

JOURNAL

**GANADO'S STRATEGIC RESET
A REMARKABLE RISE FROM FAILING TO
A "B" DISTRICT**

**ADVOCACY IS BACK
LEADING WITH VALUES AND VOICE**

**LEADING WITH HEART AND PURPOSE
ELLEN WHITE'S COMMITMENT TO ASBA**

EDUCATE. ADVOCATE. ELEVATE.

ASBA JOURNAL

March 2026 • VOL. 56

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OUR VISION

The best schools in every Arizona community.

OUR MISSION

We cultivate excellence in locally-governed school districts.

OUR KEY FUNCTIONS

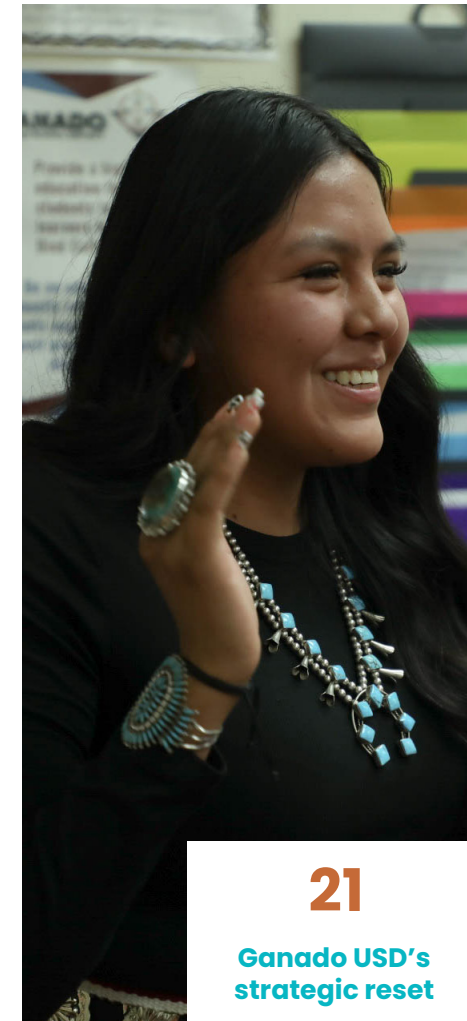
- Provide training and leadership development.
- Represent and advocate for the diverse needs of our membership.
- Provide products and services that support district success.

OUR CORE BELIEFS

- The basic life needs of children must be met for them to succeed.
- Meeting the unique educational needs of all students must be the foundation of our school systems.
- The governance of publicly - funded schools must lie with locally - elected and publicly accountable governing boards.
- The responsibility of student success is shared by students, parents, governing board, district staff and the community.
- Public education funding must be broad-based, stable and at a level that assures all students are successful.
- Knowledgeable and professionally trained governing board members are fundamental for ensuring student success.
- Closing the opportunity and achievement gap is a moral and economic imperative that must be addressed to ensure all Arizona's students are successful.
- Systematic inequities must be removed so every student achieves their fullest potential.

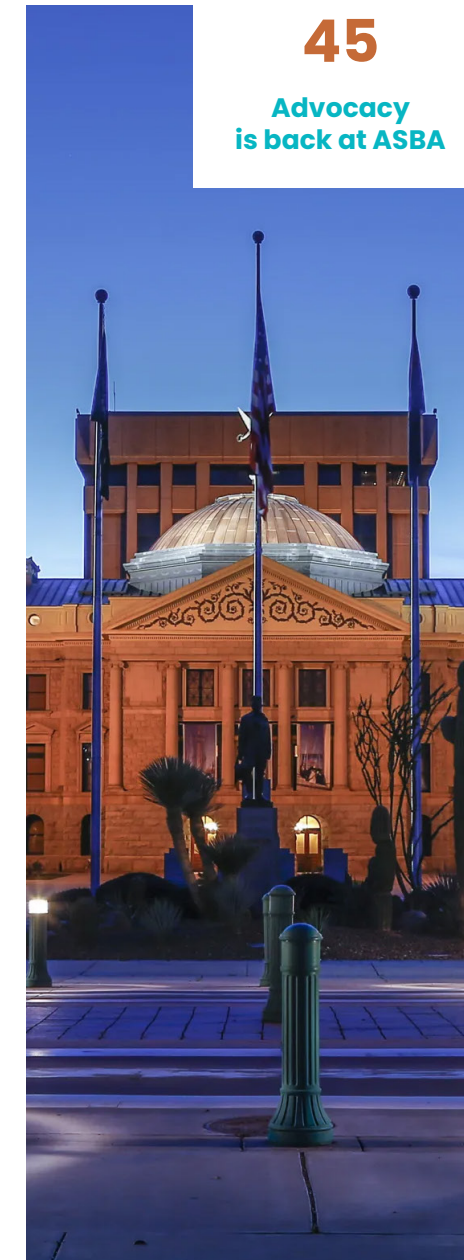
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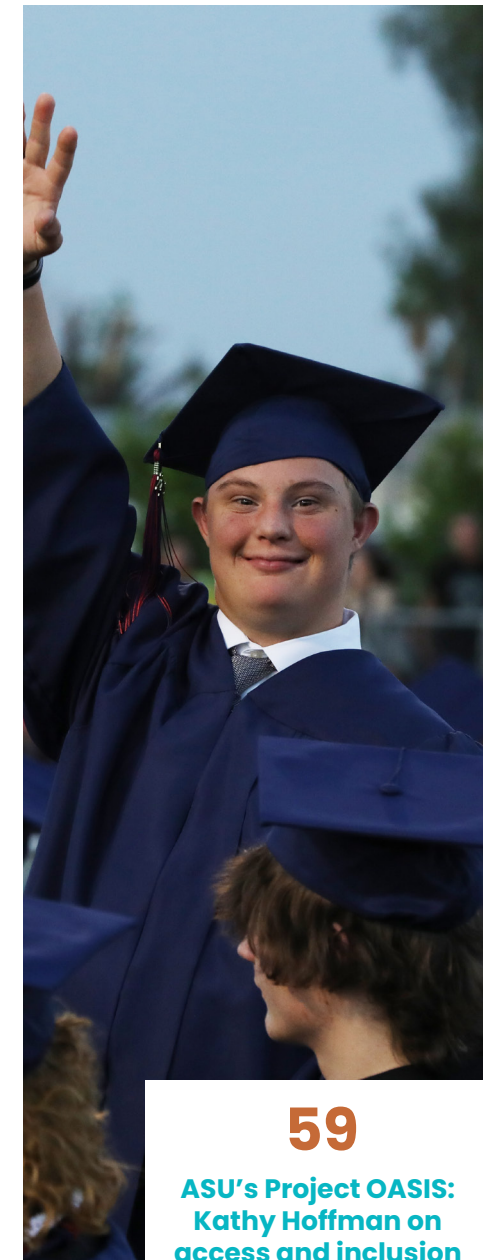
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We will champion strong governance, support board members through training and connection, protect the role of locally elected boards as defined in Arizona law, and elevate the essential role public schools play in our state’s future.

