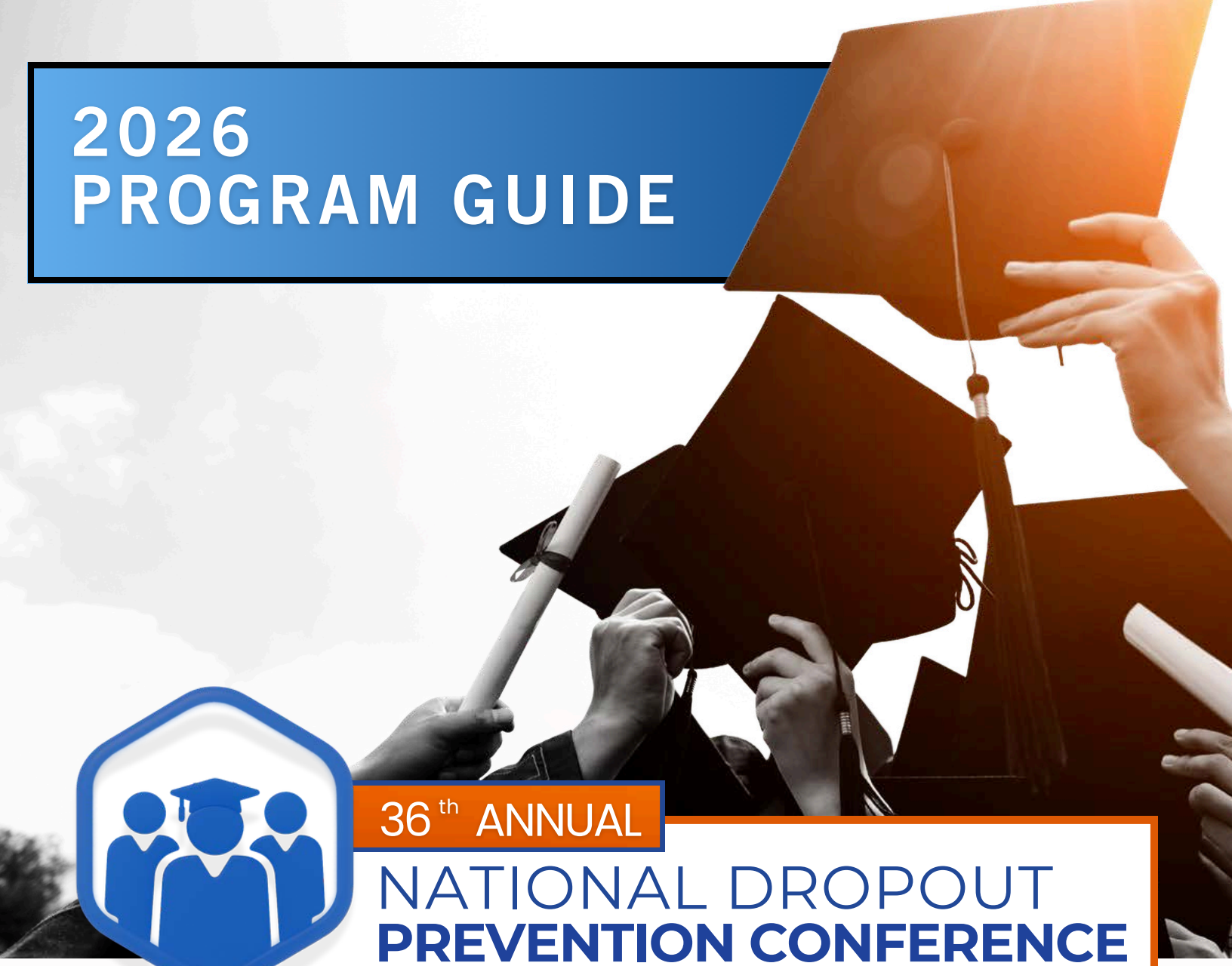
2026 PROGRAM GUIDE



36th ANNUAL NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CONFERENCE

OCTOBER 11–14, 2026 | ORLANDO, FL



EMBASSY SUITES
BY HILTON ORLANDO
LAKE BUENA VISTA SOUTH

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NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER | A division of SPN Successful Practices Network

About the National Dropout Prevention Center

Transforming Dropout Prevention into Graduation Improvement Since 1986

For four decades, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC)—a division of the Successful Practices Network (SPN)—has partnered with school districts, regional agencies, and state departments of education across all 50 states.

Our mission is grounded in a single priority: ensuring every student has a viable, supported pathway to a high school diploma. Rather than pushing one-off initiatives or short-term fixes, NDPC equips K–12 educators with field-tested frameworks, hands-on professional learning, and data-driven systems designed to produce measurable, lasting gains in student outcomes.

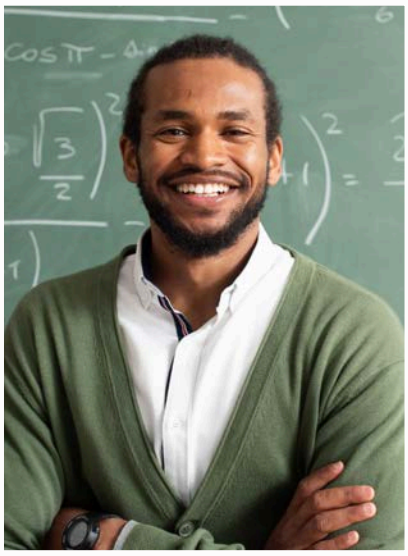


What We Do

Assessments & Action Planning: Custom partnerships—including Diploma Planning Institutes, root-cause attendance audits, and program reviews—that convert local school data into targeted graduation plans.

Trauma-Skilled™ & Attendance Frameworks: Actionable Tier 1 models that move teams beyond basic trauma awareness into practical de-escalation, resilience building, and chronic absenteeism turnaround.

Professional Learning & Credentials: National conferences, district workshops, and practitioner designations—including Trauma-Skilled Specialist and National Dropout Prevention Specialist certifications.



Bring Field-Tested Solutions to Your District

Whether your priority is lowering chronic absenteeism, training staff in trauma-skilled practices, or conducting a complete graduation system review, our team collaborates directly with your leadership to design practical, sustainable solutions.

Scan the QR Code to Connect With Our Team
Submit your information using the QR code or link below, and an NDPC specialist will reach out to discuss your district's specific needs, data trends, and partnership goals. **LINK: https://bit.ly/4hqhpi5**

Connect With Us On Site
Stop by the NDPC registration desk during the conference to speak directly with a team representative about custom partnership opportunities for your school or district.

www.DropoutPrevention.org (518) 723-2063 ndpc@dropoutprevention.org

TRAUMA-SKILLED™ SPECIALIST CERTIFICATION



TURN UNDERSTANDING INTO ACTION

Students impacted by **trauma** and **chronic stress** need more than awareness. They need **educators** and **youth-serving professionals** who know how to recognize the effects of **trauma**, **build resilience**, and put proven strategies into practice.

The **Trauma-Skilled™ Specialist Certification** from the **National Dropout Prevention Center** provides a practical pathway for developing those skills—and applying them in the settings where they matter most.

Designed for Professionals Who Work With Youth

Teachers • Administrators • Counselors • Social Workers • Student Support Staff • School Psychologists • Success Coaches • District Personnel • Youth-Serving Professionals

Your Certification Pathway

1. ENROLL & APPLY

Begin your certification journey and establish your certification record with NDPC.

2. COMPLETE MODULES 1–3

Build your understanding of trauma, resilience, supportive learning environments, and Trauma-Skilled™ instructional practices through flexible online learning.

3. COMPLETE YOUR FIELD STUDY

Put your learning into practice through a Reflective Portfolio, Action Plan, and multimedia artifact demonstrating application in your professional setting.

Learn. Apply. Make an Impact.

Certification goes beyond completing coursework. You'll connect what you learn to your own professional setting, develop strategies you can use immediately, and demonstrate how Trauma-Skilled™ practices can strengthen resilience, engagement, and student success.

Complete the certification pathway at your own pace through NDPC's online learning platform.

Questions?

Stop by the registration desk, or contact our Certification Programs Specialist at: **certification@dropoutprevention.org**

Ready to learn more?

Scan to learn more about our TSS Certification Programs or visit us online at **bit.ly/4wOaRzr**



WELCOME TO

THE 36TH ANNUAL NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CONFERENCE!

Welcome to the 36th Annual National Dropout Prevention Conference! Whether you are joining us as a superintendent, building leader, counselor, graduation coach, or classroom educator, you are part of a dedicated community committed to ensuring every student has a clear, supported path to a high school diploma. For decades, the National Dropout Prevention Center has focused on one foundational reality: lasting student persistence does not happen through isolated efforts or surface-level fixes. It happens when we build coordinated systems where every adult in the building shares responsibility for graduation outcomes.

Over the course of this conference, you can expect an experience designed entirely around practical, real-world execution rather than abstract theory. Our breakout sessions and keynotes are mapped directly across NDPC's modernized framework—Effective Strategies & Services for Graduation Improvement. You will explore concrete methods for diagnosing the root causes of chronic absenteeism, establishing trust-based family partnerships, delivering rigorous and brain-aligned active instruction, and expanding high-impact Career and Technical Education (CTE) and alternative pathways.

