



RURAL EDUCATION SUMMIT 2026

April 30 - May 1, 2026

MANHATTAN CONVENTION CENTER AT THE HILTON
410 S. THIRD ST., MANHATTAN, KS

DR. KAREN EPPLEY

DIRECTOR, RURAL EDUCATION CENTER



The world has changed in ways we couldn't have imagined since the last in-person Rural Education Center (REC) Summit in June 2019. Our "COVID-Best" in spring of 2020 has in many ways become part of the fabric of our everyday lives. Over six years later, the aftermath of COVID-19 continues to impact the children, teachers, leaders, and staff members in our schools. The challenges seem more daunting than ever, but no group of people is better equipped to do more with less. Rural teachers and school leaders were doing more with less before COVID and will continue doing whatever it takes for kids.

But today is about you. As a rural Kansas school leader, the 2026 Summit programming was designed exclusively for your professional learning. We hope you find community and time to connect with others who live the idea of "wearing many hats." Speakers were chosen because they know that one size rarely fits all and what "works" in one school, in one place, at one time, might or might not map onto your school and community.

While I'm new to the REC and K-State, maybe like you, I have a lifetime of experience with rural education. I'm a first-generation college graduate, former rural K-12 student and fifth-grade teacher in Northern Appalachia. As the director of the REC, I work on nationally relevant rural educational research and find external funding for projects that support teaching and learning in your schools. I'd love to hear your ideas about how we might work together. What are the most pressing issues impacting teaching and learning in your district? But maybe even more importantly, what are your bright spots? What positive changes have happened in your district, especially since we were last together in 2019?

I hope the 2026 Summit is both productive and reenergizing. Please be sure to catch me in the hall between sessions and introduce yourself. I'd love to hear about your rural district.

Karen



PROGRAM

2026 RURAL EDUCATION SUMMIT

*Thurs. & Friday, April 30 & May 1, 2026
Manhattan Convention Center at the Hilton
410 S. Third St., Manhattan*

THURSDAY

8:00–8:30 VENDOR FIRST LOOK

8:30 – BREAKFAST

9:00 WELCOME & OPENING KEYNOTE

Dr. Karen Eppley, Director of the Rural Education Center (REC)

Dr. Debbie Mercer,

Dean of the College of Education

Dan Whisler, Educator in Residence, TRANE
*Unlocking Rural Innovation: Preparing
Every Student for a Data-Driven Future*

10:15 VENDOR VISITS

10:45 BREAKOUT SESSIONS

1. *From the Classroom to the Workforce:
How to Integrate Data Confidence in
Rural Schools.* **Dan Whisler**, TRANE,
with school partners from Beloit and
Smoky Valley, Room Kings-A

2. *Navigating Difficult Dialogue (NDD)
and Hard Conversations.* **Kevin
Daniel**, FiredUP Consulting Group,
Room Kings-B

3. *The Rural Health Insurance Roadmap:
Renwick USD 267's Path to Choice.*
Brett Jennrich, Apollo Health
Insurance, Room Kings-C

11:30 VENDOR VISITS

12:00 LUNCH

12:45 AFTERNOON KEYNOTE

Dr. Mischel Miller, Executive Director KS
Educational Leadership Institute (KELI)
Leading in Rural Educational Settings

1:30 VENDOR VISITS

1:45PM BREAKOUT SESSIONS

1. *Strategic Planning: Creating and Living a Plan with Stakeholder Engagement.* **Kevin Daniel**, FiredUP Consulting Group, Room Kings-A
2. *Building the Leadership Bench: Planning for the Inevitable Changes that are Coming.* **Brian Jordan**, KASB, Room Kings-B

2:45 AFTERNOON KEYNOTE

Dr. Dan Mosler, Eldon Gideon
Dean of the College of Agriculture
*Food Systems, Natural Resources, and Rural
America: Preparing Our Students and Our
Communities for the Future*

3:30 CLOSING & INDEPENDENCE

COMMUNITY COLLEGE FAB LAB TOUR



TAMARA BALES, RURAL OUTREACH
EDUCATION DIRECTOR, RURAL POST
SECONDARY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
GRANT, INDEPENDENCE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Matthew Kittrell, Senior Director,
Industry and Employer Engagement,
Independence Community College