–Mitra Khazai
2026 ASBA President

A MESSAGE FROM ASBA PRESIDENT MITRA KHAZAI

As we begin a new year of service, I want to start with a simple and sincere thank you.

Like you, I serve as a local school board member, and I know firsthand the commitment this role requires. Across Arizona, volunteer public school board members continue to show up, often after long workdays and under increasing public scrutiny, because we believe in public education and in the communities we serve. That shared commitment is the steady foundation of our public school system.

There is no denying that school governance

today is more complex and more visible than ever before. Boards are navigating significant challenges, including workforce shortages, financial uncertainty and growing student mental health needs. At the same time, the public conversation about schools can feel increasingly polarized, making even routine decisions more difficult than they should be.

And yet, across Arizona, school boards remain focused on what matters most.

In urban, rural and tribal communities alike, boards like yours are working to ensure safe schools, strong instruction, responsible

stewardship of public resources and meaningful engagement with the communities you represent. We are doing this work thoughtfully, lawfully and locally, exactly as our system of public education intends.

The Arizona School Boards Association exists to support that work. This year, ASBA will continue to serve as a trusted partner, advocate and resource for local boards. We will champion strong governance, support board members



through training and connection, protect the role of locally elected boards as defined in Arizona law and elevate the essential role public schools play in our state’s future.

Just as importantly, we will continue to model something our students need to see from all of us: civil discourse, collaboration and leadership rooted in service rather than division.

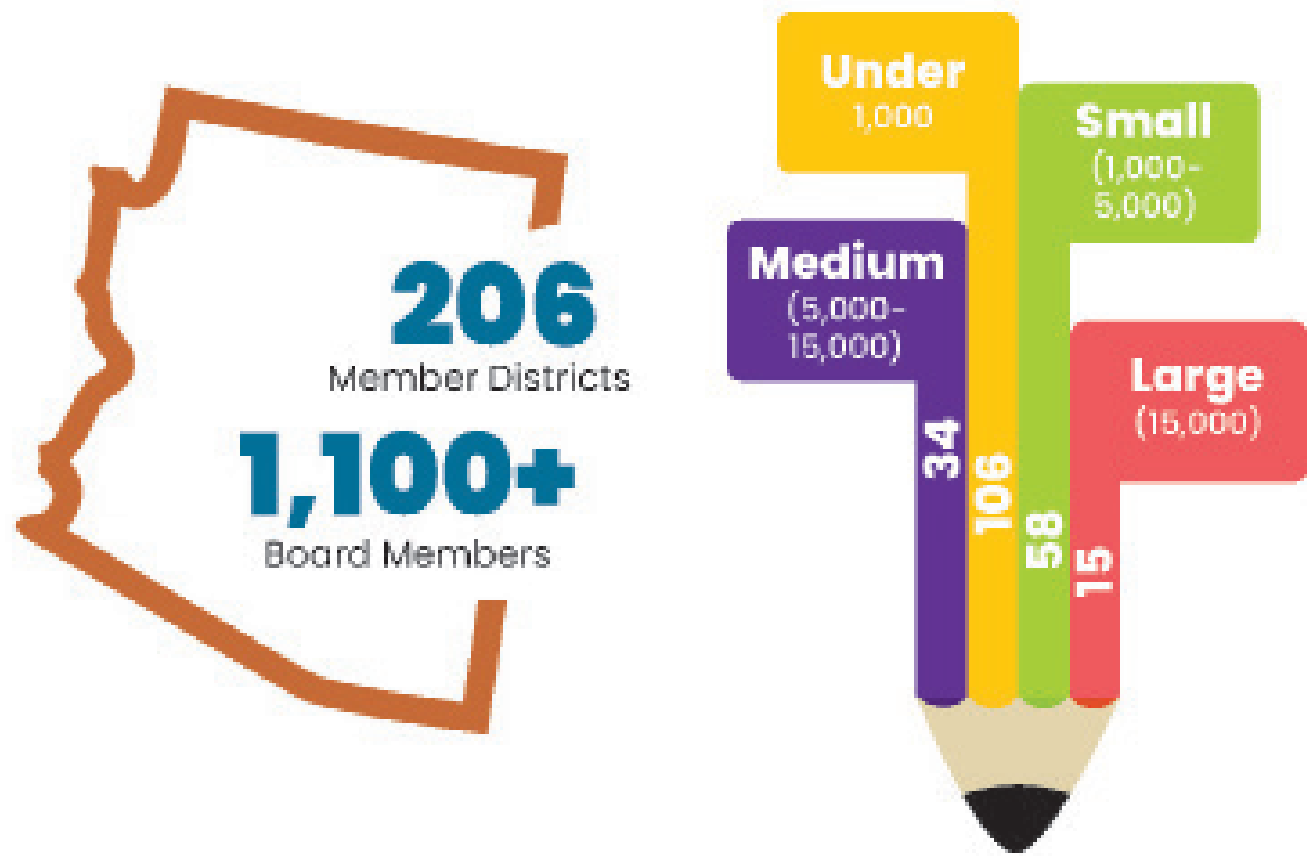
Public education has always been a shared endeavor. It requires patience, courage and a long view, especially in challenging times. I am confident that by supporting one another, learning together and staying grounded in our shared purpose, Arizona’s school boards will continue to lead with integrity and impact.

Thank you for your service, your resilience and your commitment to Arizona’s students and communities.

Here’s to the year ahead.