Most importantly, you will be learning directly from active K–12 practitioners and executive leaders who are doing this work every day. They will share the honest realities, leadership decisions, and data-driven models that have produced measurable gains in attendance, engagement, and school culture. You will have dedicated time to reflect with your peers, break out of professional silos, and evaluate what high-quality student support looks like in actionable terms.

Our goal is that you leave our time together recharged, connected to a nationwide network of colleagues, and equipped with a clear, timeline-driven implementation plan tailored to your schools. Thank you for your leadership, your dedication to our students, and the vital work you do every day.



Robert Peters, Ed.D.
Senior Vice President & Chief Academic Officer
Successful Practices Network
National Dropout Prevention Center



AGENDA

TAG YOUR PHOTOS #NDPC36

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11TH

4:00 P.M. - 7:00 P.M.	Registration Opens
7:00 P.M. - 8:00 P.M.	Evening Keynote

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12TH

7:30 A.M.	-	4:00 P.M.	Registration Open
8:30 A.M.	-	9:45 A.M.	Opening Keynote
10:00 A.M.	-	12:15 P.M.	Concurrent Breakout Sessions
12:15 P.M.	-	1:45 P.M.	Lunch/Certification Specialist Awards Ceremon
1:45 P.M.	-	4:00 P.M.	Concurrent Breakout Sessions

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13TH

7:30 A.M.	-	4:00 P.M.	Registration Open
8:30 A.M.	-	9:45 A.M.	Morning Keynote
10:00 A.M.	-	12:15 P.M.	Concurrent Breakout Sessions
12:15 P.M.	-	**1:45 P.M.**	**Lunch/*Plenary Session Panel**
1:45 P.M.	-	4:00 P.M.	Concurrent Breakout Sessions

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14TH

7:30 A.M.	-	12:00 P.M.	Registration Open
8:30 A.M.	-	10:45 A.M.	Concurrent Breakout Sessions
11:00 A.M.	-	12:00 P.M.	Closing Session

PLENARY SESSION PANEL

PALMS BALLROOM A-B-C-D

Tuesday, October 13th - 12:15 P.M. - 1:45 P.M.

The Blueprint Is Real — Powerful conversations with five executive leaders committed to turning evidence into action.

Aveene Coleman *Director of Discipline & Attendance, South Carolina Department of Education;* ***Wachera Ragland-Brown*** *Chief Academic Officer, Bayonne School District;* ***Alicia Grismer****, Director of State School Improvement, Arizona Department of Education;****Dr. Tricia Mooney,*** *Superintendent of Hermiston School District;* ***Melvin Marshall*** *Assistant Superintendent, The School District of Philadelphia*

The National Dropout Prevention Center focuses on proven, real-world solutions. This panel answers the ultimate question keeping practitioners up at night: how do you actually do it? Five executive leaders share the unfiltered story of moving beyond awareness into sustained implementation. They will discuss building cultures of shared responsibility, mapping resources directly to at-risk youth, and deploying alternative pathways to reconnect disconnected students. Hear the exact moments that challenged their assumptions, changed daily practices, and proved what it takes to scale real change.



HELPFUL INFO

SESSION EVALUATIONS

Don't forget to complete your session evaluations in the **SPN Events App** for each session you attend. Your feedback is crucial for continuous improvement and planning future conferences. Thank you in advance for your participation!

NAME BADGES

Please wear your name badge at all times. Your name badge grants you access to all sessions and refreshment breaks.

FOOD & BEVERAGE

Morning Coffee & Teas: 8:00 A.M. - 10:00 A.M.
Lunch: Monday & Tuesday from 12:15 P.M - 1:45 P.M.
Afternoon Refreshments: 2:45 P.M. - 3:45 P.M.



Download the SPN Events App!

For full details including presenter info, session descriptions and more, scan the QR code on the front page to download the SPN Events App.

View on a Laptop

Use the link below to view the app on a laptop

https://cvent.me/K8XQoV

CERTIFICATION CREDITS

If you are working toward the National Dropout Prevention Specialist Certification or the Trauma-Skilled™ Specialist Certification, you can earn credits by attending designated sessions during the conference. At the conclusion of each qualifying session, a certification slide will appear with a QR code. Simply scan the code and complete the transcript form to record your attendance. Once submitted, you will receive a confirmation notice for your records.

All breakout sessions at this conference qualify for NDPC Specialist Certification credits. Sessions that apply toward the Trauma-Skilled™ Specialist Certification are clearly identified in this printed program guide and in the SPN App. You will see the words TSS Certification Session printed in red at the end of the session description, as well as a red block on the conference schedule grid.

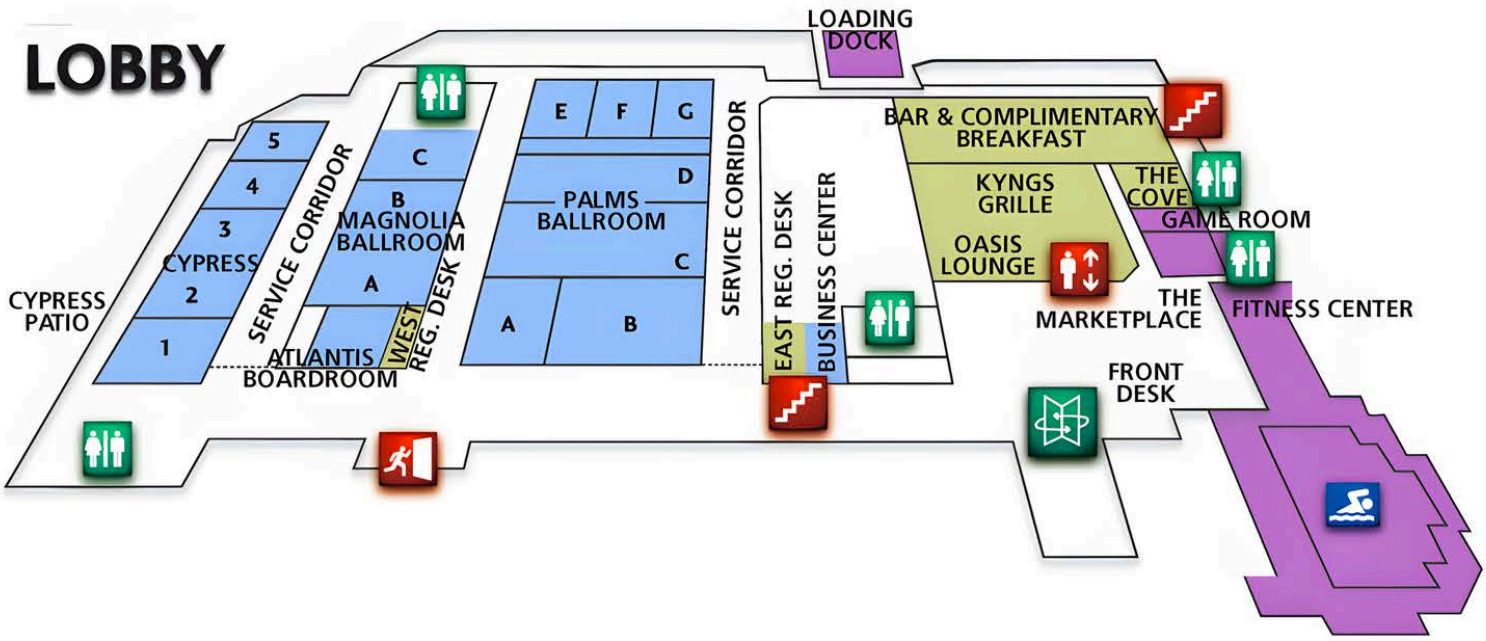
If you need assistance or have additional questions about either certification, please stop by the conference services desk, where staff will be glad to help.

WiFi

Network: Hilton Honors Meeting
Password: NDPC2026



FLOOR MAP



HOW TO NAVIGATE BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Every concurrent breakout session at this conference is intentionally mapped to the National Dropout Prevention Center's core research framework: Effective Strategies & Services for Graduation Improvement.

Rather than sifting through an unstructured list of presentations, you can use these strategy alignments to target your district's specific priorities, coordinate session coverage across your team, and build a cohesive implementation plan to take back to your schools.

At the end of every breakout session summary, you will find an Effective Strategies & Services Alignment tag color-coded to one of our four operational pillars:

Share Collective Responsibility for All Students
Focus: Systemic school culture, building-wide leadership, collaborative intervention teams, and utilizing data to uncover the root causes of chronic absenteeism and student struggle.

Build Supportive Networks for All Students
Focus: Practical mechanics of relationship-driven student support, mentoring models, student resilience, and building trust-based, two-way partnerships with families and community advocates.

Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies
Focus: Treating daily classroom instruction as a primary retention tool through active learning models, personalized instruction, student voice, and purposeful technology integration.

Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways
Focus: Structuring responsive alternative education settings, credit recovery systems, and career-connected technical education (CTE) pathways tied directly to future student success.