FRIDAY

7:40 – VENDOR VISITS

8:00 – BREAKFAST

8:20 – WELCOME

SHEA KIRSOP, KBS, A KASB COMPANY

BOB BLAIR & REX BOLEY, KARE

8:30 MORNING KEYNOTE

Dr. Darris Means, Professor of Educational Leadership and Deans Fellow for Rural Education, Clemson University, NREA President Elect
Beacons of Hope: Transformational Leadership in Rural Communities

9:15 VENDOR TIME

9:30 BREAKOUT SESSIONS

1. *The Superintendent's Playbook: Using Policy, Handbooks, Negotiations, and Job Descriptions to Lead Effectively, Location*

Lori Kopp, Assistant Executive Director of Legal Services & Attorney, KASB, Room Kings-A

2. *Building Engagement in Rural Classrooms with CW-FIT*

Katy Andrus, Project Coordinator & **Howard Wills**, Professor of Educational Psychology, KU, Kings-B

3. *Building Community Trust Through Strategic Storytelling*

Henry Whitehead, Rural Schools Collaborative, Room Kings-C

10:30 CLOSING

Dr. Darris Means, NREA President Elect

Bob Blair, KARE

Karen Eppley, Rural Education Center, Director

11:00-12:00 KARE MEETING & LUNCH

KEYNOTES



DAN WHISLER, EDUCATOR IN RESIDENCE, TRANE
UNLOCKING RURAL INNOVATION: PREPARING EVERY STUDENT FOR A DATA-DRIVEN FUTURE

Innovating the student learning experience is not just important – it's necessary – and it's possible for schools of all sizes. In this keynote, we'll look at how data is reshaping the future of work, especially in the energy industry, and discuss how schools of any size can bring more hands-on learning into traditional classrooms with a relentless focus on interdisciplinary, integrated learning.



DR. MISCHEL MILLER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR KS EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE (KELI)
LEADING IN RURAL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

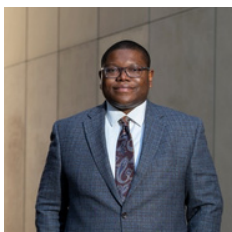
The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) supports new superintendents and principals through individualized mentoring, coaching, and yearlong professional learning designed by experienced Kansas education leaders. Through a collaborative partnership with statewide education organizations and Kansas State University, KELI helps strengthen leadership capacity so district leaders, and the communities they serve can thrive. Conversations during this session will focus on leading in rural educational settings.

KEYNOTES



**DAN MOSLER, ELDON GIDEON DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE
FOOD SYSTEMS, NATURAL RESOURCES, AND
RURAL AMERICA: PREPARING OUR STUDENTS
AND OUR COMMUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE**

Rural communities today face unprecedented changes, as disruptive technologies create both opportunities and conflict. Dr. Moser will discuss the influence of technology in food production and the wise use of natural resources, and the role of educational institutions in these transitions.



**DR. DARRIS MEANS, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND DEANS FELLOW FOR RURAL EDUCATION, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY, NREA PRESIDENT ELECT
*BEACONS OF HOPE: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL COMMUNITIES***

This keynote examines the urgent challenges shaping rural education and elevates the powerful community assets that can be mobilized in response. Drawing on transformative leadership, organizational development, and emergent strategy, the keynote offers actionable approaches for leading with purpose and serving as a beacon of hope in rural communities.

THURS. BREAKOUT SESSIONS

From the Classroom to the Workforce: How to Integrate Data Confidence in Rural Schools

Dan Whisler, TRANE, with school partners from Beloit and Smoky Valley, Room Kings-A

Join us for a practical, story-driven session focused on bringing applied, interdisciplinary learning to life in your classroom through data. Led by Christie Fouts and Adad Krug, STEM Teacher at Beloit and Science Teacher at Smoky Valley respectively. We'll walk through two examples that helped students build in-demand workforce skills—and earned national recognition for the school district along the way. You'll leave with ideas you can use immediately, no matter your grade level or content area.