Mitra Khazai
President
Arizona School Boards Association

Districts by Enrollment



District Location



7.0%
Urban



15.9%
Suburban



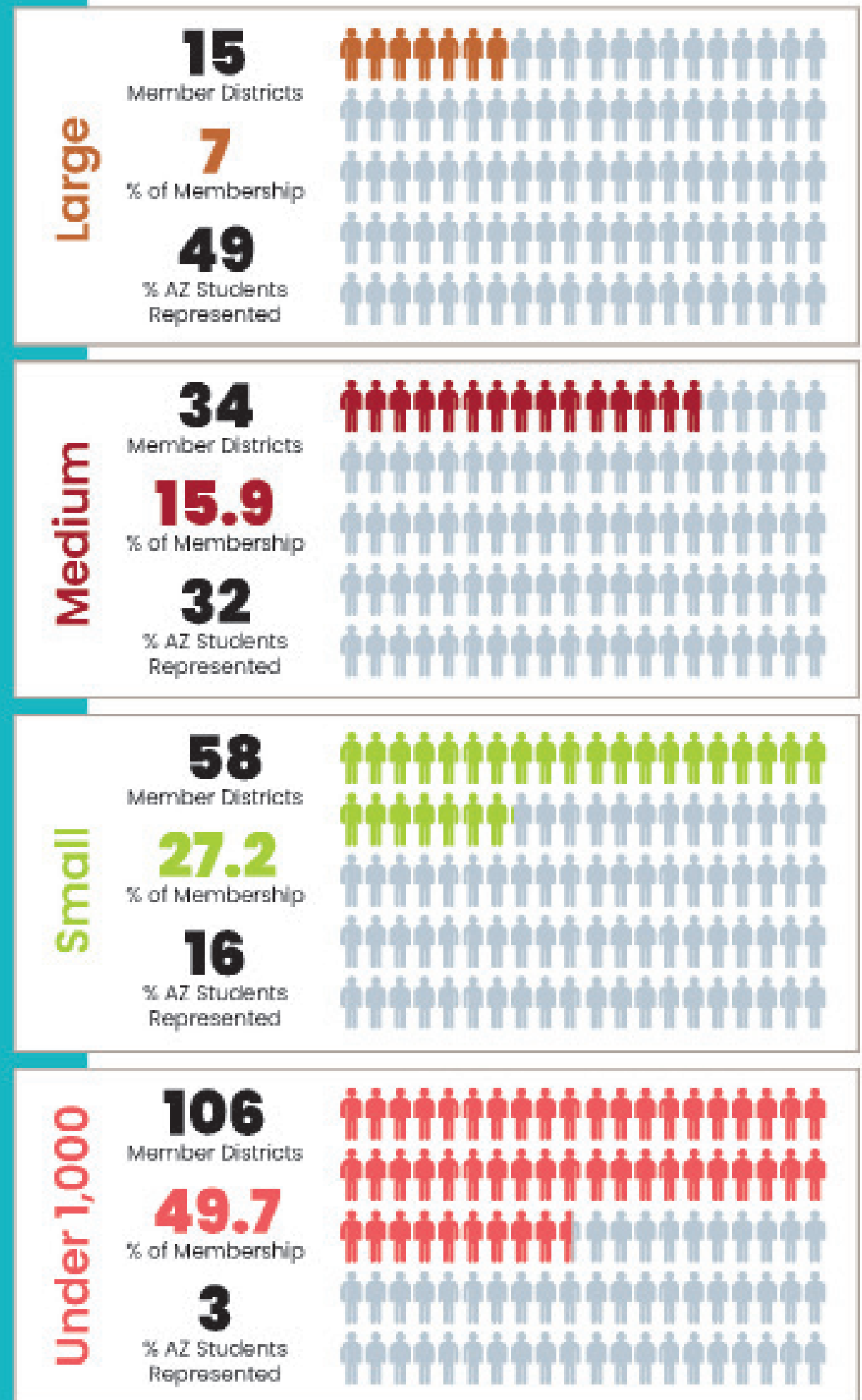
27.2%
Rural



49.7%
Remote

Self-Reported

Membership By District Size



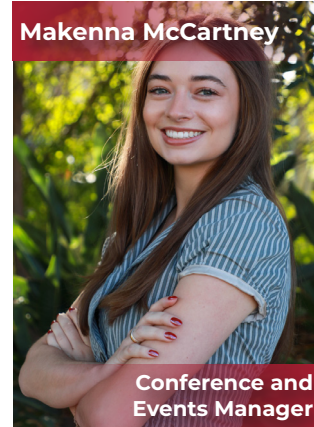
MEET THE
ASBA TEAM

HERE TO GUIDE YOU TO EXCELLENCE

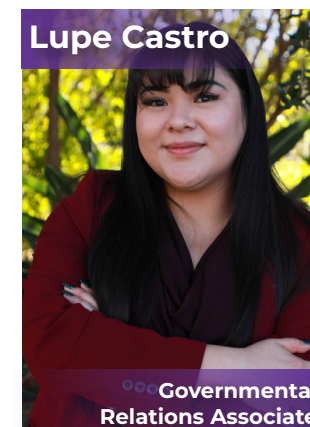
Executive Team



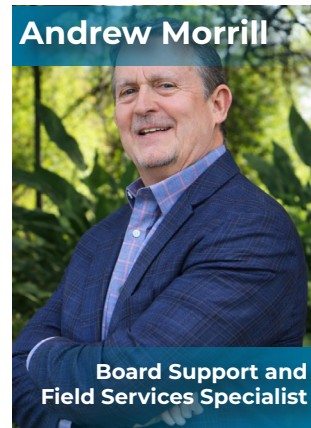
Business and Conference Services



Governmental Relations



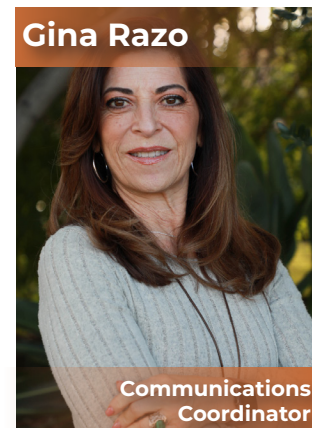
Board Support & Leadership Development



Policy Services



Communications



ASBA Spring Interns



Leading with heart, listening with purpose

A message from Ellen White, Executive Director

When I first started my career with ASBA 35 years ago, I remember attending my first conference and thinking, “I can’t believe all the work that goes into being a school board member.” I was amazed by how much these volunteers were expected to know and how deeply committed they were to Arizona’s children. It was clear they all shared the same goal – providing the best education for their communities – and I was inspired. Today, I still see that same heart and desire, but the environment in which they serve has changed. They face increasingly complex legal, political and cultural challenges. That is why ASBA’s role has never been more important.

In my new role as executive director, I want to express my sincere appreciation for your continued support of ASBA. Our association is strong because of its members. Your engagement, insight and willingness to serve your communities enable ASBA to be a trusted, nonpartisan voice for our students.



ASBA’s recently adopted Strategic Plan reflects this commitment to member-driven leadership. For the first time, the plan was developed with input from members, staff, the Board of Directors and key stakeholders. These diverse voices ensure that your association represents your needs.

ASBA recently completed our annual membership survey. I am excited to share that we received a record number of responses, with over 400 members participating. This level of engagement reflects our members’ desire to have a say in shaping ASBA’s direction. More information about the survey is available on page 19, but I would like to share a few highlights. Alignment with ASBA’s core values increased significantly this year, with the “strongly agree” category rising from 25.81% in 2025 to 40% in 2026. Overall perception of ASBA continues to improve, rising from 4.1 to 4.3 on a 5 point scale. This is especially meaningful to me because it reflects growing confidence in the association, which comes from our commitment to listen and learn from our members.

Supporting members in their leadership roles is at the core of what we do. We continue to



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Our association is strong because of its members. Your engagement, insight and willingness to serve your communities enable ASBA to be a trusted, nonpartisan voice for our students.

–Ellen White
Executive Director, ASBA



expand our customized training opportunities to deliver content that is relevant and tailored to each district's unique needs. Strong governance and the ability to make informed decisions are essential to the responsibilities of a good school board member and vital to gaining and maintaining public trust.

Our **superintendent search service** is a critical resource for districts seeking to fill this important role. Stable leadership is crucial for student success, and who better to provide that support than the organization that trains the boards responsible for hiring leadership?

ASBA developed a **communications resource center** that provides districts with a range of tools to ensure consistent, effective messaging. This service has proven to be an affordable and valuable resource for our members.

ASBA's **storytelling initiative** helps districts share their successes, challenges and innovations. If we don't share our stories, we leave the narrative to those who don't know them.

Professional learning doesn't end with board members. The **ASAP Certification Course**, developed in partnership with Grand Canyon University, is a first-of-its-kind opportunity for school district administrative professionals and serves a population within our membership that is essential to student success.