KEYNOTE PRESENTERS

Located in Palms Ballroom A-B-C-D

#NDPC36



Sunday, October 11 - 7:00 P.M – 8:00 P.M.

Chase Moore



Monday, October 12 - 8:30 A.M. – 9:45 A.M.

Dr. Robert Peters

Senior Vice President, National Dropout Prevention Center | Successful Practices Network

Every Student. Every Chance. Every Day.

"What would it take to ensure that every single student graduates?"

What if the answer to the graduation crisis has been right in front of us all along? Dr. Robert Peters pulls back the curtain on the National Dropout Prevention Center's evidence-based blueprint for graduation improvement and shows exactly how to put it to work starting Monday morning. This is not theory. These are the real practices real schools are using right now to move the needle. From cultures of shared responsibility where every adult owns every student's success, to AI fluency programs that re-engage the most at-risk learners, Dr. Peters walks through what high-performing schools are doing differently. You will hear how family partnerships bridge the gap between home and school, how mentoring and service learning ignite resilience, and why Career Technical Education is emerging as one of the most powerful forces for keeping students enrolled and excited about their futures. Whether you are a principal, a district leader, a counselor, or a passionate advocate — you will leave with a renewed sense of purpose and a concrete vision for what is possible.



Tuesday, October 13 - 8:30 A.M. – 9:45 A.M.

Dr. Linda Jordan

Senior Learning Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center

The Neuroscience of Hope: Helping Students Believe in What's Possible

Hope is more than positive thinking—it influences how students learn, persist, and respond to challenges. This inspiring session explores the neuroscience of hope and the powerful role educators play in helping students believe in themselves and their futures. Participants will discover how relationships, belonging, goals, agency, and success influence motivation and resilience, while gaining practical, brain-based strategies that communicate a life-changing message to every student: I believe in you. Your future matters.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12

BREAKOUT BLOCK 1 10:00 A.M. – 11:00 A.M.

PALMS BALLROOM E F G

Enrolled, Enlisted, Employed: Driving Academic Recovery and Long-Term Student Success

Dr. Melissa Balknight *Deputy Superintendent, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*

Join Dr. Melissa Balknight, Deputy Superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, for an impactful session on advancing academic recovery and long-term student achievement. Discover how CMS—the nation's 16th-largest district—navigated post-pandemic challenges to achieve historic two-year gains in graduation rates, math, and literacy, all while managing budget constraints after ESSER funding sunset. This workshop introduces the "3 E's" framework (Enrolled, Enlisted, or Employed), a student-centered model that ensures every learner is prepared for postsecondary success. Participants will gain actionable, budget-conscious strategies to accelerate academic progress and integrate Career and Technical Education (CTE) directly into core instruction. Attendees will leave with a clear vision and a collaborative service-delivery model tailored to meet the needs of the whole child in their districts. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways**

MAGNOLIA A-B

Foundations of the Trauma-Skilled Schools Model: Recognizing When Trauma and Chronic Stress Show Up

Nancy Nielsen, *Senior Consultant & Certification Program Specialist, National Dropout Prevention Center; and* ***Dr. Linda Jordan,*** *Senior Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Trauma and chronic stress rarely arrive at school with labels. Instead, they manifest subtly in how students and adults think, learn, behave, and build relationships. This foundational session introduces the Trauma-Skilled Schools Model and examines the neuroscience behind how chronic stress affects brain development, cognitive function, and emotional regulation. Educators will learn to look beneath observable, disruptive behaviors to understand root causes rather than simply reacting to surface symptoms. Participants will explore how adult stress directly influences classroom dynamics and co-regulation. The session provides practical strategies for reframing challenging behaviors, practicing self-care, and de-escalating conflict to cultivate emotionally safe learning environments. Attendees will leave with actionable tools to transition from reactive discipline toward skilled, intentional, and trauma-skilled responses. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Share Collective Responsibility for All Students** **TRAUMA-SKILLED SCHOOLS CERTIFICATION SESSION**

MAGNOLIA C

Keeping the Streak: Changing the Culture of Attendance and Achievement at Armand Larive Middle School

Dr. A.J. Nottingham*, Leadership Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center; and* ***Delfino Garcia****, Principal at Armand Larive Middle School, Hermiston School District, Oregon*

Drawing on the psychology of gaming, this session presents a research-based framework for "gamifying" credit recovery and traditional classroom tasks. Teachers will learn to replace "all-or-nothing" grading with XP (experience points) and "leveling" systems that foster a growth mindset and persistence. This strategy is especially effective at re-engaging Tier 3 students who have experienced academic failure. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

From Struggle to Strength: Using the Brain Architecture Game to Understand Stress, Support, and Student Success

Dr. Tammy Pawloski, *Professor & Director, Francis Marion University Center of Excellence*

What if understanding why students struggle could transform how we respond to them and change their life trajectories? This interactive session uses The Brain Architecture Game—a hands-on, neuroscience-grounded simulation—to show how early relationships and environments physically shape brain development. In small groups, participants will build physical models of brain architecture to see firsthand how protective relationships foster resilience while chronic, unbuffered stress weakens developmental foundations. Through guided reflection, attendees will connect the simulation to real-world classrooms, families, and community systems. The session translates complex research on stress regulation and relational health into a shared, accessible language for educators and leaders. Participants will leave with practical, research-based strategies to strengthen protective factors, reduce environmental stress, and cultivate compassionate settings that promote long-term student success. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

CYPRESS 4-5

Project-Based Learning on a Teacher's Schedule

Thomas Hawkins, *Director of Innovation, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Project-based learning works well for students who have disengaged from school, but a good project takes hours to plan. This session shows teachers how to use AI to draft driving questions, align projects with standards, build rubrics, and adjust tasks for different students. It also explains where the output needs a teacher's review before it reaches students. Participants leave with sample prompts and a planning template. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies**

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12

BREAKOUT BLOCK 2 **11:15 A.M. – 12:15 P.M.**

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Who's Really Struggling? When Student Behavior Reflects Adult Systems

Dr. Doran Gresham, *Assistant Professor, The George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development*

Student behavior is often treated as an individual problem, but it more accurately reflects the systems adults design and maintain. This session challenges punitive, reaction-driven discipline and makes the case for proactive, positive systems that give students real reasons to engage, comply, and persist in school. Using a real case study from a school system in Hermiston, Oregon, participants will explore how creative engagement strategies, clear behavioral contracts, and authentic work opportunities can dramatically shift behavior and belonging, including for students with disabilities. Attendees will leave with concrete ideas for redesigning school systems so behavior improves because purpose and connection increase, not because punishment escalates. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MAGNOLIA A-B

Unpacking the Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™

Adam Wallenfang, *Director of Consultant Content & Training, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

In today's rapidly evolving world, the demands on students—and the educators who serve them—have changed dramatically. From the rise of Artificial Intelligence to shifting workforce expectations, schools can no longer focus solely on content mastery. Students must develop the ability to think critically, apply their learning in real-world contexts, and persist through complex challenges. The Rigor–Relevance–Resilience (R³) Learning Model™, developed by SPN, offers a practical framework to help educators transform instruction to meet this moment. This professional learning experience introduces educators to the why, what, and how of the R³ Model. Participants will explore the urgency of adopting future-focused instruction, examine the research and neuroscience that support change, and engage deeply with each of the 3 Rs—Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience. Through examples, video case studies, and collaborative reflection, educators will begin to identify how their instruction, leadership, and/or school systems can evolve to ensure that every student is prepared for the world beyond K-12 schooling. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies**

MAGNOLIA C

From CTE to Career Identity: Building Graduation On-Ramps

Mr. Scott Depew, *Director of Secondary Education, Hermiston School District, Oregon*

How do we move beyond merely offering CTE courses to ensure every student graduates with clear direction and purpose? Hermiston School District has established a coherent 7–12 system that shifts career readiness from compliance to identity. Grounded in a "Portrait of a Graduate" framework—which emphasizes communication, collaboration, and complex problem-solving—this model transforms career exploration into clear "graduation on-ramps" that directly connect student strengths to future opportunities. Participants will examine this two-phase structure, moving from middle school aptitude discovery to high school CTE Programs of Study aligned with state graduation requirements. Featuring authentic student perspectives, this session provides district leaders, counselors, and educators with actionable strategies to align CTE pathways, organize cohesive, career-connected experiences, and ensure all students graduate future-ready. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

Taming the Test: How Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Turn State Testing into Student Success

Erin Nielsen *Teacher, Columbia County School District, Florida*

What if the key to higher test scores isn't more test prep? In this engaging, practical session, participants will explore how a middle school civics classroom transformed a high-stakes state assessment into an opportunity for authentic learning by intentionally applying rigor, relevance, and relationships. With an 86% state assessment pass rate, well above the state average, and exceptional outcomes for students with disabilities, this presentation shows that meaningful engagement and a strong classroom culture can outperform worksheets and endless review packets. Through real classroom examples, including rap battles over the Articles of Confederation, courtroom simulations featuring stolen Kit Kats, escape rooms set in Ancient Greece and Rome, and student-centered civic experiences, attendees will discover practical strategies for making rigorous content memorable and personally relevant. Participants will leave with research-backed strategies they can implement immediately to increase engagement, strengthen relationships, improve school climate, and ultimately raise student achievement across all content areas.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

CYPRESS 4-5

The Power of Student Ownership

Meghan Lefevers, *Principal, Warlick Academy; Kim Harmon, Behavior Specialist, Warlick Academy, North Carolina*

Meet one school that leaned into building the executive functioning skill of metacognition for all students. Simply put, we taught students and gave them opportunities to capture and own their improvement data. In just one year, the school saved over 150 days of OSS, drastically increased proficient exam scores and student growth, and increased the number of students graduating from high school. You are sure to leave this session with a plan to do the same in your school! **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12

BREAKOUT BLOCK 3 1: 45 P.M. – 2:45 P.M.

