

Rural Advantage

A PROJECT BY THE NATIONAL RURAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION



Feature:

MEET THE FINALISTS FOR THE 2026
RURAL INNOVATION & IMPACT SHOWCASE

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Cover photo: Students tending ponies in Latham, Missouri

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Welcome to Rural Advantage.

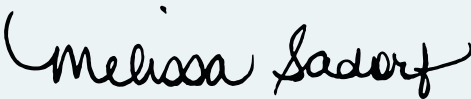
In every region, rural folks tell us the same thing: I would love to know what districts like mine are actually doing. Rural leaders learn best from other rural leaders, and right now that exchange depends far too much on who happens to sit next to whom at a conference. The Rural Advantage is our attempt to make it available to everyone, wherever you are.

We built this first issue around innovation, because innovation is where the rural advantage shows up most clearly. You’ll learn about the finalists of our inaugural Rural Innovation & Impact Showcase, a rural school adapting to the needs of its children, and practical solutions from our partners on the legal, insurance, and compliance questions landing on your desk right now. Each quarter, you can expect the same mix: real stories from real districts, a state in focus, and guidance you can act on.

Rural schools and communities are written about constantly by people who have never spent a Friday night in our gyms or a Tuesday morning in our bus barns. If we don’t tell our own story, someone else will tell it for us, and it won’t be the whole truth. This publication is our record, in our words, of what is actually happening in rural education across the country. It’s written for our members, and it’s written just as much for the public, the press, and the policymakers who make decisions about places they have never visited.

We chose the name on purpose. Rural is not a smaller version of everything else, and it is not a problem to be solved. Rural is a context with distinct assets: deep relationships, schools at the center of civic community, and staff who know every family. When something needs to change in a rural district, the people who can change it are usually already in the room. Rural education has always been resourceful—it’s time more people knew it was also innovative.

Welcome in. We’re glad you’re here.



Dr. Melissa Sadorf - Executive Director, National Rural Education Association

Welcome, Bonnie Walker

NREA is proud to introduce our new Director of Programs and Partnerships, effective October 1, 2026.



Walker brings more than 25 years of association management and nonprofit experience to NREA. Most recently, she served nearly seven years as Director of Operations with the Texas Rural Education Association (TREA), where she played a key leadership role in organizational operations, membership engagement, conferences and events, corporate partnerships, and sponsorship development. Prior to joining TREA, Walker spent 18 years with the Texas Library Association.

A seventh-generation Texan, she has a deep appreciation for rural communities and the people who serve them and has remained actively engaged in the association community through volunteer and leadership service with the Texas Society of Association Executives and organizations in her local community.

“Having worked alongside Bonnie at the state level for years, I have seen firsthand her unwavering dedication to rural schools and her exceptional talent for building strong partnerships,” said Dr. Bill Chapman, NREA President. “I am excited to see her deep expertise and passion for rural communities brought to the national level.”

This role is new to NREA, and a big step forward for organizational growth. Walker will focus on strengthening NREA program offerings, cultivating strategic and corporate partnerships, and enriching NREA's relationships with rural schools and communities across the country. A key focus of her work will be supporting the National Forum to Advance Rural Education, NREA's annual conference, and key initiatives tied to the event such as the National Rural Principal Fellowship and the Rural Innovation & Impact Showcase. She will also be facilitating partnership agreements, both for the conference and year-round.

“Our programs are about creating opportunity, connection, and growth for rural educators and students,” said Dr. Melissa Sadorf, NREA Executive Director. “Bonnie brings an exceptional depth of rural-focused nonprofit experience and a proven track record of building strategic partnerships, making her uniquely and wonderfully positioned to help NREA expand our national impact through our programming.”

Through her new role, Walker will help NREA enhance their support of rural school districts, educators, and students nationwide. NREA asks rural advocates to join them in welcoming and celebrating her as she steps into this position.



Meet the Finalists for the 2026 Rural Innovation & Impact Showcase

The Rural Innovation & Impact Showcase is a new program celebrating the bold ideas emerging from rural communities across the nation. Selected from nearly 50 submissions nationwide, these five finalists will present live at the National Forum to Advance Rural Education in San Antonio, TX.

This is just a brief snapshot of the innovative solutions that are transforming student learning, strengthening communities, and tackling some of rural education's most pressing challenges. You can learn more on our website, and join us this fall at NFARE for the live competition!



From Screens to Soil: How a 33-Student Missouri District Turned Its Roots Into a Classroom

Moniteau County R-V School, Latham, MO

Every morning at Moniteau County R-V School, the students say a chant. Bold. Respectful. Accountable. Successful. It is a small ritual with a big belief behind it, one that Superintendent Tracey Bieri puts plainly: "No matter where the kids go in life, if they are respectful and responsible and have a hard work ethic, that will take them farther than anything."

Holding onto that belief in a district of 33 students, kindergarten through eighth grade, takes some creativity.

A couple of years ago, Bieri and teacher Laura Latham sat down with a short list of what they wanted to improve: student engagement, science achievement that their state MAP scores had flagged, and character. Their students were spending too much time behind screens, and the two wanted learning that was hands-on, meaningful, and tied to the world their kids actually live in. Rather than import a program, they looked out the window at the farming community around them.

Tables Turned, Futures Earned: How Kentucky Put Students With Disabilities in the Driver's Seat

Kentucky Educational Development Corporation (KEDC)

At a traditional career fair, the student does the walking, moving from booth to booth, hoping to be noticed, hoping to find the words. For a student with a disability, that loud, crowded, high-pressure room can become a place to endure rather than shine. A team at the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation looked at that dynamic and asked a simple question: what if we flipped it?