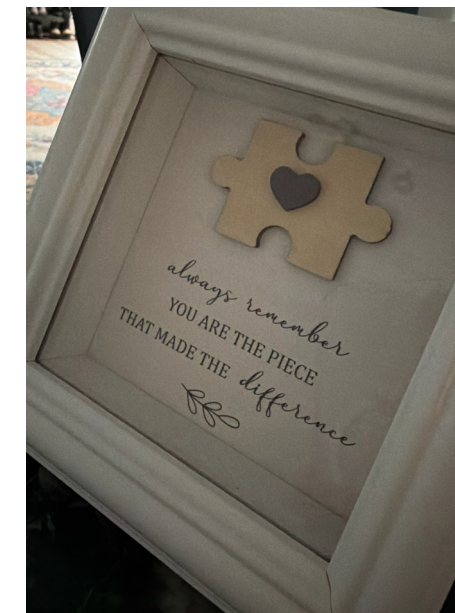
Our **School Finance Bootcamp** was designed to give district leaders a solid understanding of Arizona's school finance system. As districts face increased scrutiny, financial knowledge is essential for sound governance and effective decision-making.

Advocacy Day provided members with opportunities to engage directly with lawmakers and to strengthen their role as advocates for public education.

All these efforts reflect a coordinated commitment to ensure that school board members have the support, knowledge and resources to lead confidently.

Our work reflects one core belief: ASBA membership means you are never alone. You are part of a collective voice that shapes our advocacy, training, services and priorities. The association exists for you and because of you.

It's truly an honor to serve as your executive director. ASBA is stable, focused and well-positioned to support our members during this pivotal time. My commitment to you is simple – to lead with integrity and to listen with heart.



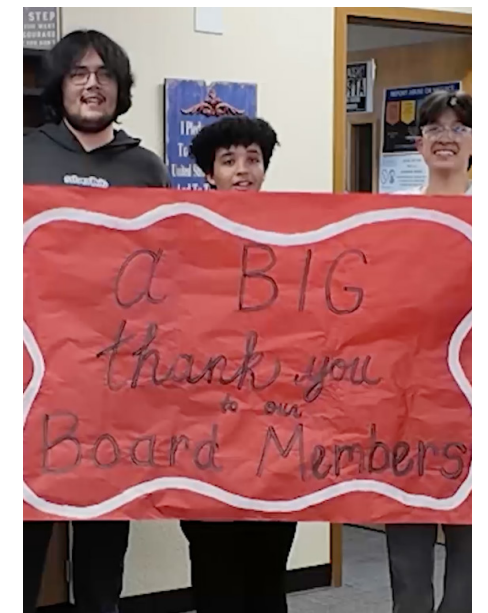
BALSZ School District: Honoring service with lasting recognition

BALSZ School District commemorated School Board Appreciation Month by presenting each board member with a personalized plaque and a short video highlighting their photos and biographies. The tribute honored both individual contributions and the shared responsibility of governance, creating a lasting record of service for the district and its community.



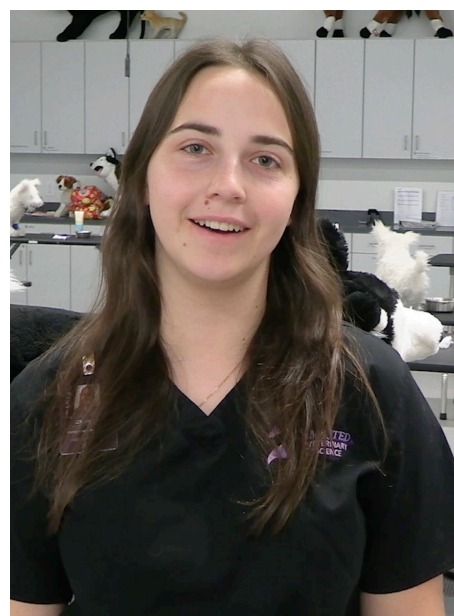
Glendale ESD: A joyful, student-centered thank you

Glendale Elementary School District celebrated School Board Appreciation Month with creativity and gratitude. During a governing board meeting and on social media, members were surprised with custom LEGO mementos, student thank-you cards and playful staff tributes. The celebration served as a meaningful reminder that board service shapes daily experiences for students, staff and families across the district.



J.O. Combs USD: Recognition through personal voices

At its January governing board meeting, J.O. Combs Unified School District honored board members with handwritten thank-you cards and a commemorative video. The recognition reflected the district's emphasis on personal connection and gratitude, offering board members a direct window into the appreciation felt by the community they serve.



Pima JTED: Highlighting leadership behind career pathways

Pima JTED's communications team produced a short video tribute shared during a regular governing board meeting and on social media. The message celebrated the board's role in advancing career and technical education opportunities, emphasizing how governance decisions translate into real-world pathways for students across southern Arizona.



Florence USD: Celebrating service through community connection

Florence Unified School District recognized its governing board by highlighting their service through a dedicated graphic and social media outreach. By celebrating board members publicly and inviting the broader community to engage online, the district underscored the often unseen work of governance and reinforced the vital connection between board leadership and public trust.



Union ESD: Celebrating board service and 15-Year milestone

At Union Elementary School District's January board meeting, Superintendent Kristine Morris honored board members Susan Doucet, president, and Nubia Briceno with flowers and certificates recognizing their service, and celebrated Briceno's milestone of 15 years on the board with a personalized engraved vase commemorating her dedication to Union ESD's students and community.



Wickenburg USD: Celebrating legacy, leadership and teamwork

Wickenburg Unified School District marked School Board Recognition Month with a message honoring both current service and long-standing leadership. The district also celebrated its governing board's receipt of ASBA's Total Board Boardsmanship Award and recognized Board President Joe Maglio, elected unanimously for the 16th consecutive year, highlighting how sustained commitment and collaboration support district success.



Tempe ESD: Students at the center of every decision

Tempe Elementary School District shared a message of gratitude recognizing the governing board's dedication to student-focused leadership. By naming each member and affirming their collective role in guiding the district forward, the recognition reflected a commitment to service, purpose and community stewardship.



Tucson USD: A public moment of appreciation

Tucson Unified School District paused during a governing board meeting to recognize and thank its board members, inviting the community to share in the moment. The acknowledgment reinforced the district's commitment to transparency and collective celebration of those who guide its mission and priorities.

MEET ASBA'S

2026 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

DEDICATED TO SERVING YOU WITH VISION AND COMMITMENT

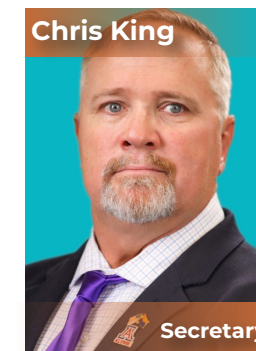


ASBA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

ASBA is excited to introduce this year's Board of Directors to members. The board includes the five officers of the Executive Committee, 17 County Directors, including two for Maricopa and Pima counties due to their larger populations and the presidents of the Hispanic/Native American Indian Caucus and Black Alliance.