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Finding the Other Why: Four Lenses for Seeing School-Based Challenges Differently

Nancy Nielsen, *Senior Consultant & Certification Program Specialist, National Dropout Prevention Center*

Educators often talk about "finding your why," but when students struggle, another question arises: why are we seeing these specific patterns? Schools invest immense time and resources in interventions, yet good strategies often fail because they target the wrong underlying issue—leading to "random acts" of intervention. Before adding another program, teams need a practical framework to re-examine problems from a fresh perspective and ensure solutions match the true root cause. This session introduces the Four Lenses—Stability, Connection, Engagement, and Achievement—to create a deliberate pause between problem and solution. Participants will learn to challenge initial assumptions, analyze familiar school-based struggles, and evaluate whether current efforts align with actual student needs. Attendees will leave equipped to stop simply doing more and focus limited resources on high-impact, targeted strategies that fit the problem. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MAGNOLIA A-B

The Heron Model: A Trauma-Informed, Student-Centered Approach to Virtual Alternative Education

Emilee Fidler, *Academic Administrator;* ***Dr. Alexandra Deremer****, Assistant Academic Administrator;* ***Katherine Lukas****, Student Success Coordinator;* ***Heidi Shealy****, Graduation Coach; and* ***Courtney Ballinger,*** *Senior Success Coach, Heron Virtual Academy of SC*

Serving at-risk students virtually demands far more than delivering online instruction—it requires interconnected systems that holistically address academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and attendance needs. As South Carolina's first trauma-certified virtual alternative school, Heron Virtual Academy has developed a student-centered framework to eliminate learning barriers and drive student persistence and graduation success. This session explores how an interdisciplinary team integrates multi-tiered systems of support, flexible scheduling, trauma-informed practices, and graduation coaching into a cohesive virtual model. Presenters will share practical insights and hard-won lessons from scaling enrollment and re-engaging students who historically struggled in traditional settings. Participants will leave with scalable strategies for cross-functional staff collaboration, flexible scheduling, and integrated MTSS frameworks adaptable across virtual, alternative, and traditional school environments. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways. TRAUMA-SKILLED SCHOOLS CERTIFICATION SESSION**

MAGNOLIA C

Breaking the Cycle: Re-Engaging Families as a Strategy for Dropout Prevention

Chrystal Hawkins*, Education Strategist — Family Engagement, Systems, Team Development, Jefferson County Public Schools, Kentucky/Chrystal Power Cons.*

Students at risk of dropping out are often connected to families facing repeated engagement barriers, such as inconsistent communication and prior negative school experiences. This Cycle of Family Disengagement directly affects attendance, behavior, and academic success. This session explores how strategic family engagement is a critical lever for dropout prevention and helps educators examine how current practices may inadvertently create barriers to partnership. Participants will explore real-world implementation stories—including missteps, adjustments, and a featured case study in which a parent leadership group co-designed solutions to improve digital access and school connections. Attendees will leave with practical, research-based strategies to rebuild trust, eliminate participation obstacles, and immediately engage families as collaborative partners in keeping students on track for graduation. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Build Supportive Networks for All Students**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

Making the Case for Your Program

Thomas Hawkins*, Director of Innovation, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

When budgets tighten, programs get cut by people who do not know what your program actually does. This session is for the coaches, sponsors, coordinators, and counselors who run those programs, and it covers how to document your program's value before someone else estimates it for you. Participants work through the Strategic Reinvestment questions applied to their own program: what it costs, who it serves, what it produces, and what would happen to those students without it. The session then covers where AI helps assemble that case, including organizing attendance and participation data, drafting a one-page summary a principal can forward, and building charts that answer a specific question rather than decorate a slide. It also covers the limits: AI will invent a statistic if you let it, it cannot establish that your program caused an outcome, and student-level data does not belong in a general-purpose chatbot. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

CYPRESS 4-5

Every Student Counts: Proven Strategies for Attendance, Engagement, and Dropout Prevention

Mrs. Tonya Cupp*, Director of Instructional Programs, Cullman County Schools, Alabama; and* ***Dr. Kay Warfield****, Instructional Services Administrator, Alabama Department of Education*

Chronic absenteeism and student disengagement are among the strongest predictors of dropout rates, making early intervention and intentional systems critical for student success. This session will explore practical, data-driven strategies to improve attendance, strengthen student engagement, and reduce dropout risk across diverse school settings. Participants will examine best practices, including early warning systems, relationship-centered interventions, family engagement, and cross-functional team collaboration. Through real-world examples and actionable frameworks, attendees will leave with tools to identify at-risk students, implement targeted supports, and build a culture where every student feels connected and accountable. This session is ideal for district and campus leaders seeking sustainable approaches to increase attendance, improve outcomes, and ensure every student stays on the path to graduation. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12

BREAKOUT BLOCK 4 **3:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.**

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Wired to Learn: Applying Neuroscience to Modern Learning Strategies.

Dr. Linda Jordan *Senior Learning Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Today's learners navigate unprecedented levels of information, distraction, and cognitive load. This presentation bridges insights from modern neuroscience with proven learning strategies to help learners thrive in fast-paced, digitally rich environments. Grounded in how the brain learns, remembers, and adapts, this session explores the neural mechanisms that underlie attention, motivation, memory, and cognitive flexibility. Participants will discover why traditional learning approaches often fail—and how strategies such as spaced practice, retrieval, interleaving, metacognition, and emotionally relevant learning can significantly improve retention and transfer. Designed for today's learners, the presentation highlights practical, brain-aligned techniques that support focus, deepen understanding, and promote long-term learning. Attendees will leave with actionable strategies to apply immediately to enhance engagement, build durable knowledge, and design learning experiences that align with how the brain is wired to learn. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies**

MAGNOLIA A-B

If We Want Students to Stay, We Have to Listen: Student Voice as a Strategy for Attendance, Engagement, and Dropout Prevention

Dr. Gina Upshaw *Director, School District of Philadelphia*

Standard early warning data like attendance and grades identify which students are struggling, but rarely explain why. Students hold key insights into the barriers they face and the support they need. This session examines how embedding student voice into attendance interventions, MTSS structures, and dropout prevention shifts schools from adult-driven compliance to student-centered environments that prioritize trust, belonging, and shared problem-solving. Participants will explore strategies for navigating real-world implementation challenges, including building trust, securing staff buy-in, and establishing effective feedback loops that translate input into action. Educators will leave with an adaptable framework and practical tools—such as empathy interview prompts, survey templates, and listening session guides—to identify the root causes of absenteeism and integrate student feedback directly into district support systems.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: **Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MAGNOLIA C

Designing CTE Learning Experiences that Keep Students Engaged, Supported, and on Track

Mike Woods*, Director, CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York; and* ***Tanner Thompson****, Partnerships and Learning Systems Lead, CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York*

Career and Technical Education is a powerful dropout-prevention strategy, but access alone is not enough. Students need relevant, accessible learning environments that anticipate learner variability and reduce barriers, especially for special populations. This session introduces resources developed by the CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York (facilitated by the Successful Practices Network) to help educators strengthen access, equity, and engagement through Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Participants will explore practical UDL applications across CTE classrooms, labs, work-based learning, and career pathways spanning fourteen national career clusters. Through guided practice and discussion, attendees will learn how intentional design fosters belonging, builds student confidence, and improves persistence. Educators will leave with tools and actionable strategies to advance both CTE achievement and district-wide dropout prevention.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: **Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

Building a Belief System: Culture of Learning and Restorative Practice in Unique Communities

Abby Ferguson *Principal, The Chiles Academy*

Culture is the primary driver of successful dropout interventions and the critical bridge between policy and practice. Grounded in the lived experience of an alternative charter school serving pregnant and parenting teens, this session demonstrates how building a shared belief system rooted in safety, accountability, and community ownership can transform a high-discipline, low-engagement environment into a thriving, relationship-centered community. Participants will examine practical strategies for operationalizing community norms, overcoming staff misalignment, and using restorative practices and circle-based dialogue to de-escalate conflict. Attendees will leave with a framework for assessing school culture, actionable tools for circle facilitation, and embodiment-based techniques—such as scenario role-play—that strengthen emotional regulation and build a lasting foundation for student re-engagement. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13

BREAKOUT BLOCK 1 10:00 A.M. – 11:00 A.M.