Their answer is the Reverse Career Fair. Instead of students approaching employers, graduating seniors set up their own stations to showcase their vocational skills, their resumes, and their portfolios. Then the employers come to them, and the employers do the interviewing. The students lead. In the team's own framing, it puts young people in the driver's seat and turns years of classroom transition instruction into a genuine roots-and-wings moment, the point where a student stops being prepared for life after high school and starts showing that they are ready for it.

“Building” Career Pathways: Workforce, Culture, and Nation Building in Rural Wisconsin

College of Menominee Nation and the National Indian Education Association

The Menominee Tribe manages one of the largest forested areas in the country, yet it lacked the workforce for its own infrastructure repair, building, and contract labor, a gap that hit hard amid housing shortages and an aging skilled workforce. As Debra Downs of the College of Menominee Nation put it, the goal became to build an internal workforce for the reservation and surrounding areas, filling the “big blank space in the middle” opening up as one generation nears retirement.

“Building” Career Pathways grew out of that need. When Core Learning Exchange reached out to the National Indian Education Association with an idea for digital career exploration, NIEA said yes. Through the Catalyze Challenge, the partners weighed healthcare against construction trades, and construction won: it fit what the college could deliver and aligned with the tribe’s forestry economy. As Casie Wise, senior program director at NIEA, explained, “the ability to build and repair your own housing is essential to growth and sustainability.”

Drawing on Kinship: How Eastern Kentucky Made Computing Its Own

Digital Promise and Eastern Kentucky School Partners

In the hills of Eastern Kentucky, people have always made things, fixing what breaks, building what they need, solving problems with whatever is on hand. “We are from makers,” said Rebecca Morrison of Floyd County Schools, “but they didn’t know they were makers. They just had to survive.” Drawing on Kinship began with a conviction that this ingenuity is not a charming relic but a foundation, and that computing belongs on top of it rather than in place of it.

The work started in Eastern Kentucky before the researchers ever arrived. District leaders in Floyd County and Pikeville Independent had been asking how to deepen learning in their region, and a visit to a mentor district near Pittsburgh, a place that had weathered the collapse of steel much as Appalachia weathered the decline of coal, showed them what technology could do for students’ confidence. That connection brought in Digital Promise and, with it, a National Science Foundation research-practice partnership. But one phrase was there in the very first grant proposal: Appalachian ingenuity. For researcher Emi Iwatani of Digital Promise, it framed everything.



Building Capacity from Within: How Lee County Grew Its Own Teachers

CarolinaCAP at the University of South Carolina and Lee County School District

For twelve years, Shawnta McKenzie has watched the same cycle. As director of human resources for Lee County School District, a rural district of about 400 high school students in one of South Carolina’s smallest counties, she would recruit a teacher, watch them stay a year, sometimes only six months, and then start over. “In December, they were gone,” she said. “By January, we were looking for another teacher.” This year, for the first time in those twelve years, the district opened the school year with no vacancies.

That turnaround has a name: CarolinaCAP, the Carolina Collaborative for Alternative Preparation, an alternative certification pathway housed at the University of South Carolina. But the people who built it in Lee County describe less a program than a decision to stop recruiting away from the problem and start growing out of it.



Read the Full Stories

Scan the QR code or visit **click here** to learn more about each of our finalists.



Join Us for the Live Competition!

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A Case for Change: Why Traditional Health Benefits Are Failing Rural America's Schools



Mark Gilmore, Apollo Health Insurance C.O.O. & Rural Education Strategist

About five years ago, after 22 years as a trial attorney, I made a rather unique transition to help lead a health insurance brokerage. As national headlines focus on teacher shortages, crumbling infrastructure, and curriculum battles, rural superintendents face an equally quiet and devastating crisis inside their own balance sheets: the cost of employee healthcare.

For urban and suburban school districts, employee benefits are an annoying administrative routine. For a rural district, they are a systemic vulnerability. The macroeconomic forces shaping today's health insurance market are fundamentally mismatched with the realities of rural geography, the size of rural districts, and the overloaded plate of rural superintendents.

To protect school budgets and keep high-quality educators in rural classrooms, education leaders must understand the unique structural challenges facing their health plans—and how to build a more resilient alternative.

1. The Geographic Trap: Provider Monopolies and “Medical Deserts”

The primary driver of high healthcare costs in rural America is not high utilization; it is the absolute lack of competition.

In metropolitan areas, major insurers bargain aggressively with competing hospital networks to drive down costs. In rural communities, independent hospitals and regional healthcare systems hold strict monopolies. If there is only one hospital within a 60-mile radius, that facility dictates the pricing.

As a result, rural districts routinely pay two to three times more for standard procedures—such as MRIs,

laboratory panels, or uncomplicated surgeries—than their suburban counterparts. Furthermore, because local networks are narrow or nonexistent, employees are often forced to travel hours for routine specialist care. This inflicts a double blow to the district: high medical costs compounded by the operational strain of frequent staff absences and substitute teacher coverage.

2. The Mid-Size Disadvantage: ACA Compliance and Claims Volatility

Rural school districts with more than 50 employees occupy a uniquely precarious regulatory position. Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), they are categorized as Applicable Large Employers (ALEs) and must offer compliant, affordable family coverage or face severe financial penalties.

However, a headcount of 50 to 250 lines of coverage lacks the statistical stability required to absorb modern medical claims. In a pool of thousands of employees, a handful of high-cost conditions—such as oncology regimens, complex cardiac events, or premature births—are easily absorbed. In a mid-sized rural district, just one catastrophic claim a year can trigger an immediate 20% to 30% premium spike from traditional insurance carriers.

This extreme volatility completely destroys long-term budgetary predictability, forcing school boards to repeatedly choose between absorbing premium increases or stripping away instructional resources.

