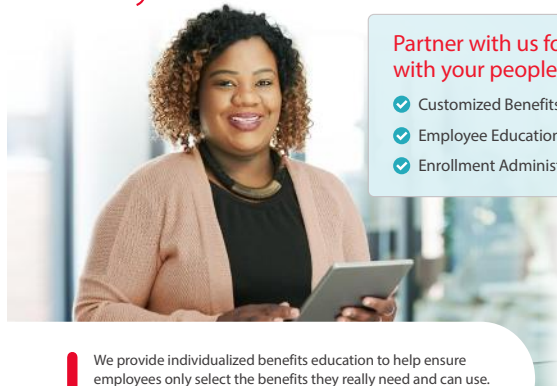
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# ACROSS THE AISLE For Public Schools

BY DUANE MARTIN

**O**n July 7, I filed an initiative petition with the Missouri Secretary of State seeking a constitutional amendment to ensure that taxpayer funds dedicated to public education cannot be diverted to private schools. The petition's goal is simple yet critical: to safeguard the use of public funds for Missouri's public schools, which are open to every child in our state.

Not long after the filing, Across the Aisle for Missouri Public Schools ("AAMPS") was formed as a bipartisan coalition committed to protecting public education in Missouri. AAMPS brings together diverse perspectives in service of a shared goal: preserving taxpayer funds for Missouri's public schools. It will support the initiative petition and to give voice to the thousands of Missourians who believe taxpayer dollars should remain in

public schools. The organization represents parents, educators, and community leaders who understand the vital role that public schools play in serving all children, regardless of background or circumstance.

Part of what drove me to file the petition was that Missouri consistently ranks near the bottom nationally in state support for public education. At the same time, our state leaders have advanced programs that divert public dollars away from local school districts – this is wrong. Every dollar shifted away from public education limits the ability of our schools to provide strong teachers, modern classrooms, and essential resources for the students they serve.

AAMPS is committed to ensuring that Missouri's public funds continue to strengthen Missouri's public schools. We are working to pass this constitutional amendment so that all children

in our state - urban, suburban, and rural alike - have access to fully funded, high-quality public education.

If you share this commitment, we invite you to get involved. To learn more, ask questions, or support the initiative petition, please contact Duane Martin at [dmartin@aamps.us](mailto:dmartin@aamps.us) or Jacque Cowherd at [jcowherd@aamps.us](mailto:jcowherd@aamps.us). Together, we can protect Missouri's public schools and the children they serve. ■



Duane Martin is an attorney with EdCounsel. He is deeply committed to public service and the public education community.



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# *Breaking the Stigma*

## A New Era of Student Mental Health

**M**ental health challenges among students are at an all-time high, yet many families do not seek the support they need due to stigma or fear. When students are mentally well, they are better able to concentrate, achieve higher test scores, and contribute to a healthier, more successful school environment.

Student 365 is a comprehensive mental health program designed to address this critical need by providing students, parents, and staff with immediate access to care—at no cost to the school district. The program includes both virtual and in-person therapy options, ensuring flexibility to meet a wide range of needs.

### Key Program Features:

- Up to 8 therapy sessions per concern every 12 months with licensed clinicians, psychologists, or psychiatrists (virtual or in-person).
- 12 additional pediatric behavioral therapy sessions (ages 18 months–17 years), including parental and youth coaching along with medication management from psychiatrists.
- 24/7 access to licensed clinicians through an “In-the-Moment Support” line—for crises such as suicidal ideation, school anxiety, and more.
- Parental support: 8 standalone therapy sessions PER AREA OF NEED for parents and staff coping with stressors like job loss, divorce, or depression - Students don't have to need therapy for parents to get help which will reduce household stress.

- Seamless care transition: We assist students in connecting with school counselors or other providers through their insurance after therapy ends.
- Quarterly data reports, including engagement trends, grade levels, areas of need, resolution outcomes, and more.
- Life Assist program for staff and parents including resources for legal (free lawyer calls), dependent care, financial, and more.
- Implementation & Funding:
- Allocated Funds (Not grants) are going to be released through designated Student Well Being Money from the Treasury to the State in the next 30-60 days. The ask upfront is for three years of funding, with ongoing renewal efforts for continued support for years four and beyond.
- Implementation can begin within 45–60 days, and includes customizable educational materials for the school website, Posters, other social media, and email outreach.

The next step is to acknowledge that you are interested in setting up a 30-45 minute virtual meeting to present the program to your district. Feel free to invite as many key personnel to the meeting to learn how Student 365 is a game changer for our K-12 students, parents and staff. ■

For more information, contact Jay Higgins at **573-690-7022** or email [jhiggins@acrisure.com](mailto:jhiggins@acrisure.com).



# Unlocking Mental Well-Being for K-12 Students

## Meet Student 365

When life throws curveballs, students need access to immediate and confidential support.

Recent statistics reveal a critical state of student mental health and underscore the urgent need for accessible and effective mental health support for our youth. Call A Doctor Plus, in partnership with National Telehealth Solutions, provides Student 365, a comprehensive virtual counseling program designed to help students, their parents and potentially staff navigate challenges and thrive.