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

The Power of Missed Opportunities: Why Every Interaction Matters

Dr. Bryan Marshall *Associate State Superintendent. Mississippi Department of Education*

Attendance is often viewed through the lens of compliance and reporting, yet behind every record is a student whose future can be shaped by daily adult interactions. Rather than treating attendance as an administrative task, this interactive session challenges educators, leaders, and support staff to reframe it as a continuous series of opportunities. Through compelling stories and real-world examples, attendees will explore how small acts of persistence—a phone call, a home visit, or a second chance—can become pivotal turning points for disengaged learners. Participants will examine the root drivers of chronic absenteeism and gain practical strategies to build proactive support systems before concerns become crises. Educators will leave with actionable tools to strengthen family partnerships, build trust, and cultivate a school culture where every interaction helps keep students connected, valued, and on track to graduate. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Share Collective Responsibility for All Students

MAGNOLIA A-B

Growing Resilience: Cultivating Connection and Belonging Through a Schoolwide Garden Initiative

Mercedes Thurston, Assistant Principal | School Site Administrator, Spectrum Academy; and Nayomie Duran, Science Educator, Spectrum Academy

At Spectrum Academy, an alternative high school serving previously disconnected students, a schoolwide garden initiative evolved into a powerful movement that fosters engagement, resilience, and personal growth. Rooted in the core needs for connection, belonging, and autonomy, the garden serves as a living metaphor: planting, tending, and sustaining a seed mirror students' own development. The physical space amplifies student voices, encourages shared responsibility, and seamlessly integrates cross-curricular learning with social-emotional support. This session shares practical, replicable strategies for launching and sustaining an experiential learning initiative that reconnects disengaged youth. Attendees will learn to collaborate across staff and student lines to create hands-on learning opportunities, leaving equipped with actionable tools to help students build resilience, rewrite their stories, and take root in their educational journeys. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Build Supportive Networks for All Students **TRAUMA-SKILLED SCHOOLS CERTIFICATION SESSION**

MAGNOLIA C

Strategic Resource Allocation: Proving Return on Investment and Transforming a District

Jeremy Batchelor *Superintendent, Youngstown City School District*

Future-ready school systems require more than balanced budgets—they require the intentional alignment of people, time, and resources to achieve measurable student outcomes. This session shows how school districts can move beyond traditional budgeting and adopt a Return on Investment (ROI) mindset that drives long-term sustainability and system effectiveness. Grounded in real-world leadership, the presentation links the NDPC/SPN ROI strategy to practical implementation in a high-need, urban school setting. Using the Youngstown City School District as a case study, participants will explore how a financially strained system shifted from reactive budgeting to strategic resource allocation, avoided deep programmatic cuts, and redesigned staffing to improve efficiency. Attendees will leave with a clear ROI framework for identifying inefficiencies, aligning investments with academic priorities, and building sustainable, outcomes-driven district operations. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Share Collective Responsibility for All Students

CYPRESS 1-2-3

GPS (Game Plan System) for Improving Student Attendance

Hal Dunlap *Senior Consultant, National Dropout Prevention Center*

Chronic absenteeism is devastating, stripping students of learning opportunities and depriving society of the benefits of high graduation rates. This session introduces the Game Plan System (GPS), a coordinated framework designed to reduce absenteeism. Like a navigational system, attendance GPS relies on three components: knowing where you are, defining your destination, and charting an effective route. This final step is particularly challenging for students with diverse backgrounds and learning needs. When students lack a clear route toward their goals, they often lose interest in attending school. While many schools implement piecemeal attendance initiatives with limited success, GPS integrates diverse strategies into a purposeful, intentional, and systemic plan. Participants will learn how to unify isolated attendance efforts into a comprehensive framework that drives student engagement and long-term success.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students

CYPRESS 4-5

A Graduation Ecosystem: How Coordinated Alternative Pathways, Special Education Supports, and Workforce Programs Prevent Student Disengagement

Kristina MacBury *Principal Sarah Pyle Academy/ Christina School District; and* ***Rebecca Ryan*** *Director of Student Services, Christina School District*

Across schools nationwide, student disengagement rarely happens overnight—it stems from accumulated academic, personal, and mental health barriers that traditional systems were not designed to address. This session examines how Delaware's Christina School District re-engineered dropout prevention by creating a comprehensive, interconnected ecosystem of educational pathways to meet complex student needs while maintaining clear graduation standards. Participants will explore how the district intentionally aligns specialized programs—including the nationally recognized Sarah Pyle Academy, employability skills networks, virtual options, and specialized Special Education supports—to ensure students do not fall through the cracks. Attendees will learn to build seamless, cross-departmental partnerships that integrate alternative education with Special Education, leaving with replicable frameworks and practical tools to design fluid graduation pathways in their own districts.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13

BREAKOUT BLOCK 2 **11:15 A.M. – 12:15 P.M.**

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Beyond Academics: A Turnaround Principal's Blueprint for Student Support Services

***Dr. Patrice Faison**, Associate Superintendent of Student Support Services, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina*

The most successful school turnarounds don't happen because schools focus only on instruction. They happen when supports are aligned to remove barriers to learning. This session explores how to intentionally align attendance, mental health, counseling, behavior, and school culture to drive academic outcomes actively. Drawing on the perspective of a turnaround principal now leading student support services, you'll get concrete strategies for breaking down silos and using every support as a lever for achievement. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MAGNOLIA A-B

Trauma-Skilled Schools and the Culture of Resilience: What to Do When Trauma and Chronic Stress Show Up

***Nancy Nielsen**, Senior Consultant & Certification Program Specialist, National Dropout Prevention Center; and **Dr. Linda Jordan**, Senior Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Understanding trauma is important, but becoming Trauma-Skilled requires translating that knowledge into intentional action. This session shifts the focus from simply identifying the effects of trauma and chronic stress toward actively cultivating everyday conditions that foster resilience and growth. Participants will examine five core resilience factors—connection, belonging, achievement, autonomy, and fulfillment—and explore how to embed each systematically into school culture, daily instructional practices, and adult-student relationships. Through interactive reflection, guided discussion, and practical application exercises, attendees will evaluate their own school environments through a Trauma-Skilled lens. Educators and leaders will leave equipped to identify immediate opportunities within their specific roles to strengthen resilience, elevate student voice, and advance organizational trauma-skilled implementation. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Build Supportive Networks for All Students TRAUMA-SKILLED SCHOOLS CERTIFICATION SESSION**

MAGNOLIA C

From the Cheap Seats to Center Stage: Using Music, Culture, and the Arts to Teach English in Special Education

***Dr. Doran Gresham**, Assistant Professor, The George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development*

Students with disabilities are often positioned on the margins of literacy instruction, given simplified tasks rather than meaningful access to language, culture, and expression. This session explores how music, spoken word, and culturally grounded artistic practices can serve as powerful entry points for teaching English concepts to students with special needs. Participants will examine how rhythm, lyrics, storytelling, and performance can support vocabulary development, reading comprehension, syntax, and expressive language while honoring students' identities and lived experiences. The session emphasizes moving beyond compliance-based instruction toward high-interest, high-expectation learning experiences that invite student voice and participation. Attendees will leave with practical ideas for integrating music and culture into special education literacy instruction, not as enrichment or reward, but as a rigorous and engaging instructional approach that brings students from the margins to the center of the learning experience. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

The "Love Language" of School-Community Partnerships

***Dr. A.J. Nottingham**, Leadership Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Schools are the heart of their communities, yet many district-family relationships remain purely transactional. This interactive session introduces the "Family Engagement Love Languages" framework to help educators move beyond basic parent involvement and build authentic, long-term commitment. Grounded in evidence-based messaging techniques, the presentation demonstrates how personalized, intentional communication can significantly strengthen trust and improve student attendance—particularly within rural educational contexts. Participants will learn how to shift from transactional outreach to a dynamic communication cadence that builds lasting social capital with families. Attendees will leave with practical tools to implement immediate, high-impact strategies, including a customized "Family Engagement Menu" designed to overcome unique rural logistics like geographic distance and transportation barriers.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Build Supportive Networks for All Students

CYPRESS 4-5

Beyond the Checklist: Formative Feedback as a Catalyst for Change

***Dr. Jerad Farley,** Director of Elementary Education, Hermiston School District, Oregon; and **Dr. Pete Perez**, Superintendent of Schools, Othello School District, Washington*

What if the single biggest lever for student achievement isn't a new program but how we talk to teachers about their practice? Research and two decades of district leadership point to the same truth: feedback that develops teachers moves the needle more than feedback that merely rates them. This session contrasts evaluative and formative feedback and, through real district results, shows how shifting principals from evaluators to instructional coaches can transform a system. Attendees will leave with a practical, research-grounded model for building a culture where formative feedback drives principal, teacher, and ultimately student growth, along with a clear first step to start that shift on Monday morning. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13

BREAKOUT BLOCK 3 1:45 P.M. – 2:45 P.M.