3. The Retention Tax: When Benefits Neutralize Salaries

The rural teacher retention crisis is deeply intertwined with benefit plan design. Rural districts already struggle

to compete with wealthier suburban districts on base salaries. Historically, robust, low-cost health benefits served as a powerful equalizer to attract and retain talented educators.

Today, skyrocketing premiums have inverted this advantage. When a traditional, fully insured health plan increases its rates, rural districts are often forced to pass the financial burden onto their staff through higher deductibles and increased employee premium contributions.

When a young teacher looks at a rural contract, they do not just look at the gross salary—they look at the net take-home pay. If a family health plan consumes 20% of their monthly paycheck, the position becomes financially unviable. Inadequate benefits actively accelerate the migration of talent away from rural communities.

Beyond the Status Quo: Strategic Paths Forward

Rural school districts can no longer afford to buy traditional, off-the-shelf fully insured health insurance. Coping with annual premium increases by simply raising deductibles is a math problem that has run out of runway.

To regain financial control, forward-thinking rural superintendents and boards are taking charge by adopting sophisticated, alternative benefit architectures:

Flexible Dependent Coverage Options: Many districts successfully cover 100% of single employee coverage, but struggle when educators need to cover spouses and dependents. Family premiums under traditional group plans often reach \$1,500 to \$2,500 per month out of an educator's paycheck. District leaders can solve this by giving staff access to tailored, lower-cost individual marketplace or private solutions for family members. This strategic shift puts \$1,000 to \$2,000 back into an educator's pocket every month—delivering a substantial effective pay raise without adding financial burden to the district's general fund.

Level-Funded and Partially Self-Funded Structures: School boards often hesitate to consider alternative funding models due to a perceived risk of uncapped medical claims. Modern level-funded and partially self-funded plans eliminate this exposure through built-in stop-loss insurance. This caps the district's maximum financial liability at a predictable, fixed monthly amount—functioning with the exact same budget certainty as a fully insured plan. However, if total claims come in lower than expected, the surplus funds are returned directly to the school district's general fund rather than kept by a commercial carrier. Crucially, these structures give leadership direct visibility into claims data, empowering the district to manage healthcare costs strategically rather than operating in the dark.

Independent Prescription Carve-Outs: Prescription

drugs, specifically high-cost specialty medications, represent the fastest-growing segment of school healthcare spending. By unbundling pharmacy benefits from the major medical carrier and partnering with a transparent Pharmacy Benefit Manager (PBM), districts eliminate hidden middleman markups and secure direct manufacturer rebates, keeping those savings within the district.

Direct Primary Care (DPC) & Telehealth Integration:

Forward-thinking leaders are expanding access by establishing direct partnerships with local rural health clinics for flat monthly membership fees, alongside zero-copay virtual primary and mental health services. These integrations provide staff with immediate, local care, drastically reducing travel time, minimizing the need for substitute coverage, and diverting costly emergency room visits before they impact the district's health plan.

The Mandate for Rural Leaders

Healthcare is no longer just a line item in the human resources budget; it is a critical pillar of a district's operational solvency and recruitment strategy.

Rural education leaders and superintendents have the power to shift from passive consumers of insurance to active managers of healthcare risk. By demanding price transparency, exploring capped-risk funding models, and leveraging strategic plan design, school district leaders can halt unsustainable rate hikes—protecting both community taxpayers and the educators our rural students rely on.

About the Author

Mark Gilmore is a seasoned attorney with over 20 years dedicated to the practice of law in Missouri. Mark has had extensive recognition in the legal field for his outstanding ability to successfully litigate the most complex cases.

Mark is a passionate individual who has a knack for hard work and unmatched dedication to everything he does. He believes strongly that a team is only as strong as its leader and he strives to always lead with positivity and mutual respect. When Mark is not working to help better the lives of others, you can find him spending time with his wife and children or cheering on his favorite team the Kansas City Chiefs.

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Rural School Spotlight: Penn Valley Union Elementary School District, California

Rooted in Community, Moving Toward New Horizons



Yuri Calderon, Superintendent of Penn Valley Union Elementary School District

Nestled in the western foothills of California's Sierra Nevada, Penn Valley is a community shaped by the land and by generations of people who have made their lives there. The region's identity reflects its rural and agrarian roots, with ranches, farms, forests, and open spaces continuing to define the landscape. Its history is also closely connected to California's Gold Rush. Nearby mining settlements, historic roads, and communities built along rivers and creeks tell the story of those who came west in search of opportunity and established towns that have endured for generations.

Today, the Penn Valley Union Elementary School District is working to honor that history while creating a renewed sense of direction for its students, schools, and community. Serving students from transitional kindergarten through eighth grade at Ready Springs Elementary School, Williams Ranch Elementary School, and Vantage Point Charter School (TK-12th Grade), the district is beginning a collaborative process centered on three ideas that reflect both the character of Penn Valley and the journey of its schools:

Roots. River. Horizons.

The framework is more than a theme. It is a way for the district to listen to its community, recognize its strengths, confront its challenges, and develop a shared vision for the future.

"Our schools are deeply connected to the history, relationships, and values of this community," said Superintendent Yuri Calderon. "Before deciding where we want to go, we need to understand what has shaped Penn Valley, what our community values, and what we want every student to experience. Roots, River, and Horizons gives us a language for having that conversation together."

Honoring the Roots

The roots represent the traditions, relationships, values, and experiences that have shaped Penn Valley and its schools. Like many rural school districts, Penn Valley's identity is inseparable from the community it serves.

Generations of families have attended its schools. Teachers, classified employees, parents, volunteers, local businesses, and community organizations have all played a part in supporting students. In a rural district, those relationships matter.