## Critical State of Student Mental Health



39.7% of students experience persistent sadness or hopelessness



50% of all lifetime mental health conditions begin by age 14



20.4% seriously consider suicide

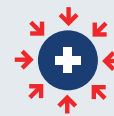


9.5% have attempted suicide

## Student 365 is designed to



Increase student engagement with mental health support



Provide seamless care for diverse mental health needs



Improve the health and well-being of young people



Mitigate risks and support school communities



Jay Higgins, Partner  
573-690-7022  
jhiggins@acrisure.com

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# ADA TITLE II COMPLIANCE

What Superintendents Need to Know



BY CHELSEA BLAIR

**S**uperintendents carry many responsibilities - but few are as urgent, or as easily overlooked, as ensuring that district communications are fully accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

## Why This Matters Now

The U.S. Department of Justice has issued updated rules requiring all digital communications - including district websites, online portals, and digital documents - to meet accessibility standards by the respective deadlines:

- **April 24, 2026** - for districts serving a population over 50,000
- **April 26, 2027** - for districts serving populations under 50,000 (or if the district is a special district government)

These dates may seem distant, but the work involved is significant. Getting ahead of the curve now will protect your district and serve your community.

## What “Accessible” Means

ADA compliance in digital communications ensures that all students, parents, staff, and

community members, including those with visual, auditory, or mobility impairments, can fully engage with district materials. This includes:

- **Websites** that screen readers can navigate.
- **PDFs and documents** with alt text, tagging, and logical reading order.
- **Videos** with captions or transcripts.
- **Colors and fonts** that meet readability standards.

## Practical Steps

Not every district has a full communications or IT team

and that’s okay. Here’s how superintendents can still move the work forward.

## Start with Your Website:

If your district uses providers like Apptegy, ParentSquare, or FinalSite, you already have a platform designed to meet ADA standards; however, you should still have a conversation with them to make sure your site is up to par. If your site is on another platform, you may want to consider migrating now rather than face costly remediation or potential lawsuits.



*Entegrity helps schools save with energy upgrades—improving buildings and budgets so more resources go to students.*

**Address Your Documents:** PDFs are one of the most common compliance issues. MASA has partnered with IMS Technology Group, who offer PDF remediation services starting at a state-contracted rate of just \$0.32 per page, an extremely reasonable price point. Even small districts can take advantage of this service without stretching budgets.

**Train Staff Where Possible:** Even basic awareness makes a difference. Train assistants, teachers, and administrators who post online materials to add alt text to images, check color contrast, and upload accessible files.

**Don't Wait:** Complaints and lawsuits are already being filed around the country. Starting now reduces both legal risk and community frustration.

**Why It Matters**

Compliance isn't just about avoiding lawsuits, it's about equity. Families deserve equal access to district information, whether they're reading an agenda on a phone, reviewing a handbook in a PDF, or watching a board meeting replay.

**MASA's Role**

MASA will continue to share resources, training, and examples to support districts in preparing for ADA compliance. To learn more, visit MASA's [ADA Title II Compliance for School Districts](#) page online to view helpful resources, trainings, checklists for superintendents, and more. ■



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# *The Long View*

Leadership, Planning, & Service in Public Education

BY DR. BERNARD DUBRAY

After 54 years in public education, 38 of them as superintendent of the Fort Zumwalt School District, I hung up my hat in 2023. My journey began in 1969 as a teacher in the Pattonville School District. In 1974, I moved to Orchard Farm as principal of the middle school, later becoming assistant superintendent.

It was there I met two of my life mentors. John Glore, the Orchard Farm High School principal, had worked with me previously in Pattonville and was the prototype of what a high school principal should be: steady, dedicated, and deeply committed to his students. Larry Doyle, the district's Director of Curriculum and Instruction, became my other guiding influence. When Larry left for an administrative role at Fort Zumwalt, I stepped into his position. Eight years later, I followed him to Fort Zumwalt as Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services.

By 1985, I became superintendent just as Fort Zumwalt was entering an era of explosive growth. Our student population surged from 8,200

in 1985 to 19,000 by 2009. Managing that growth was the most daunting challenge of my career until COVID-19. The pandemic brought a new kind of disruption that no superintendent could have been fully prepared for. There were also times in the 1990s and early 2000s when Missouri's foundation formula was underfunded or the governor withheld funds due to state revenue shortfalls. On at least one occasion, we had to present an unplanned tax referendum simply to keep the district on solid footing, a reminder that even the best-laid plans sometimes require quick adaptation.

In the growth years, superintendents often led planning and forecasting themselves. I had the good fortune to inherit a strong foundation: Larry Doyle's "Agenda for the '80s," a strategic plan that anticipated curriculum needs, population trends, building projects, and the bond issues and tax levies required to meet

them. Using that as a template, I created successive 10-year plans to keep the district ahead of the curve. One of the smartest long-term financial moves we made was investing bond issue funds through MoSIP while awaiting construction timelines. By "parking" those dollars at the best available interest rates, we maximized returns and stretched taxpayer resources further.