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Growing Great Human Beings: The Neuroscience of Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience

Dr. Linda Jordan *Senior Learning Consultant, Successful Practices Network*

Students' feelings, engagement, and thinking in the classroom are deeply rooted in how the brain learns best. This session links neuroscience research to the R³ Framework (Rigor, Relevance, Resilience) to help educators intentionally design learning environments where students thrive academically and emotionally. Participants will explore how key brain systems—including the prefrontal cortex and dopamine-based motivation pathways—influence attention, memory, curiosity, and persistence. Moving beyond theory into action, educators will examine practical classroom strategies and observable "look-fors" aligned with each R³ dimension. Attendees will learn to reduce cognitive overload, foster belonging, and support student well-being without adding more to their plates—equipping them to cultivate resilient, curious thinkers through brain-aligned practices.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

MAGNOLIA A-B

The Bayonne Bridge: Moving from Siloed Systems to Integrated Student Success

Dr. Wachera Ragland-Brown*, Chief Academic Officer;* ***Monique Bullock****, Principal, Nicholas Oresko Community School; and* ***Dr. Karen Fiermonte****, Principal, Dr. Walter F. Robinson Community School, Bayonne Public Schools, New Jersey*

Are your academic interventions and SEL supports living in separate worlds? Many districts struggle with "initiative fatigue" because siloed student-success systems treat academics and social-emotional well-being as separate domains. Join Bayonne Public Schools' Chief Academic Officer for an honest look at how one district is "trending toward integration." This session moves beyond traditional discipline to explore how the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) can serve as a unified framework for bringing minds and hearts together.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students

MAGNOLIA C

Supporting Diverse Learners in CTE Programs

Mike Woods*, Director, CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York; and* ***Tanner Thompson****, Partnerships and Learning Systems Lead, CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York*

Students enter CTE programs with diverse strengths, experiences, and support needs. To help these learners access opportunities and excel in academic and technical environments, educators must move beyond general awareness and provide targeted support. This session introduces two specialized resources from the CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York (facilitated by the Successful Practices Network) that help educators support special populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners. Participants will examine key considerations for diverse learner groups, identify common barriers to participation, and learn actionable strategies to strengthen program completion. Through guided discussion and resource exploration, attendees will learn practical steps to implement in classrooms, labs, and work-based learning settings —leaving with tools to build responsive CTE environments where every student can persist and thrive.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Offer High-Impact Learning Pathways

CYPRESS 1-2-3

Family Matters: Seeing Families Differently

Dr. Felicia Turner*, Senior Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

What if the families we sometimes describe as “uninvolved,” “unresponsive,” or “hard to reach” are facing barriers we haven’t yet recognized? Perhaps they’re not hard to reach; we simply need to rethink how we reach them. In Part I of the Family Matters journey, participants will challenge common assumptions about family engagement and examine how school practices and everyday interactions shape whether families feel seen, valued, welcomed, and heard. Through reflection, discussion, and practical strategies, participants will explore the difference between parent involvement and authentic family engagement and consider the school experience from families’ perspectives. The journey begins with a simple but powerful shift: before we can effectively engage families, we must first acknowledge who they are, what they bring, and how they experience us.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Build Supportive Networks for All Students

CYPRESS 4-5

Imagine If They Knew We Cared: Building Systems That Keep Students Connected

Elizabeth Altman*, Director of the Liberty Partnerships Program at Suffolk County Community College;* ***Andrea Modeste,*** *Project Director of the Liberty Partnerships Program at SUNY Niagara; and* ***Crystal Parkhurst****, Project Director of the Liberty Partnerships Program at Marist University*

Students who appear disengaged are often communicating something far more complicated than “I don’t care.” What changes when we move beyond attendance, behavior, and grades and ask what students need to feel known, connected, capable, and able to envision a future? Drawing on New York State’s Liberty Partnerships Program, this session explores how a statewide dropout-prevention initiative translates research into an integrated system of support. Through statewide perspectives and project-level examples, presenters will examine six interconnected priorities—emotional wellness, belonging, engagement, leadership, future readiness, and academic success—and demonstrate how relationships, student voice, individualized planning, and school, higher education, family, and community partnerships work together to interrupt disengagement. Participants will consider how these principles can be adapted within their own schools and communities. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Build Supportive Networks for All Students

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13

BREAKOUT BLOCK 4 3:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Keeping the Fire Burning: Rediscovering Joy in the Journey

Nancy Nielsen *Certification Programs Specialist, National Dropout Prevention Center*

Amid lesson plans, endless emails, and data reports, the original spark that drew educators to the profession can easily be buried. Education is about lighting a fire in students, but igniting passion and hope in others is impossible when our own fire needs tending. Reconnecting with purpose and prioritizing well-being are not luxuries—they are essential to creating thriving schools and driving student success. Grounded in the NDPC strategy of Sharing Collective Responsibility for All Students, this engaging session invites participants to step away from the daily grind to reflect, laugh, and reconnect. Attendees will explore how adult wellness directly affects school culture and student engagement. Educators will leave with a personal plan to manage stress, strengthen connections with colleagues, and sustain their professional energy throughout the school year. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

MAGNOLIA A-B

Classrooms are The Birthplace of Inclusive Societies

Ariael Brooks-Porter*, Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Every classroom is more than a place where academic standards are taught—it is the first society many young people encounter. Students learn who belongs, whose voices matter, how differences are valued, and what it means to contribute to a community. When classrooms are intentionally designed for inclusion, they become powerful catalysts for equity, innovation, and lifelong belonging. In this engaging, research-based session, participants will explore how inclusive instructional practices, Universal Design for Learning, collaborative systems, behavioral supports, and emerging AI tools work together to create learning environments where every student can thrive. Attendees will leave with practical classroom strategies, current research, and an actionable framework for turning everyday instructional decisions into opportunities that strengthen both student outcomes and school culture.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: **Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies**

MAGNOLIA C

Developing Resilience

Hal Dunlap, *Senior Consultant National Dropout Prevention Center*

There is nothing more important to success than the lessons learned through adversity, setbacks, and failures. While most people try to avoid failure at all costs, this session builds on the idea that embracing hard times builds the resilience needed for a growth mindset and psychological well-being. Failure is an inevitable, vital component of growth, and our ability to turn losses into future victories determines our ultimate trajectory. Educators must help students navigate adversity rather than avoid it. Coddling students or shielding them from setbacks sets them up for future failure when the stakes are higher and they lack coping skills. Participants will explore valuable perspectives and practical strategies to teach students perseverance, helping them harness tough times to build resilience and achieve lasting success. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** **Build Supportive Networks for All Students**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

Family Matters: Connecting with Families Differently

Dr. Felicia Turner*, Senior Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Schools contact families every day, but contact and connection are not the same. So, can we talk? More importantly, can we rethink how we talk with families to build connection rather than deliver information? In Part II of the Family Matters journey, participants will explore how trust, communication, and relationships shape whether families remain recipients of information or become genuine partners. Through relatable school-family scenarios and practical strategies, participants will examine the difference between simply talking to families and meaningfully communicating with them, and discover ways to foster authentic, two-way interactions across a variety of roles and settings. The next step is connection: moving beyond simply reaching families to intentionally connect with them in ways that build trust, strengthen relationships, and make authentic partnership possible.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: **Build Supportive Networks for All Students**

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14

BREAKOUT BLOCK 1 8:30 A.M – 9:30 A.M

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Cultivating Wellness: A Holistic Approach to Self-Care for Educators

***Hal Dunlap**, Senior Consultant, National Dropout Prevention Center*

Educators face unprecedented stress and burnout from growing job demands and the complex, trauma-informed needs of today's students. Facing high levels of disillusionment, teachers are often stretched thin by expectations from parents, communities, and administrations. This interactive session shifts the focus back to the educator, identifies the root causes of burnout, and provides actionable strategies to help teachers regain effectiveness, job satisfaction, and purpose. Participants will learn how to design an intentional wellness plan to build physical, mental, and emotional stamina—ensuring they are energized, refreshed, and prepared to handle daily classroom challenges. Attendees will leave with practical, purposeful practices that restore their passion for teaching and foster a happy, focused mindset that directly drives positive student outcomes.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students **TRAUMA-SKILLED SCHOOLS CERTIFICATION SESSION**

MAGNOLIA A-B

Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities in General Education

***Ariael Brooks-Porter**, Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Disengagement, exclusionary practices, and high dropout rates disproportionately impact students with disabilities. While inclusion in general education is widely prioritized, systems often fall into reactive or compliance-driven approaches that fail to keep students on track for graduation. This session explores proactive, evidence-based inclusive design strategies that directly support student persistence, access, and long-term academic success. Participants will examine high-impact practices—including intentional accommodations, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and proactive behavioral supports—that reduce barriers to grade-level content. Through practical application activities, educators and administrators will move beyond surface-level inclusion, leaving with immediate, concrete tools to create sustainable support structures that actively prevent disengagement. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

MAGNOLIA C

Flip the Script: Breaking Down Barriers and Changing the Trajectories of At-Risk Youth

***Dr. Rebecca Knighton** Author and Trainer*

We all know the feeling of seeing a student walk through your school doors at the beginning of the year, knowing they are at risk of dropping out, and feeling powerless to stop it. Dr. Rebecca Knighton studied middle and high school teachers who change students' trajectories and identified the specific attributes, mindsets, and skills that enabled their success. In this highly experiential session, attendees will gain a deeper understanding of the internal and external barriers that affect student engagement and increase the risk of dropping out. Through self-reflection and skill-building activities, attendees will develop the key mindsets, skills, and attributes of the teachers in Dr. Knighton's study and leave with practical strategies to connect with and engage their most disengaged students. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Share Collective Responsibility for All Students**

CYPRESS 1-2-3

Using AI to Boost School Community Collaboration

***Thomas Hawkins**, Director of Innovation, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Dropout prevention requires a coordinated effort, and Artificial Intelligence can be the catalyst that unites the entire school community. This session demonstrates how AI can bridge communication gaps and streamline collaboration between teachers, administrators, counselors, students, and parents. We will explore practical, AI-driven strategies for everything from generating personalized, multilingual parent communications to summarizing student data for more effective support team meetings. Participants will learn how AI can help teachers co-design engaging, real-world projects with students while also helping administrators build the support systems that make this collaboration possible. We will also address the critical conversation around AI ethics and data privacy. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14

BREAKOUT BLOCK 2 9:45 A.M. – 10:45 A.M.

PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G

Student Engagement: The How and the Why

***Dr. Linda Jordan**, Senior Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Student engagement is not about compliance or entertainment—it is a brain-based response to environments that foster safety, relevance, challenge, and connection. This session explores the neuroscience of engagement to show how emotional and cognitive brain systems drive attention, motivation, and persistence. Participants will see how active engagement serves as the essential gateway to deeper learning, rigor, and student resilience. Blending research with practical application, educators will learn high-impact instructional strategies—including intentional lesson design, student voice and choice, and meaningful discourse—that move students from passive participation to active, purposeful thinking. Attendees will leave with concrete tools to create classroom conditions that cultivate curiosity, belonging, and student ownership without sacrificing cognitive demand.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

MAGNOLIA A-B

Cultivating Resilience with Intentional Instructional Practices

***Adam Wallenfang**, Director of Consultant Content & Training, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Everyone agrees that all students must graduate with strong Resilience skills, but what do Resilient students look like, and how do teachers infuse Resilience into their instruction? In this session, we'll use SPN's Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R³) Learning Model™ to define Resilience, consider how school communities cultivate a disposition of Resilience within students, and identify the instructional practices most effective at creating learning environments infused with Resilience. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

MAGNOLIA C

Transforming Family Engagement Together

***Dr. Felicia Turner**, Senior Consultant, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

Family engagement is bigger than an event, a program, or one person's responsibility. It takes all of us. In the final part of the Family Matters journey, participants will examine how policies, practices, systems, and everyday decisions shape families' experiences with school. They will explore critical family touchpoints, identify barriers that may unintentionally hinder partnerships, and consider practical ways teachers, counselors, graduation coaches, administrators, and other school staff can share responsibility for strengthening family-school partnerships. Ultimately, the goal is transformation: moving family engagement from something schools do to how schools work, and transforming school environments into places where families know they belong, their voices matter, and their partnership is essential to student success.
Effective Strategies & Services Alignment: Build Supportive Networks for All Students

CYPRESS 1-2-3

AI Q&A Hour

***Thomas Hawkins**, Director of Innovation, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center*

An open hour, no slides. Bring the AI question you are actually stuck on: a policy you are drafting, a vendor pitch you cannot evaluate, a staff member asking what is permitted, a use case you suspect is a bad idea. Questions about tools, policy, student data, and classroom practice are all welcome. **Effective Strategies & Services Alignment:** Enhance Instructional Engagement Strategies

CLOSING SESSION 11:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.

PALMS BALLROOM A-B-C-D

The NDPC/SPN SPiN Awards: A Family Celebration

***Dr. Robert Peters** Senior Vice President, Successful Practices Network | National Dropout Prevention Center, **Nancy Nielsen** Certification Programs Specialist, National Dropout Prevention Center*

Experience an exciting blend of engagement, friendly competition, and connection through our event app! Take part in interactive games, win fantastic prizes, and connect with fellow attendees. Energized by Dr. Robert Peters and Nancy Nielsen, this closing celebration promises a memorable, high-spirited finale that brings everyone together.

CONFERENCE AGENDA MONDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2026

	8:30 AM – 9:45 AM	10:00 AM - 11:00 AM	11:15 AM - 12:15 PM
PALMS BALLROOM A-B-C-D	**KEYNOTE:** **Dr. Robert Peters** Every Student. Every Chance. Every Day.		
PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G		**Dr. Melissa Balknight** Enrolled, Enlisted, Employed: Driving Academic Recovery and Long-Term Student Success	**Dr. Doran Gresham** Who's Really Struggling? When Student Behavior Reflects Adult Systems
MAGNOLIA A-B		TSS **Nancy Nielsen** Foundations of the Trauma-Skilled Schools Model: Recognizing When Trauma and Chronic Stress Show Up	**Adam Wallenfang** Unpacking the Rigor-Relevance-Resilience (R^3) Learning Model™
MAGNOLIA C		**Dr. A.J. Nottingham** Keeping the Streak: Changing the Culture of Attendance and Achievement at Armand Larive Middle School	**Mr. Scott Depew** From CTE to Career Identity: Building Graduation On-Ramps
CYPRESS 1-2-3		**Dr. Tammy Pawloski** From Struggle to Strength: Using the Brain Architecture Game to Understand Stress, Support, and Student Success	**Erin Nielsen** Taming the Test: How Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Turn State Testing into Student Success
CYPRESS 4-5		**Thomas Hawkins** Project-Based Learning on a Teacher's Schedule	**Meghan Lefevers** The Power of Student Ownership

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2026

12:15 PM- 1:45 PM	1:45 PM - 2:45 PM	3:00 PM - 4:00 PM
LUNCH	**Nancy Nielsen** Finding the Other Why: Four Lenses for Seeing School-Based Challenges Differently	**Dr. Linda Jordan** Wired to Learn: Applying Neuroscience to Modern Learning Strategies.
	Emilee Fidler TSS The Heron Model: A Trauma-Informed, Student-Centered Approach to Virtual Alternative Education	**Dr. Gina Upshaw** If We Want Students to Stay, We Have to Listen: Student Voice as a Strategy for Attendance, Engagement, and Dropout Prevention
	Chrystal Hawkins Breaking the Cycle: Re-Engaging Families as a Strategy for Dropout Prevention	**Mike Woods** Designing CTE Learning Experiences that Keep Students Engaged, Supported, and on Track
	Thomas Hawkins Making the Case for Your Program	**Abby Ferguson** Building a Belief System: Culture of Learning and Restorative Practice in Unique Communities
	Mrs. Tonya Cupp Every Student Counts: Proven Strategies for Attendance, Engagement, and Dropout Prevention	

CONFERENCE AGENDA TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2026

	8:30 AM – 9:45 AM	10:00 AM - 11:00 AM	11:15 AM - 12:15 PM
PALMS BALLROOM A-B-C-D	**Keynote** **Dr. Linda Jordan** The Neuroscience of Hope: Helping Students Believe in What's Possible		
PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G		**Dr. Bryan Marshall** The Power of Missed Opportunities: Why Every Interaction Matters	**Dr. Patrice Faison** Beyond Academics: A Turnaround Principal's Blueprint for Student Support Services
MAGNOLIA A-B		TSS **Mercedes Thurston** Growing Resilience: Cultivating Connection and Belonging Through a Schoolwide Garden Initiative	TSS **Nancy Nielsen** Trauma-Skilled Schools and the Culture of Resilience: What to Do When Trauma and Chronic Stress Show Up
MAGNOLIA C		**Jeremy Batchelor** Strategic Resource Allocation: Proving Return on Investment and Transforming a District	**Dr. Doran Gresham** From the Cheap Seats to Center Stage: Using Music, Culture, and the Arts to Teach English in Special Education
CYPRESS 1-2-3		**Hal Dunlap** GPS (Game Plan System) for Improving Student Attendance	**Dr. A.J. Nottingham** The "Love Language" of School-Community Partnerships
CYPRESS 4-5		**Kristina MacBury** A Graduation Ecosystem: How Coordinated Alternative Pathways, Special Education Supports, and Workforce Programs Prevent Student Disengagement	**Dr. Jerad Farley** Beyond the Checklist: Formative Feedback as a Catalyst for Change

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2026

12:15 PM- 1:45 PM	1:45 PM - 2:45 PM	3:00 PM - 4:00 PM
Plenary Session Panel The Blueprint Is Real — Powerful conversations with five executive leaders committed to turning evidence into action.		
LUNCH	**Dr. Linda Jordan** Growing Great Human Beings: The Neuroscience of Rigor, Relevance, and Resilience	**Nancy Nielsen** Keeping the Fire Burning: Rediscovering Joy in the Journey
	Dr. Wachera Ragland-Brown The Bayonne Bridge: Moving from Siloed Systems to Integrated Student Success	**Ariael Brooks-Porter** Classrooms are The Birthplace of Inclusive Societies
	Mike Woods Supporting Diverse Learners in CTE Programs	**Hal Dunlap** Developing Resilience
	Dr. Felicia Turner Family Matters: Seeing Families Differently	**Dr. Felicia Turner** Family Matters: Connecting with Families Differently
	Elizabeth Altman Imagine If They Knew We Cared: Building Systems That Keep Students Connected	