Schools are not simply places where children receive instruction. They are gathering places, sources of community pride, centers of activity, and institutions that help preserve a community's identity from one generation to the next.

The district's vision-building process begins by asking community members to identify the roots that should be protected and strengthened. These may include close relationships between educators and families, a strong sense of belonging, local traditions, personal attention for students, and the willingness of people to step forward when their schools need support.

"Rural schools possess strengths that cannot always be measured in a report or reflected in a spreadsheet," Calderon said. "Our size allows us to know students personally, build meaningful relationships with families, and create a genuine sense of community. Those are advantages we should never lose."

Navigating the River

The river represents the district's shared journey. Rivers have shaped the geography and history of the Sierra foothills. They also provide an appropriate metaphor for the work of public education. A river is rarely straight or predictable. It encounters obstacles, changes direction, and continues moving forward.

For Penn Valley, the river represents the choices the district makes, the challenges it navigates, and the progress it achieves along the way. The district is using this part of the framework to encourage honest conversations about the present. Staff members, families, students, and community partners are being invited to identify what is working, where improvement

is needed, and what conditions must be created for students and educators to thrive. Those conversations will help establish priorities for teaching and learning, student engagement, school culture, professional development, and the use of district resources.

The process is grounded in the belief that vision should not simply be written by district leadership and presented to the community. It should emerge from listening, reflection, and shared ownership. "Leadership has a responsibility to establish direction, but lasting change cannot be built in isolation," Calderon said. "People are more likely to support a vision when they can see their experiences, hopes, and values reflected in it." That collaborative approach is particularly important in a rural community, where schools and community life are closely connected. Decisions made by the district affect families, local organizations, employers, and the long-term vitality of the region.

Looking Toward the Horizons

The horizons represent possibility. Penn Valley's leaders believe that a student's opportunities should not be limited by the size or location of the community in which that student grows up. Rural students should have access to strong academics, the arts, technology, career exploration, outdoor learning, agriculture, athletics, and experiences that help them understand the range of possibilities available to them.

As the district develops its direction, it is exploring ways to build upon the strengths and character of the community. That work includes strengthening foundational classroom instruction, creating supportive and engaging learning environments, expanding visual and performing arts opportunities, and developing hands-on learning connected to agriculture, science, technology, and the natural environment. These efforts are not intended to move the district away from its rural identity. They are intended to make that identity an advantage.





Agriculture can become a pathway for science, engineering, environmental studies, entrepreneurship, and emerging technology. The region's rivers, forests, and foothills can become extensions of the classroom. Local artists, tradespeople, farmers, businesses, and civic organizations can help students connect academic learning with authentic experiences. The goal is to ensure that every student develops a strong foundation while also discovering interests, abilities, and possibilities that may shape the student's future.

That emerging direction is captured in a statement the district is considering as part of its vision-building work:

Rooted in community, strengthened through learning, and inspired by limitless horizons, Penn Valley prepares every student to thrive in school, in life, and in the future they choose.

The statement connects the district's history with its responsibility to prepare students for a changing world. It also reflects a larger aspiration for Penn Valley to become a place where families choose to be, educators come to lead, and students discover that their possibilities are limitless.

A Rural Community Building Its Future

The work in Penn Valley is still unfolding. Roots, River, and Horizons are not being presented as a completed initiative or a slogan attached to a predetermined plan. It is the beginning of a process through which a rural district is asking essential questions.

What should never change?

What must improve?

What opportunities should every student have?

What kind of school district does the community want to build for the next generation?

For Penn Valley, the answers will come from listening to the people who know the schools and community best. The roots will provide stability. The river will carry the district forward. The horizons will remind students and educators to continue looking beyond what is immediately visible.

Penn Valley's story demonstrates that rural communities do not have to choose between honoring their past and preparing for the future. Their history, relationships, natural surroundings, and sense of place can become the foundation upon which a new future is built. And in Penn Valley, that future begins with strong roots, a shared journey, and horizons filled with possibility.

About the Author

Yuri Calderon serves as Superintendent of the Penn Valley Union Elementary School District, bringing more than three decades of experience in education, law, school finance, administration, and organizational leadership. Calderon is focused on strengthening academic achievement while creating meaningful opportunities for students through the arts, agriculture, project-based learning, technology, and expanded learning. His leadership philosophy centers on integrity, listening, strong relationships, and the belief that every resource should support student outcomes.



Rural America Matters. Let's Build Its Future Together.



Christine Hamp, National Grange President

Too often, the conversation about rural America begins with what it lacks. Not enough people. Not enough teachers. Not enough doctors. Not enough broadband. Not enough investment. Not enough opportunity. This isn't the rural America I know.

I know communities where neighbors still know one another by name. Where schools serve as gathering places. Where volunteers still answer the fire bell. Where local businesses sponsor youth sports teams. Where people understand that when someone is struggling, you don't ask whose responsibility it is – you simply show up. These aren't signs of decline. They're signs of extraordinary strength.

Rural America is not defined by scarcity. It is defined by resilience, innovation, service, and possibility. It is where millions of Americans still choose to raise families, build businesses, serve their neighbors, and believe that community is more than a place – it is a responsibility. It feeds our nation. It fuels our economy. It stewards our forests, farms, and natural resources. It produces entrepreneurs, educators, military leaders, first responders, scientists, healthcare professionals, and public servants. Rural America preserves traditions while embracing innovation. It reminds us that progress is measured not only by technology, but by the strength of our relationships and our willingness to invest in one another.

The future of America depends upon the future of rural America. That is why organizations like the National Rural Education Association and the National Grange matter so deeply. Our organizations may approach rural communities from different perspectives, but we are working toward the same goal: creating places where people want to live, families want to grow, businesses

want to invest, and young people see a future worth building.