Success depended on community trust. We joined local chambers of commerce in St. Peters and O'Fallon, as well as the St. Louis Regional Commerce and Growth Association, to ensure Fort Zumwalt was visible and engaged. I met regularly with city administrators, planners, and developers to

track new subdivisions, estimate resulting student enrollment, and anticipate commercial growth, including any tax incentives that might impact revenue. I also maintained close contact with the county assessor and collector to

*“Education is not just a profession; it’s a calling.”*

inform budget decisions.

This approach allowed us to forecast needs without spending heavily on outside consultants. My early years in Orchard Farm, where I wore many hats from public relations to curriculum to special education, gave me the broad perspective to support my team in Fort Zumwalt with firsthand understanding of their work.

Looking back, I feel profoundly grateful. Education is not just a profession; it's a calling. I loved what I did, and I believe no one could have a more important job than those entrusted with shaping the next generation. ■

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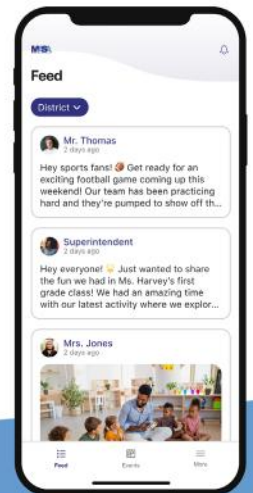
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# Building Value, Connection, and Support



**E**ach year, MASA's membership represents the heart of public education leadership in Missouri and 2025-26 is no exception. With more than 2,400 superintendents, district leaders, and emeritus members now part of our growing network, MASA continues to serve as a collective voice for those shaping the future of Missouri's schools.

### Your Voice in MASA's Future

This year marks an important season of reflection and renewal for our Association. We've launched a strategic planning process that will guide MASA's direction for the next several years.

Our goal is simple: to ensure our work continues to meet the real needs, challenges, and aspirations of our members. Over the coming months, you'll receive short surveys inviting your input on what's working well, where we can improve, and how MASA can best serve you. Your voice will directly shape how we design member programs, events, and communication moving forward.

### Collaboration with Purpose

In July, MASA introduced a new Partnership Program designed to

strengthen relationships between Missouri's public school leaders and the organizations that support them. This new model moves beyond sponsorship, it's about collaboration. Our partners share our commitment to advancing education, and together, we're building connections that bring new resources, innovations, and opportunities directly to districts.

### Professional Growth, Tailored to You

We are taking a fresh look at how we design MASA events and professional development. Our goal is to provide customized learning experiences that reflect the realities you face as school leaders. From cohorts to statewide conferences, our professional growth opportunities will continue to evolve, guided by your feedback, to ensure you gain the most value and support possible from your membership.

### Member Benefits in Action

MASA's commitment to supporting members extends beyond professional learning, it's about being there when you need it most. Our Crisis Communications Hotline through our partnership with the Donovan Group has already

assisted eight districts this school year, helping superintendents navigate situations ranging from student and staff tragedies to facility damage and employee concerns. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, underscoring the importance of having trusted support when quick, steady communication matters most. In addition, our Superintendent Helpline remains a confidential resource for questions about board relations, finance, and leadership challenges. These tools are here so you never have to face tough moments alone.

### Our Why

Everything we do, from advocacy and communication to professional growth, is grounded in one goal: to strengthen the leadership capacity of Missouri's superintendents and ensure every student benefits from strong, informed, and connected leadership.

We're grateful for your continued engagement and partnership as we chart the next chapter of MASA's story, together.

- *The MASA Team*

# Call for Proposals

## MASA/MOSPRA SPRING CONFERENCE

March 18-20, 2026 | Lake Ozark, MO

MASA and MOSPRA are pleased to announce the Call for Proposals for the 2026 Spring Conference, taking place March 18-20, 2026, at Margaritaville Lake Resort, in Lake Ozark, Missouri.

Each year, conference participants look forward to sessions that address the most timely and relevant issues facing Missouri's public school leaders. We are currently seeking breakout session proposals that provide practical insights, innovative solutions, and thought-provoking discussion.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Leadership and board relations
- Legislative updates and policy changes
- Compliance and legal issues
- Communication and community engagement
- Equity and inclusion
- Finance and operations
- School safety and crisis management
- Innovation and technology in education (including AI and ChatGPT applications)

**Presenters must be current MASA or MOSPRA members.** Business or organization representatives interested in presenting are welcome to do so in partnership with a MASA or MOSPRA member as part of a joint presentation.

To submit your proposal, please complete the online form by November 14, 2025.

If you have questions or would like to discuss a potential topic before submitting, please contact Mr. Kelly Hinshaw at [khinshaw@mcsa.org](mailto:khinshaw@mcsa.org).

**DEADLINE TO SUBMIT: NOVEMBER 14, 2025**



[forms.office.com/r/NvVdrz6YUv](https://forms.office.com/r/NvVdrz6YUv)



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