CONFERENCE AGENDA WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2026

	8:30 AM – 9:30 AM	9:45 AM - 10:45 AM	11:00 AM - 12:00 PM
PALMS BALLROOM A-B-C-D			**Closing Session -** **Dr. Robert Peters & Nancy Nielsen** The NDPC/SPN SPiN Awards: A Family Celebration
PALMS BALLROOM E-F-G	TSS **Hal Dunlap** Cultivating Wellness: A Holistic Approach to Self-Care for Educators	**Dr. Linda Jordan** Student Engagement: The How and the Why	
MAGNOLIA A-B	**Ariael Brooks-Porter** Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities in General Education	**Adam Wallenfang** Cultivating Resilience with Intentional Instructional Practices	
MAGNOLIA C	**Dr. Rebecca Knighton** Flip the Script: Breaking Down Barriers and Changing the Trajectories of At-Risk Youth	**Dr. Felicia Turner** Transforming Family Engagement Together	
CYPRESS 1-2-3	**Thomas Hawkins** Using AI to Boost School Community Collaboration	**Thomas Hawkins** AI Q&A Hour	
CYPRESS 4-5			



Building SUSTAINABLE Pathways to Graduation

Providing collaborative, site-specific planning services to help districts transform student data into lasting, schoolwide graduation systems.

What Is the Diploma Planning Institute?

Offered by the National Dropout Prevention Center, the Diploma Planning Institute (DPI) is an intensive, site-specific planning service that guides district and campus leadership teams to build comprehensive graduation plans. Working directly with field experts, your teams analyze local student data to turn isolated dropout efforts into a coherent, proactive K–12 system.

Why Districts Choose DPI

- Root-cause data diagnostics across all grade levels
- School-wide ownership instead of isolated initiatives
- Concrete blueprints tailored to your campuses
- Measurable, multi-year graduation rate improvement

Our Strategic Focus

Systemic Data Audits
Identifying early warning signs, attendance trends, and transition points.

Targeted Interventions
Building responsive, tiered academic and behavioral support plans.

District Alignment
Unifying administrators, counselors, and staff around shared goals.

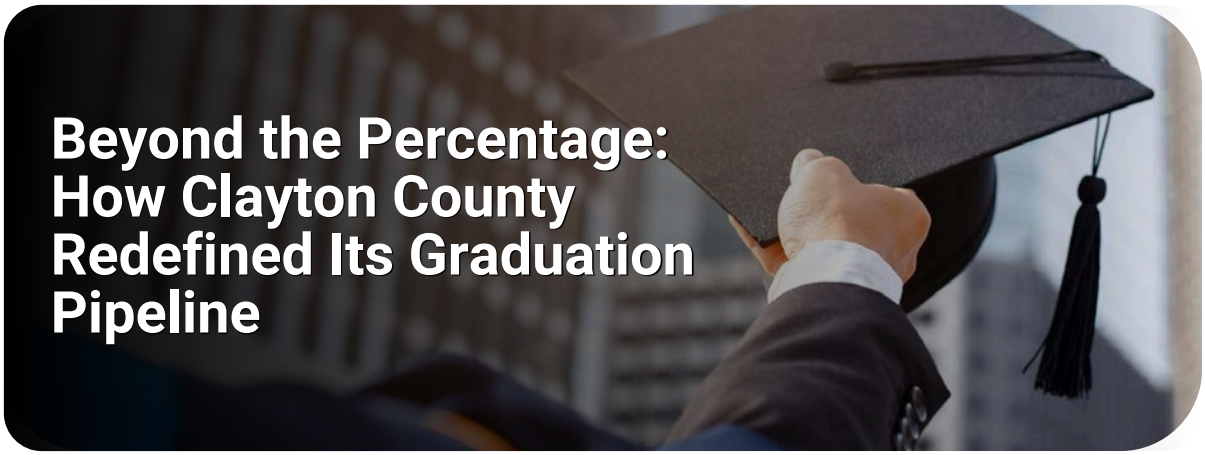
Actionable Roadmaps
Equipping campus teams with measurable, implementation-ready strategies.

Bring a Diploma Planning Institute to Your District

Scan the QR code below or visit the link to learn how to bring a Diploma Planning Institute to your schools.
LINK: **https://bit.ly/46HtlXY**

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER | A division of SPN Successful Practices Network

NDPC SUCCESS STORY



Beyond the Percentage: How Clayton County Redefined Its Graduation Pipeline

DISTRICT-WIDE GRADUATION RATE TURNAROUND

53.6% → **86.2%**

2012 Baseline — **2025 Outcome**

+32.6% DISTRICT GROWTH

Through NDPC's Diploma Planning Institutes, Clayton County Public Schools shifted from reactive fixes to systemic intervention, driving historic student completion.

In 2012, Clayton County Public Schools faced a sobering reality: its four-year high school graduation rate stood at 53.6%, trailing Georgia's state average by 16 points. Across eight high schools, rates bottomed out as low as 43%, with only a single campus meeting the state baseline. Serving a student body where 99% of learners live in poverty, the district spent years labeled among Georgia's lowest-performing systems.

The turning point came in 2014, when district leadership partnered with the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) to conduct Diploma Planning Institutes (DPI) across every middle and high school campus.

Rather than treating graduation as an isolated senior-year metric, NDPC worked with Clayton County's school-based Dropout Prevention Teams to fundamentally rethink student disengagement. The work replaced disconnected initiatives with data-grounded intervention systems. Guided by NDPC, campus teams learned to analyze school-specific root causes, establish early warning triggers, and implement localized, targeted action plans.

"That work was significant because it caused us to look differently at graduation—not simply as a rate that we reported, but as the culmination of every decision, intervention, relationship, and opportunity provided to a student throughout their educational journey," explains Dr. Alicia Dunn, Clayton County's Director of Counseling, Enrollment, Post-Secondary Readiness & Strategic Improvement. "Graduation-rate improvement could no longer be viewed as something that happened during senior year or as the sole responsibility of high schools. It had to become a K–12 commitment centered on prevention, early identification, intentional intervention, student advocacy, and strong systems of support."

That shift changed daily practice across the district. Schools built intentional monitoring protocols around graduation cohorts, tracking credits and academic progress in real time while expanding credit recovery, individualized planning, and targeted attendance supports.

The long-term impact proved transformative. By 2018, Clayton County's districtwide graduation rate reached 71.7%. By 2025, it climbed to 86.2%—highlighted by Riverdale High School, which more than doubled its rate from 43.1% in 2012 to 89.1%, surpassing the state average.

"More than a decade later, one of the greatest lessons from our work with the National Dropout Prevention Center remains incredibly relevant: students do not become dropout statistics overnight," says Dr. Dunn. "There are indicators, there are opportunities to intervene, and there are adults who can change the trajectory. Behind every graduation-rate percentage is a student, a family, and a story."

Bring Field-Tested Success to Your District

Clayton County's sustained graduation gains began with a deliberate, system-wide commitment: moving from isolated dropout initiatives to a structured, data-driven framework.

Through NDPC's Diploma Planning Institutes (DPI), your district leadership and school-based teams will work alongside expert facilitators to uncover root causes of disengagement, implement targeted early-intervention pathways, and build sustainable support systems tailored to your unique community.

Scan the QR code below or visit the link to learn how to bring a Diploma Planning Institute to your schools.

LINK: **https://bit.ly/46HtlXY**

NOTES

SAVE THE DATE: NASHVILLE 2027



37th ANNUAL

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CONFERENCE

SHERATON MUSIC CITY NASHVILLE AIRPORT | NASHVILLE, TN

Keep the Momentum Going. Bring the Framework Home.

October
3–6, 2027

Sheraton Music City Nashville Airport
777 McGavock Pike
Nashville, TN 37214

Moving From Idea to Impact Starts With Your Next Step

Real graduation improvement is never a one-time initiative—it is a continuous, school-wide commitment.

As you take the research, session takeaways, and cross-functional blueprints from this week back to your campus, make plans now to reconvene next fall in Music City. Join fellow district leaders, principals, counselors, and graduation specialists to evaluate your progress, sharpen your implementation strategies, and discover what is working across the country.

Exclusive On-Site Access: Register Early & Save

As an attendee of this year's conference, early registration for Nashville is officially open for you today. Lock in your spot now at an exclusive attendee discount:

Use Promo Code: Nashville2027 during checkout to claim the lowest attendee rate.

Three Easy Ways to Register

- **Visit the Registration Desk:** Speak directly with an NDPC team member on site before you leave to complete your early registration.
- **Scan the QR Code:** Instantly access the private registration portal from your mobile device.
- **Register Online:** Visit **https://bit.ly/3VedhKD** and apply code **Nashville2027**.