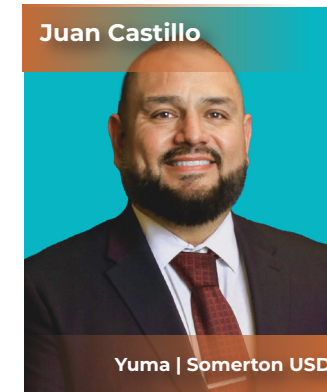
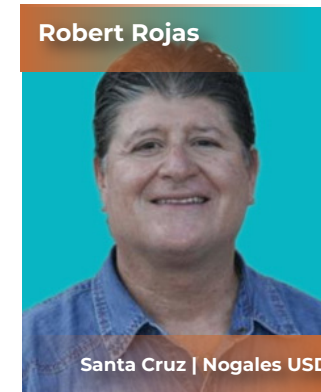
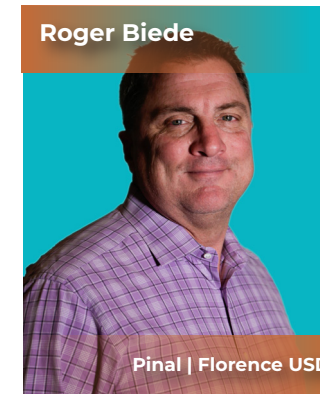
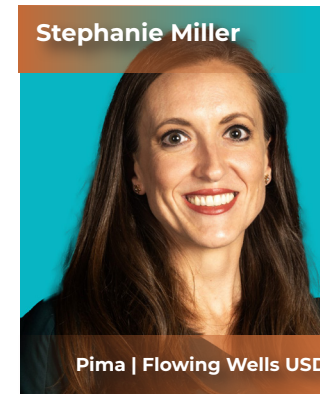
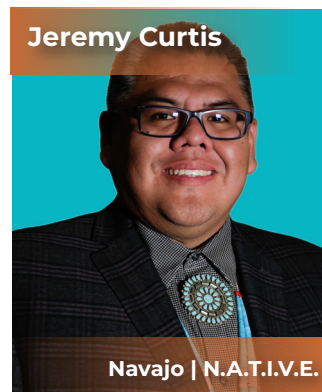
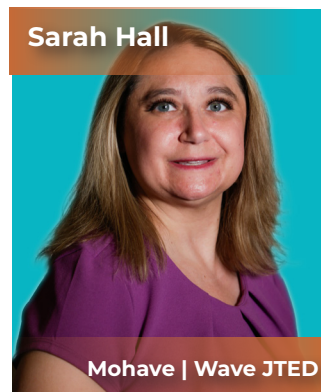
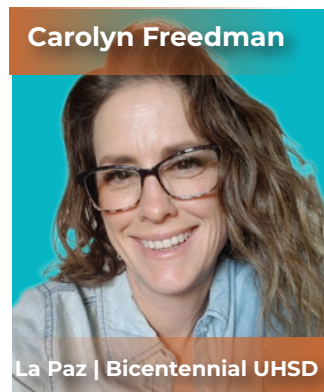
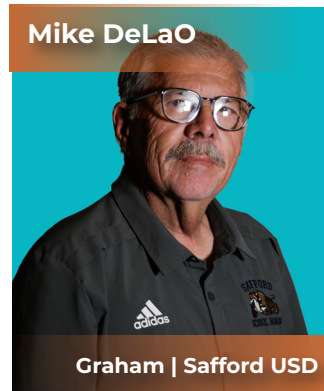
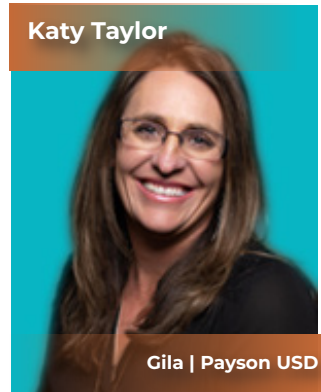
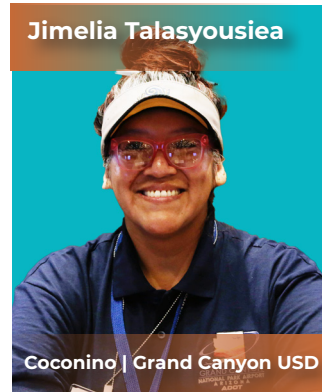
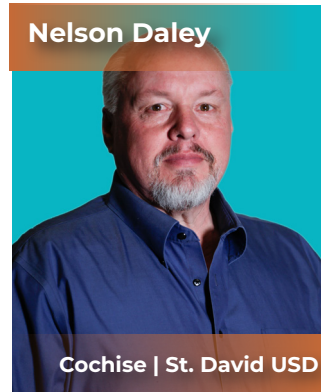
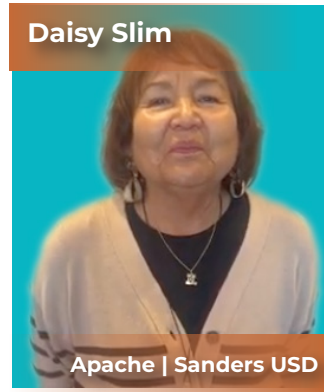
School board delegates elected the secretary, treasurer and president-elect to the Executive Committee of the ASBA Board of Directors at the ASBA Annual Business Meeting on Thursday, Dec. 18, 2025, during the ASBA-ASA Annual Conference. Each officer serves for a one-year term. All individuals who applied were moved forward by the nominating committee and included in the ASBA Voter Guide. County Directors were elected during county meetings held from September through October of last year.

Meet our County Directors and Alliance/Caucus leaders on the next page!

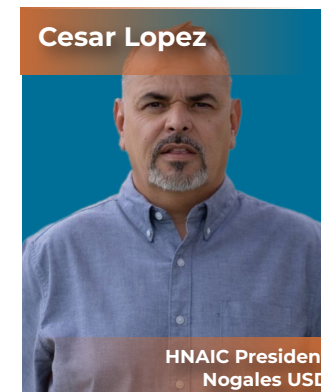


ASBA 2026 Board of Directors Executive Committee members (from left to right) Immediate Past-President Tadeo De La Hoya, President-Elect Wendy Effing, President Mitra Khazai, Treasurer Armando Montero, Secretary Chris King

MEET YOUR 2026 COUNTY DIRECTORS



MEET YOUR 2026 CAUCUS & ALLIANCE LEADERSHIP



Their story. Your voice. Our next chapter.

ASBA Annual Membership Survey results

456

Participants

4.3

Overall perception rating on a 5-point scale

A campaign grounded in research

The ASBA Annual Membership Survey was centered around one guiding message: *we are all part of their story*. Grounded in research and shaped by member feedback, this campaign was intentionally designed to gather meaningful insight from classrooms, boardrooms and communities across Arizona.

Members and partners shared their perspectives, experiences and ideas for the future of public education. We listened, reflected and analyzed what you shared using both qualitative and quantitative data. Now, we're sharing what we heard and how it's guiding what comes next.