Neither of our organizations exist simply to preserve what once was. We exist to help build what comes next.

For nearly 160 years, the National Grange has partnered with rural communities because we believe that thriving communities do not happen by accident. They are built – one relationship, one partnership, one volunteer, one leader, and one generation at a time. The Grange was founded in 1867 to strengthen rural America through education, advocacy, fellowship, and local action. While agriculture remains an important part of our identity, our mission has always extended far beyond the farm. We believe strong communities require engaged citizens, capable leaders, vibrant local organizations, and people who are willing to work together for the common good. That belief has never been more important than it is today.

Communities don't become stronger because someone else decides to invest in them. They become stronger when the people who call them home decide they are worth investing in.

That simple idea is at the heart of everything the Grange does. We don't begin with a predetermined list of programs. We begin by listening. What does this community need? What opportunities already exist? Who is missing from the conversation? How can we bring people together around a common purpose?

Those questions lead to different answers in every town, because every community has its own strengths, challenges, and aspirations. That flexibility is one of the Grange's greatest strengths.

The Grange is more than another volunteer organization. We convene conversations. We develop leaders. We connect people who may never have met otherwise. We help communities discover solutions that already exist within themselves. And when communities are ready to move from ideas to action, the Grange provides the structure, relationships, and staying power to help that work endure.

Across America, local Granges are mentoring young leaders, supporting schools, addressing food insecurity, strengthening local agriculture, preserving community history, hosting educational workshops, organizing volunteer projects, creating scholarship opportunities, improving parks and public spaces, advocating for rural priorities, and building partnerships that make communities stronger. Not because anyone directed them to, but because local people saw a need and chose to do something about it. That grassroots spirit is what has sustained the Grange for generations, and it is exactly why we see such tremendous opportunity to partner with rural educators.

Schools are often the heartbeat of rural communities. Strong schools build strong communities. Strong communities sustain strong schools. Neither can thrive without the other. Every educator knows that learning doesn't stop when the dismissal bell rings. Some of life's most important lessons – service, leadership, citizenship, compassion, and responsibility – are learned by doing. They are learned when young people work alongside adults who care deeply about their community. This is where partnerships matter. Imagine an elementary school class documenting the history of their town alongside Grange members. Or imagine FFA, 4-H, student councils, and local Granges working side by side to address food insecurity. Few classrooms offer richer opportunities for place-based learning than the communities surrounding them.

Educators are among the first to recognize emerging challenges and among the first to celebrate new possibilities. Every day, they shape not only academic success, but confidence, character, citizenship, and leadership. They see the potential in young people long before those young people see it in themselves. Educators cannot build thriving communities alone – nor should they have to. Lasting change happens when schools, families, businesses, civic organizations, local government, and volunteers begin rowing in the same direction. This is where the Grange has always done its best work.

Imagine what becomes possible when educators are joined by community organizations that share these same goals. Imagine classrooms partnering with local Granges to preserve community history, strengthen agricultural literacy, mentor younger students, and improve their hometowns. Imagine every young person graduating believing they don't have to leave rural America to find purpose – they can help build it. Before

students can become leaders, they need to know they belong.

That future doesn't happen by chance. It happens when adults make a deliberate decision to invest in the next generation – not simply by preparing young people for successful careers, but by preparing them for meaningful lives of leadership, service, and civic responsibility.

We often ask what the next generation can do for rural America. Perhaps it's time we also ask what kind of rural America we are leaving for the next generation. Will they inherit communities where people know one another, where volunteerism is valued, where civic organizations are thriving, and where young leaders are encouraged to step forward? Or will they inherit communities where those connections have faded? Every generation writes part of that story. The good news is that the next chapter has not yet been written.

As educators, community leaders, parents, volunteers, and organizations dedicated to rural life, we all have a role in ensuring that the next chapter is one of opportunity, belonging, and hope. That is stewardship and that is work worth doing together. That is the future we should all be working toward.

Across America, the Grange is growing – not simply in numbers, but in purpose. We are launching new Granges, building new partnerships, developing new leaders, and finding new ways to serve because rural America deserves organizations willing to evolve alongside the communities they serve.

Our goal is not simply to grow the Grange. Our goal is to grow stronger communities. Communities where families thrive. Where schools are valued. Where businesses succeed. Where neighbors know one another. Where every generation has an opportunity to contribute.

Communities are not built by institutions alone. They are built by people. People who believe their hometown is worth investing in. People who choose collaboration over isolation. People who understand that the future belongs to those willing to build it together. That is why partnerships matter.

The National Rural Education Association and the National Grange each bring unique strengths to rural America. Working together, we can inspire young leaders, strengthen civic life, create meaningful service opportunities, expand educational partnerships, and ensure that rural communities remain places of innovation, opportunity, and hope.

The future of rural America will not be determined by demographics alone. It will be determined by the choices we make today – by the partnerships we build, by the leaders we develop, and by the communities we choose to strengthen. No one organization can build the future of rural America alone, but together, our collective impact can be extraordinary.

The National Grange invites you to become our partner in building the future of rural America. Together, we can ensure that rural America is not simply remembered for what it has contributed to our nation's past but celebrated for the limitless opportunities it continues to create for our nation's future.

The future of rural America isn't something we inherit. It is something we build – together. That work begins in our schools, grows through our communities, and succeeds through partnerships grounded in service, leadership, and a shared belief that every rural community deserves the opportunity to thrive.

Rural America has never asked for someone else to write its story. Its strength has always come from ordinary people doing extraordinary things for their neighbors. That spirit built our communities. It sustained them through generations of change and it will carry them into the future. The National Grange is proud to stand beside the National Rural Education Association – and every educator, volunteer, parent, business owner, and community leader who believes rural America deserves its brightest days ahead.