Navigating Difficult Dialogue & Hard Conversations

Firedup Consulting Group, Room Kings-B

Would you trade short-term discomfort for long-term success and wins? Of course you would, but many choose not to when it comes to having hard conversations. Participants in this session will learn to embrace difficult conversations as an opportunity vs seeing them as a threat and avoiding them. Understanding that avoidance is not a strategy, but a recipe for disaster will be a focus. An overview of the four phases of navigating difficult dialogue (NDD) will be uncovered.

The Rural Health Insurance Roadmap: Renwick USD 267's Path to Choice

Brett Jennrich, Apollo Health Insurance, Kings-C

Rural health insurance often feels like a dead end—limited options, stagnant budgets, and "take it or leave it" renewals. Join Renwick USD 267 Superintendent Tim Hayden and Apollo Health Insurance to see how one district broke that cycle. We will move past traditional renewals to share an educational session on a proactive toolkit of strategies designed to give you real ideas to better control your district's coverage and costs.

THURS. BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Strategic Planning: Creating and Living a Plan with Stakeholder Engagement

Kevin Daniel, Firedup Consulting Group, Room Kings-A

Participants in this session will gain a deeper understanding of the value of having a strategic plan that is alive, agile, created with stakeholder engagement and owned vs. just “sitting on the shelf” and discussed every three to five years.

Key themes to be shared in this session include:

- Understanding the principle / concept of extreme ownership
- The eight (simple and powerful) steps and process to create a strategic school improvement plan with stakeholder feedback and input.
- The powerful outcomes that occur when you live out and own your district's / building's strategic plan.
- Simple and powerful strategies and action steps to keep leaders, staff and community engaged in a strategic school improvement process and plan.

Building the Leadership Bench: Planning for the Inevitable Changes that are Coming

Brian Jordan, KASB, Room Kings-B

In this session, participants will look at trends in leader vacancies across the state of Kansas over the last several years. They will discuss how to develop the next leader that is already working within their system. The session is designed for current superintendents as well as board members to hear about the landscape of Leadership in Kansas, along with ideas that have been successful in preparing people to lead.

The Superintendent's Playbook: Using Policy, Handbooks, Negotiations, and Job Descriptions to Lead Effectively

Lori Copp, Assistant Executive Director of Legal Services and Attorney, KASB, Room Kings-A

Managing a district often means wearing many hats. Board policies, employee handbooks, negotiated agreements, and job descriptions serve as key tools for maintaining clarity, consistency, and compliance. This presentation explores how these documents interact, how they guide personnel decisions, and how superintendents can use them to navigate complex operational and legal issues while supporting staff and maintaining effective district leadership.

Building Engagement in Rural Classrooms with CW-FIT

Katy Andrus, Project Coordinator & Howard Wills, Professor of Educational Psychology, KU, Kings-B

This session will provide an overview of CW-FIT- a classroom engagement program primarily for elementary and middle schools. Participants will learn the core components of CW-FIT and receive access to all available resources needed to implement the intervention. Rural school leaders will gain information on how to support the program which has strong evidence base for increasing engagement and reducing disruptive behavior. Grant opportunities will be discussed as Kansas rural elementary and middle schools may receive grant support for CW-FIT.

Building Community Trust Through Strategic Storytelling

Henry Whitehead, Rural School Collaborative, Kings-C

How do we ensure our community sees the incredible work happening inside our buildings? This workshop provides a hands-on guide to asset-based school communication. Effective leadership is about more than policy-- it's about the narratives that we build around our schools. In this session, school leaders will unpack a "Storytelling Toolkit" designed for the rural context. We will explore the core pillars of effective communication, identify high-impact methods for reaching community members, and learn how to transform daily wins into a powerful connective device. Join us to discover how prioritizing your story can boost internal morale and strengthen external advocacy.

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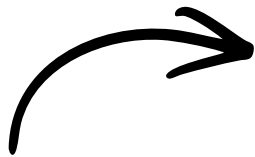
Kansas State University
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Please scan to give us
feedback for 2027!



2027 REC Summit
Thurs., April 29th and Friday, April 30th, 2027