Survey results at a glance



ASBA set a record with **456 total participants** in the 2026 Annual Survey

The average overall perception of ASBA rose to **4.3 on a 5-point scale** in the 2026 survey compared to 4.1 in 2025

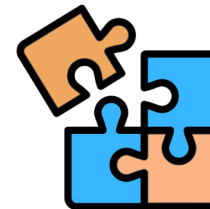
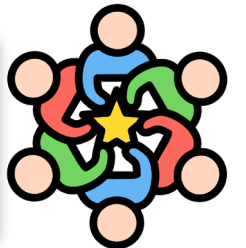


47.24% of members **strongly agree** that ASBA's services align with member needs compared to 38.15% in 2025



44.93% of members **strongly agree** that ASBA adequately addresses school board challenges compared to 36.72% in 2025

Member Engagement rose to **4.2 on a 5-point scale** in the 2026 survey compared to 4.0 in 2025



31.63% of members **strongly agree** that ASBA's services align with member needs compared to 25.81% in 2025

40.0% of members **strongly agree** that ASBA's core values align with the values of school boards in Arizona compared to 25.81% in 2025



What's next

Survey insights have been shared across ASBA departments and are actively informing planning, priorities and future initiatives. This coordinated approach ensures member feedback continues to shape decisions - not just in reflection, but in action.

For a deeper dive into the 2026 Annual Survey results, please visit: <https://azsba.org/2026-annual-membership-survey-results/>

Why Ganado Unified's strategic reset is drawing statewide attention

Nestled in northeastern Arizona in the heart of the Navajo Nation, Ganado Unified School District serves a close knit community where land, language, culture and schooling are inseparably connected. For generations, Ganado schools have been more than classrooms. They have been places of gathering, anchors of opportunity and symbols of hope for families determined to shape a stronger future for their children.

Today, that long standing commitment is gaining renewed momentum, guided not only by instructional improvement, but by intentional governance and a shared strategic vision. What makes Ganado's story especially compelling is that its impact is felt not just in data and planning documents, but in the voices of students who experience the change every day.

"I like this school because it's filled with kindness and joy," said Berkley Todechechie Jr., a sixth grader. "We get to do fun things here, even bringing my guitar to school."



From improvement to impact

Ganado's recent progress reflects years of deliberate work and collective accountability. Once identified largely as a failing district, Ganado schools now earn B and B plus ratings across campuses. Just three years ago, every school in the district had been identified by the state as needing improvement. District leaders understood that meaningful, sustainable change would require more than isolated initiatives.

"We always have to be willing to learn," Superintendent Dr. Leandra Thomas said.

That mindset, grounded in reflection and continuous improvement, became a defining feature of the district's approach. As systems strengthened and outcomes improved, district leadership recognized a critical gap. While improvement efforts were underway, the district lacked a formally adopted, board approved strategic plan to unify direction and ensure long term alignment.

"When we were asked to develop a strategic plan, the district had been working on one for years, but it was never board approved," Thomas said.

That realization marked a turning point.

Governance in action: partnering with ASBA

To move from intention to implementation, Ganado partnered with the Arizona School Boards Association.



Beginning in March 2024, ASBA worked closely with the governing board and superintendent to facilitate a structured strategic planning process grounded in governance best practices.

Rather than focusing solely on outcomes, ASBA's approach emphasized readiness, roles and responsibility, ensuring that governance teams were aligned before charting a future course.

"Strategic planning is not about producing a document," said Julie Bacon, ASBA Director of Leadership Development. "It's about building shared ownership between the board and superintendent, clarifying roles and creating a framework that guides decisions long after the planning sessions end."

Through ASBA's strategic planning overview, board members and district leadership explored ASBA's planning framework, reviewed timelines and engaged in

facilitated discussion to determine whether the time was right for their community to formalize a long-term plan.

"Boards sometimes feel pressure to move quickly," Bacon said. "Our role is to help governance teams pause, ask the right questions and ensure they are aligned before committing to a long-term vision."

That alignment proved essential.

Respecting the path forward

Throughout the process, ASBA facilitators worked with Ganado's governing board and superintendent to clarify distinct yet interconnected roles. Board members focused on vision, values and accountability. District leadership concentrated on implementation, systems and instructional alignment. Together, they shaped a plan rooted in local priorities and community voice.



families and students share responsibility for student success, guided by common goals and expectations.

With the adoption of a new district wide curriculum and strengthened expectations for instructional rigor, Ganado has expanded access to high quality learning from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, including alternative education and special education programs. Professional development, weekly data discussions and collaborative reflection support a culture of continuous improvement.

“We have to change our perspective of what more can we do to better our district and help our students,” Thomas said. “It’s going to take collaboration and teamwork to keep moving forward.”

“

We have to change our perspective of what more can we do to better our district and help our students.

-Dr. Leandra Thomas
Superintendent, Ganado USD



“You can’t allow a transition to get in the way of innovation,” Governing Board Member Patrick Barns said. “There is a need to respect the path.”

Approved by the governing board in fall 2024, Ganado’s strategic plan now serves as a clear roadmap for districtwide improvement, anchored by four priorities: academic excellence, optimized resources, positive culture and meaningful community engagement. Those priorities now guide decision making at every level of the district.

A community effort from bus stop to boardroom

The impact of Ganado’s strategic clarity extends well beyond board meetings. Improvement efforts now align across classrooms, campuses and community spaces. Teachers, support staff, administrators,

That collaboration is visible to students.

“There are a lot of activities here that other schools don’t have,” said Jaynessa McIntosh, a freshman. “It makes being here feel rewarding.”

Pride rooted in progress

As outcomes improve, pride across Hornet Country continues to grow. Students describe a strong connection to their schools and a sense of responsibility to represent their community with confidence and purpose.

“Being a Ganado student makes me feel proud because I feel like I’m representing that elderly community that didn’t get the education they deserved,” said Jaelish Ceileibi, a junior at Ganado High School.

That pride is reinforced daily in classrooms where relationships matter.

“My favorite teacher celebrated with the whole class when we passed a test,” said Erin Blueeyes, a sixth grader. “It made us feel proud and motivated.”

Students also point to a sense of trust and support that extends beyond academics.

“The teachers here are respectful and understanding,” said Camilla Archie, a sixth grader. “They make learning easier and help us feel supported.”

For others, that support translates into confidence about the future.

“Going to school here makes me feel confident,” said Nizaria McIntosh, a junior. “I know this school will help me graduate and reach my goal of joining the Navy.”

“Being a Hornet means pride,” added freshman Reyvonah Kee. “They help you have achievements you can reach, and you can help make this school bigger and more well known.”

A governance lesson with statewide resonance

Ganado Unified School District’s progress carries lessons far beyond its borders. Across Arizona, school boards are navigating complex challenges, from academic recovery to workforce pressures and evolving community expectations. In that environment, Ganado’s experience underscores a central truth of public education governance. Improvement is most sustainable when vision, leadership and accountability are aligned.



Strategic planning, when rooted in local context and guided by clearly defined governance roles, becomes more than a compliance exercise. It becomes a tool for continuity amid change, providing boards and superintendents with a shared compass that endures beyond individual terms and transitions.