So, here's our invitation. If you're an educator, reach out to your local Grange. If you're a Grange member, introduce yourself to your local school. Start one conversation. Find one shared project. Mentor one young leader. Build one stronger community. Great partnerships rarely begin with grand plans. They begin when neighbors decide to work together.

We want rural communities where every child believes they belong, where every family feels connected, where every volunteer knows they can make a difference, and where every generation has the opportunity to leave their hometown stronger than they found it.

The future of rural America isn't waiting for someone else. It's waiting for us. Let's build together.

Five Ways Schools and Granges Can Build Stronger Communities Together

Cultivate Tomorrow's Leaders

Create student leadership opportunities through community service, mentoring, public speaking, civic engagement, and local project leadership.

Bring Learning Beyond the Classroom

Partner on agricultural literacy, local history, environmental stewardship, financial literacy, career exploration, and hands-on learning experiences.

Strengthen Community Connections

Bring together educators, families, local businesses, nonprofits, and volunteers to address community needs through collaborative projects.

Inspire a Lifetime of Service

Engage students in meaningful service-learning projects that improve their hometowns while fostering citizenship and community pride.

Invest in Rural Futures

Work together to create communities where young people see opportunity, families choose to stay, and future generations can thrive. The strongest rural communities are those where schools and communities see themselves not as separate institutions, but as partners in building the future.

About the Author

Christine E. (Chris) Hamp comes from deep rural roots: a fourth-generation Grange member, she grew up on her family's dairy farm in Monroe, Washington, where her great-grandfather homesteaded in the early 1880s. That upbringing, along with her tenure in Grange that began at age 5, has shaped her enduring commitment to the resilience and well-being of rural life.

Chris was elected President of the National Grange in 2023, having previously served as National Vice President from 2021-23, and three other elected National Grange positions from 2011-21.

After more than 31 years in state and local government, the vast majority in the fire service, Chris retired in early 2023 at the rank of Division Chief. She also served as a Type 1 Finance Section Chief for the Pacific Northwest Team 2 Incident Management Team.

Chris holds a Master of Public Administration degree from The George Washington University, a bachelor's degree in public policy and administration from Western Washington University, and an associate degree in Fire Command Administration from Edmonds Community College.

Since 2022, she has been a member of the Board of Directors of the Quilts of Valor Foundation. Also, since her election as President of the National Grange in 2023, she serves as President of two affiliate Grange entities, Grange Advocacy, a 501(c)(4), and the Grange Foundation, a 501(c)(3) trust.

Chris and her husband, Duane, live on 20 acres outside Spokane, Washington.

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State Affiliate Recognitions



Thank You, Dennis Copeland *Arkansas Rural Education Association (AREA)*

The best part of being the Executive Director of the Arkansas Rural Ed Association was seeing the growth of our organization. We went from 140 School

District member schools to 222. We also increased our Vendor Membership from 30 to 84. We provide \$24,000 worth of Scholarships to our member school district's students. We have tried to make people feel valued and appreciated. The AREA has enjoyed its State Affiliation with the National Rural Education Association. I am retiring in December of this year and that will conclude 47 years in education as a teacher, coach, principal, superintendent, and Executive Director of the AREA. I will stay highly involved in education as we have 5 grandchildren ages 17 down to 6.



Thank You, Jack Moles *Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA)*

When asked what the best part of being the Executive Director for NRCSA, it didn't take much thought at all. The relationships and connections I was able to make was

easily the best part. I had a great Executive Committee that was supportive of all that I did. I got extremely close with these great educational leaders. I attended Board of Education meetings at 148 of our member school districts and Educational Service Units, giving me the opportunity to connect with many Board members. That was an enjoyable endeavor for me. I also got the opportunity to connect with many Principals, teachers, coaches, and students over the eight years I served. They helped to show me the pride our rural school districts have. I also had the opportunity to interact with our Governor and several of our State Senators on the Legislative side of things. While not always in agreement with some of them, I believe I was most often treated with respect and hope that I was able to treat them with that same respect. I know at times they depended on me in my role with NRCSA to provide the smaller school side of things on legislation. I was also able to form great relationships with leaders of several of our education organizations in Nebraska. One of the most satisfying relationships was with the leadership of our largest school districts in the state. At times not on the same part on a piece of legislation, we did work to keep friendly lines of communication going. So, obviously the easy answer to the question is the same thing that made my entire educational career so very rewarding: relationships and connections!



Thank You, Michael Heilman *North Dakota Small Organized Schools (NDSOS)*

Mike Heilman grew up on his family's farm near Knox, North Dakota, one of ten children, and he never lost sight of the communities that shaped him. His 37 years

in public education began in the ag classroom as a teacher and FFA advisor in Minot and Garrison. He went on to serve 16 years as a high school principal in Garrison, Dickinson and Bismarck, as Assistant Superintendent in Bismarck, and as Burleigh County Superintendent of Schools. As Executive Director of NDSOS, Mike was a steady and trusted voice for small schools at the Capitol. Session after session, he testified to make sure state policy works for districts where relationships run deep and every staff member wears many hats. He also served as North Dakota's hub contact for the Rural Schools Collaborative. NREA thanks Mike for his service and wishes him and Rochelle many good days with their children and grandchildren.



Thank You, Yuri Calderon *California Small School Districts' Association (SSDA)*

Yuri Calderon serves as Superintendent of the Penn Valley Union Elementary School District, bringing more than three decades of experience in education, law, school finance,

administration, and organizational leadership. Throughout his career, he has served as an education attorney, chief business official, assistant superintendent, and statewide education leader, giving him a broad perspective on the opportunities and challenges facing public schools.