Ganado’s journey also illustrates the power of governance that honors community voice. By grounding decisions in shared values and long-term goals, boards strengthen public trust and ensure that progress reflects the aspirations of the families they serve.

As Arizona’s public education system continues to evolve, the work of governing boards remains both consequential and enduring. Ganado Unified School District stands as a reminder that thoughtful governance, anchored in collaboration, clarity and purpose, can help districts not only improve outcomes, but build futures worthy of the students and communities they serve.

2025 ASBA-ASA ANNUAL AWARD WINNERS



Lou Ella Kleinz
Excellence in Governance Award



Vail Unified School District



Barbara Robey School Board
Member of the Year



Mike DeLaO, Safford USD



ASAP Member of the Year



Renee Davis, Safford USD



Total Board Award

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| Benson USD | Tempe ESD |
| Central Arizona Valley Institute of Technology (CAVIT) | Tempe UHSD |
| Deer Valley USD | Tolleson ESD |
| Florence USD | Tombstone USD |
| Glendale UHSD | Vail USD |
| Joseph City USD | Wickenburg USD |
| Madison ESD | Winslow USD |
| Parker USD | |
| Pinon USD | |
| Sahuarita USD | |





Golden Bell Promise Program Award – Elementary



Tolleson ESD – Jobs for Graduations (JAG)

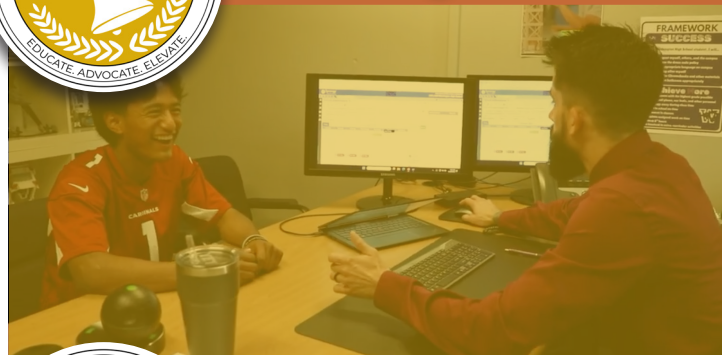
AASA Superintendent of the Year



David Y. Verdugo, Santa Cruz Valley USD



Golden Bell Promise Program Award – High School



Glendale UHSD – Attendance Campaign

All Arizona Superintendent – Small District



Daniel Erikson, Sonoita ESD



Golden Bell Promise Program Award – CTED/CTE



CAVIT – Massage Therapy Program

All Arizona Superintendent – Medium District



Brad Sale, Parker USD



Golden Bell Promise Program Award – Collaboration



Ganado USD – Leadership and Educational Equity

All Arizona Superintendent – Large District



John Carruth, Vail USD



Galveston Elementary's new chapter brings fresh energy to students, teachers and community

August 26, 2025 | Chandler Unified School District

For more than 60 years, Galveston Elementary School in Chandler Unified School District has stood as a source of pride in its community. That legacy now continues on a reimagined campus designed to honor the school's history while creating new opportunities for students, staff and families.

Opened in 2024 after a two-year rebuild, the new campus has transformed more than just the physical space. It has brought renewed energy, pride and connection to the Galveston community.



"This rebuild means everything to Galveston," said Principal Tony Alcala, a Galveston alum. "It's a refresh. It's a restart. It's an opportunity to help kids feel like they are the most important kids in the state of Arizona."

The redesign was shaped by collaboration. Parents, business owners, district leaders and staff worked alongside architects to create a 21st-century learning environment that reflects Galveston's roots while embracing innovation. The result includes flexible classrooms, collaborative spaces, natural light and multipurpose areas that invite learning and connection.

Tradition was intentionally preserved. "We actually kept some bricks from the old campus," Alcala shared. "Grandparents and alumni who attended Galveston in the '70s, '80s or '90s can take a piece of that history home. It's a 63-year-old school community on a brand-new campus and that tradition still lives here."

For Alcala, the transformation is personal. "It's surreal," he said. "I still wake up sometimes and can't believe I am the principal of my old elementary school. My dream is for a Galveston alum to become principal one day."

Teachers say the new building has had an immediate impact. PE teacher Taylor Cole noted the difference in student pride and responsibility. "Kids are more excited every day and I've seen them take pride in this building," she said.



Fifth-grade teacher Samantha Shamblin echoed that sentiment. "The impact on students is excitement," she said. "Being able to give this group of kids a brand-new school with brand-new resources feels inspiring. The kids come in ready to learn."

The redesigned campus has also strengthened community connections. Outside organizations now use the gym for clinics, and events like STEM nights have flourished. "There's so much more community now," Shamblin said. "Being able to invite families into this new space has changed everything about my job."

One year in, the excitement remains strong. "It's like we've won the lottery," Alcala said. "Galveston is here for everyone — kids, parents, grandparents, the whole family. This is a school that will stay in kids' hearts forever."

Galveston's transformation is more than new walls. It is a renewed vision built on community, pride and possibility.

“Galveston is here for everyone — kids, parents, grandparents, the whole family.”

- Tony Alcala
Principal, Galveston ESD, Chandler USD





ASBA recognized for excellence in communication and advocacy

The work of supporting Arizona’s school boards extends beyond policy and training. It requires clear communication, credible advocacy and a sustained commitment to telling the story of public education with integrity. This year, the Arizona School Boards Association was honored by the Arizona School Public Relations Association with multiple Awards of Excellence; recognition that reflects both institutional strength and individual leadership.

Elevating the story of school governance

ASBA received Awards of Excellence for three signature communications initiatives:

- **Journal magazine** — Recognized for its depth, design and reflective storytelling, the Journal continues to serve as a year-in-review archive documenting the policy landscape, governance challenges and district innovation shaping Arizona public education.
- **District highlight video series** — This initiative amplifies the voices of diverse districts across the state, showcasing local leadership and community impact through thoughtful visual storytelling.
- **ASBA website, developed in collaboration with Novle Agency** — The redesigned platform strengthens accessibility and usability, ensuring members, policymakers and partners can easily access governance resources, advocacy updates and professional development tools.



Individual leadership recognized

Two ASBA team members were also honored for their professional excellence and commitment to public education.



Dani Cole, multimedia communications manager, received the Rising Star Award for demonstrated achievements in innovative communication strategies and impactful engagement initiatives. Her leadership in multimedia storytelling and strategic messaging has strengthened ASBA’s statewide presence. Equally significant is her commitment to professional development through active participation in workshops, conferences and continued learning, reflecting both personal growth and dedication to the communications profession.



Lupe Castro, governmental relations associate, was recognized for advocacy and political contributions to public education. This distinction honors individuals who demonstrate support for education through legislative action, lobbying efforts and meaningful collaboration with school districts and communities. Castro’s work ensures that the voice of locally elected school boards is represented thoughtfully and effectively in policy discussions that shape Arizona’s public schools.

A reflection of collective purpose

These recognitions affirm more than individual or project-based success. They underscore ASBA’s broader commitment to equipping school boards with clear information, compelling storytelling and principled advocacy.