At Penn Valley, Calderon is focused on strengthening academic achievement while creating meaningful opportunities for students through the arts, agriculture, project-based learning, technology, and expanded learning. His leadership philosophy centers on integrity, listening, strong relationships, and the belief that every resource should ultimately support student outcomes. Through the district's "Roots, Rivers & Horizons" framework, he is working to honor Penn Valley's traditions, embrace thoughtful change, and prepare students for the opportunities ahead. His goal is to build schools where families choose to be, educators choose to lead, and students are prepared to live the lives they choose. Be sure to read more about his district in this issue of *Rural Advantage* (page 7).



Welcome, Aaron Fischer
Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA)

Aaron Fischer brings 27 years of educational leadership experience rooted almost entirely in rural Minnesota communities.

Fischer started as Executive Director in July 2026 and is focused on building upon the organization's well-earned reputation as a leading voice for rural education in Minnesota. He looks forward to deepening advocacy efforts at the Capitol, strengthening communication and relationships with member districts, and expanding the ways MREA celebrates the students, educators, and communities that make rural schools thrive. Fischer and his wife Brenda, who serves as Dean at St. Scholastica's Stender School of Leadership, Business, and Professional Studies, share a lifelong dedication to education. They have three grown sons who reside throughout Minnesota.



Welcome, Paul Sheffield
Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA)

Paul Sheffield brings more than 30 years of educational leadership experience to his role, along with a longstanding commitment to rural schools and the

NRCSA mission. He previously served on the NRCSA Executive Board as the Southeast Representative for six years, completing two terms and actively supporting advocacy efforts on behalf of rural districts across the state.

He began his career in education in 1992 as a math, health, and physical education teacher and coach at Keya Paha County High School in Springview, Nebraska. He later earned a Master's degree in Educational Administration from South Dakota State University and held multiple leadership roles at Shickley Public Schools, including principal, activities director, technology director, superintendent, and principal. He earned an Educational Specialist degree from the University of Nebraska-Kearney in 2005. In 2008, Sheffield became superintendent at Exeter-Milligan Public Schools, where he served until his retirement in 2025. Throughout his administrative career, he focused on student-centered decision-making, staff support, community engagement, and strong fiscal and organizational stewardship.

Sheffield and his wife, Karla, have been married since 1988 and have three children serving their communities in the military, agriculture, and healthcare professions.



Welcome, Dr. Michael Bitz
North Dakota Small Organized Schools (NDSOS)

Dr. Mike Bitz brings 35 years of experience as a school superintendent to NDSOS, including 19 years leading smaller districts across North Dakota. He began his

superintendent career in Emerado, a K-8 district in northeastern North Dakota. He then served North Sargent and Milnor Public Schools and spent 11 years at Hillsboro Public Schools. For the past 16 years, he has served as Superintendent of Mandan Public Schools. Dr. Bitz has served on numerous local, state and national committees, and he brings a strong understanding of the legislative process and deep knowledge of North Dakota's education landscape. Originally from Napoleon, North Dakota, he steps into the role ready to support and advocate for small organized schools across the state. NREA looks forward to working alongside him on behalf of North Dakota's rural students and communities.



Welcome, Scott Borba
California Small School Districts' Association (SSDA)

Scott Borba is a passionate champion for rural education, working alongside district leaders, policymakers, and education partners to ensure that students have

equitable access to opportunities and resources.

Prior to joining SSDA, Scott served for eight years as Superintendent/Principal of the Le Grand Union Elementary School District, leading significant gains in student achievement, organizational culture, and community engagement. His career in education has included roles as a teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent, providing him with firsthand experience in the unique rewards and challenges of leading small schools.

In addition to his leadership roles, Scott is an adjunct professor in the School of Education at California State University, Stanislaus, an author, and a frequent keynote speaker on educational leadership, continuous improvement, and the power of collaboration to drive meaningful change in schools.

Scott believes that small and rural schools are among America's greatest educational assets and is committed to amplifying their voice, helping leaders move from connection to clarity to impact.

Who We Are

After a collaborative process that included board conversations, member input, and honest reflection on NREA's role as a national organization, the Executive Board formally adopted an updated Vision, Mission, and Core Values for NREA.

These principles are a commitment, grounded in more than a century of showing up for rural schools, informing how NREA will move into the future.



Vision

The NREA envisions strong rural schools and communities where education is the catalyst for resilience, opportunity, and success.

Mission

As the trusted voice for rural education, the NREA advocates for every rural learner, educator, and community.

Core Values

Advocacy

We champion the needs of rural students, educators, and communities through proactive policy engagement and storytelling that elevates rural voices.

Collaboration

We believe progress happens through relationships. We bring together educators, families, partners, and policymakers to co-create solutions that reflect the realities and assets of rural life.

Community

We believe that rural schools are the heart of their communities. We foster strong relationships, honor local voice, and serve as active partners in building vibrant, sustainable futures.

Innovation

We encourage creative problem-solving and forward-thinking approaches that reflect the strengths and realities of rural education contexts.

Leadership

We cultivate and support bold, resilient, and ethical leaders who advocate for and guide the future of rural education.



2026-2030 Strategic Plan

Using the new Mission, Vision, and Core Values as a guide, the NREA Executive Board adopted NREA's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan in spring 2026, which identifies five main goals for the future. These goals reflect where our members, affiliates, and partners are telling us NREA is most needed.

Goal 1: Grow and Strengthen NREA Membership

NREA will continue building a diverse, active, and growing community of rural education stakeholders. Growing membership is not just a revenue strategy. It is a signal that NREA is delivering real value to the people closest to rural schools.

Goal 2: Invest in State Affiliates and Their Leaders

NREA will strengthen communication, consistency, and capacity across all state affiliates. By 2030, every affiliate director should have access to onboarding support, peer mentoring, and ongoing professional learning.

Goal 3: Build Partnerships and Expand Revenue

NREA will cultivate a diverse portfolio of strategic partnerships and sponsorships that generate sustainable revenue, extend our reach, and advance rural education across sectors. This goal positions NREA to pursue grant opportunities and expand financial flexibility so we can direct resources where rural schools need them most.

Goal 4: Elevate Rural Education in Federal Policy and Advocacy

NREA will deepen its presence in federal education policy conversations as a recognized, data-informed voice that shapes decisions affecting rural students, schools, and communities. When rural education comes up in Washington, NREA should already be in the room.

Goal 5: Advance Professional Learning for Rural Educators at All Levels

NREA will develop and deliver professional learning that builds the knowledge, skills, and confidence of rural educators and leaders, designed with rural contexts at the center. By 2030, NREA will be a trusted source of professional learning that rural educators actively seek out.

Our Leadership



Dr. Melissa Sadorf
Executive Director



Dr. Bill Chapman
2026 President



Dr. Darris Means
President-Elect



Dr. Chris Lagoni
President-Elect
Designate



Dr. Devon Brenner
Immediate Past President



David M. Ardrey
Past President



John Glasgow
Higher Education
Representative



Allison Nys
Board Member at Large



Jeff Byrd
School Administrator
Representative



Dr. Marlon Murray
Board Member at Large



Dr. Stephen Johnson
State Affiliate
Representative



Jerry White
Rural Board of Education
Representative



Dr. Jerry D. Johnson
Rural Research Center
Representative



Yuri Calderon
State Affiliate
Representative



Dr. Bronwyn Ragan-Martin
State Education Agency
Representative

Join NREA Today!

Thank you in advance for joining NREA. Your support allows NREA to maintain its vital national presence and drive meaningful change. We are proud to share several major milestones and commitments to our membership that define our direction for the future:

- **Redefining our Vision, Mission, and Core Values**, grounding our advocacy in collaboration, community, innovation, and leadership.
- **Adopting a 2026-2030 Strategic Plan**, providing a clear five-goal roadmap for the next four years.
- **Continued legislative representation** through events like Hill Day, presenting at national-level conferences, and creating and promoting rural research and literature.
- **Continued dedication to recognition programs** such as the National Rural Teacher of the Year, the Chance Dissertation Award, and the NREA Hall of Fame.
- **A new lifetime membership option**, which includes lifetime complimentary attendance to the National Forum to Advance Rural Education (NFARE).
- **Discounted registration to NFARE**, as well as some partner conferences, encouraging member connection and collaboration.
- **Launching a new Strategic Partners program**, expanding resources available to our membership.
- **Expanding the State Affiliate program**, creating a stronger national network with direct ties to each state.

This list is not exhaustive, but it represents how NREA remains a catalyst for resilience, opportunity, and success in rural education. We need your support to continue this work. **Please support NREA with your membership.**

[Click to Join Now](#)



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Thank You, Partners!

Strategic Partners

These partners support our efforts to elevate rural voice and presence by offering tools, learning opportunities, and services that align with rural realities.



State Affiliates

These partners each represent their local network of rural and small schools, sharing NREA benefits and resources with their membership. We also use our national platform to promote the good work happening in these regions through communication with the State Affiliates. The names of each organization listed below are clickable links, so you can get connected in your state!

- Arizona Rural Schools Association
- Arkansas Rural Education Association
- Association of Illinois Rural & Small Schools
- Coalition of Rural & Small Schools of Virginia
- Colorado Rural Schools Alliance
- Florida School Boards Association
- Idaho Rural Schools Association
- Indiana Small & Rural Schools Association
- Kansas Association of Rural Education
- Louisiana Rural Education Association
- Michigan Association of School Boards
- Maine Department of Education
- Minnesota Rural Education Association
- Mississippi Rural Education Association
- Missouri Association of Rural Education
- Montana Rural Education Association
- Montana Small Schools Alliance
- Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association
- Nevada Association of School Boards
- New Jersey Association of School Administrators
- North Carolina Rural Education Collaborative
- North Dakota Small Organized Schools
- Oregon Small Schools Association
- Oklahoma Public School Resource Center
- Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools
- Panhandle Area Education Consortium
- Pennsylvania Association of Rural & Small Schools
- Rural Maryland Council
- Rural School Advocates of Iowa
- Rural Schools Association of New York State
- Small School Districts' Association (CA)
- South Carolina Organization of Rural Schools
- Tennessee Rural Education Association
- Texas Rural Education Association
- UWA Center For Reimagining Rural Education
- Utah Rural Schools Association
- Vermont Rural Education Association
- Washington Rural Education Center
- Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance



"Fight Child Abuse" is a free abuse prevention initiative for students in grades K-12

The free animation lessons were produced by Wonder Media for the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center Foundation.

The resources are available at FightChildAbuse.org and on YouTube at [Fight Child Abuse](https://FightChildAbuse.org).

The goal of the program is to educate students in grades K-12 about what to do when confronted with abusive behavior such as afe and unsafe touches and other physical and emotional abuse.

Every animation video in the K-3, 4-6, and teen series, emphasizes the importance of going to a parent or another trusted adult when confronted with an unsafe situation.



Scan the QR Code to Learn More



Contact: Mike Nelson

Vice President, Education and Strategic Partnerships Barbara Sinatra Children's Center Foundation in Partnership with Wonder Media

Cell: 801-368-5580 • Voice: 800-675-4123

Email: mnelson@wondermediagroup.net



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