In a dynamic education landscape, excellence in communication and advocacy strengthens governance. These honors reflect an enduring commitment to serving Arizona’s students, communities and locally elected leaders with integrity and purpose.

Bulldog pride unites Safford Unified in 110 years of tradition, excellence

October 24, 2025 | Safford Unified School District

Nestled in Arizona's Gila Valley, the city of Safford reflects small-town charm, deep-rooted tradition and a strong belief in the power of education. For generations, schools have served as the heartbeat of the community, a legacy now reaching a major milestone as Safford Unified School

District celebrates 110 years of public education.

"When I look back on 110 years, what stands out most is the strong tradition that's been built," said Superintendent AJ Taylor. "Safford schools have always been about achieving excellence."

Founded in 1913, Safford Unified has grown alongside the community it serves. What began amid farmland and copper mining has evolved into a district supporting a city of more than 10,000 residents and serving as a regional hub for education, agriculture and civic life. Through that growth, the district's identity has remained rooted in perseverance, pride and shared values.

"I've always seen it as a school that has honor, respect and integrity," said Mike Moreno, principal of Dorothy Stinson Elementary. "The principal leaders throughout the years have always had nothing but the best in mind for their students and staff. That's apparent in their actions."

That enduring spirit is on full display during homecoming week, one of the district's most cherished traditions. Students, alumni and families come together to celebrate school pride that spans generations.

"I see the spirit alive within my classmates and myself with our involvement," said Owen Price, Safford High School student body president. "Everybody participates, especially this week. We have so much school spirit. It's the best feeling ever."

A highlight of the week is the annual homecoming bonfire, a tradition that draws the entire town together. "Every single year we have a homecoming bonfire," Price said. "We get the whole community out, teachers, students and everyone shows up and shows out."

Those traditions serve a larger purpose. "I hope this celebration reinforces a sense of Bulldog pride," Price added. "It's about celebrating our past while looking forward to a future of continued success."

That Bulldog identity now begins earlier than ever. Moreno shared that elementary schools once had individual mascots, but the district made a conscious shift toward unity. "We decided we want to all be Bulldogs," he said. "We try to incorporate that and get students ready for wherever they go next."



For school board member and Safford alumni Julie Cluff, that sense of unity defines the district. "I'm very blessed and honored to be a student at Safford High School," she said. "It's a great place to be."

Looking ahead, Taylor says the district remains focused on honoring tradition while embracing what's next. "It's about parades, family events and extracurriculars," he said, "but also creating new traditions that will shape the next 110 years of Bulldog history."

More than a school district, Safford Unified is a reflection of what's possible when a community rallies around education. In Safford, being a Bulldog isn't just for students. It is a lifelong legacy.

“
Safford schools have always been about achieving excellence.

- AJ Taylor
Superintendent, Safford USD



25 years of impact



Customer Service Training for Classified Staff

Spring is a great time to refresh customer service skills and support the staff who shape every first impression.

ASBA's customer service training helps front office and classified staff feel prepared, supported and confident in every interaction with families, students and community members.

Participants will walk away with:

- Practical strategies for creating a welcoming, customer-centered experience
- Tools to navigate challenging conversations with professionalism and consistency
- Stronger communication skills that reflect your district's values
- A shared approach that builds trust and positive relationships

Designed to fit your district's needs:

- Flexible 2-, 3- or 4-hour sessions
- Interactive, high-energy activities that keep staff engaged
- A newly developed workbook with tools staff can use right away

For more information or to schedule a training, contact Heidi Vega at hvega@azsba.org.



"We assume every individual should know what to do and how to respond to our stakeholders through email, phone, or in person. But sometimes we all need reminding, and the ASBA Communications team reminded us in a fun, engaging, and effective way," - **Dr. Leandra Thomas, superintendent of Ganado Unified School District.**



"HUGE thank you to Heidi Vega and her team...It was ideal for what AESD needs. Our administrative assistants were engaged from beginning to end thanks to ASBA's professionalism. Interactive training with real office scenarios made the experience feel special to Alhambra. Our teams have been busy putting their own feedback into practice and are looking forward to the upcoming Secret Shopper experience," - **Dana Lucero, executive assistant to the superintendent and governing board for Alhambra Elementary**



Building educator excellence to give all students the opportunity for success.

Through coaching, leadership development, and proven tools, NIET helps schools strengthen instruction and create the conditions where teachers thrive and students achieve.

"In the last few years, we have been emphasizing the importance of a **strong school culture** that supports every student to set ambitious learning goals and meet those goals. Partnering with NIET has helped us advance this work and get results."

- *Lizette Esparza, Superintendent, Gadsden Elementary School District #32*



"We have anchored our academic and student success goals around accelerating student learning while **improving teacher effectiveness**. Our partnership with NIET enables us to continue to grow and improve."

- *Dr. Michael Robert, Superintendent, Osborn School District #8*



NIET has worked with more than 350,000 educators and 35,000 teacher leaders in 11,000 schools, impacting 3.5 million students by transforming instruction, closing learning gaps, and achieving award-winning growth.

Learn more about NIET's impact by visiting www.niet.org.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION:

WHAT OUR STUDENTS SEE

ASBA's renewed advocacy was on full display during a successful Advocacy Day at the Arizona State Capitol, where school board members from across the state came together with a shared message grounded in lived experience. Policy decisions have real and visible consequences inside school buildings, and those consequences are felt daily by students and educators.

Centered on the theme of *What Our Students See*, Advocacy Day focused attention on the everyday conditions that shape a student's ability to learn. Noise levels inside classrooms, extreme temperatures in gymnasiums, sanitation in restrooms, and access to safe and potable drinking water are not abstract facility concerns. They directly affect student focus, health, and academic success. When mold appears on ceilings or when infrastructure deteriorates beyond temporary repairs, attention is pulled away from teaching and learning. Teachers should be focused on reading, writing, and math, not on whether the building itself is safe.

Across Arizona, districts experience these challenges in different ways. In some communities, aging school buildings require major repairs. In others, limited funding has delayed upgrades to heating and cooling systems, restrooms, or drinking fountains. Some districts struggle with classrooms and facilities that no longer meet the needs of today's students. These are the kinds of district specific realities school board members brought forward, and where local examples, including those from Bisbee Unified School District and other communities, help illustrate what students truly see when they arrive at school each day.



During the event, ASBA invited school board members to join its government relations team at the Capitol to better understand the current state of school facilities funding and to strengthen their skills as effective advocates in meetings with lawmakers.

The day reinforced the importance of telling a clear and consistent story; one rooted not in rhetoric but in the lived experiences of students across Arizona.

That message closely aligns with ASBA's long standing advocacy beyond the Capitol. The association is a plaintiff in *Glendale Elementary School District et al. v. State of Arizona*, a major case originally filed in 2017, challenging the state's failure to adequately fund school capital needs. A recent ruling in favor of the plaintiffs marked a significant win for public education and affirmed the importance of long term and member driven advocacy. The court case reinforces what school board members shared during Advocacy Day. Adequate facilities funding is not theoretical. It is essential to provide students with safe and functional learning environments.

Advocacy Day underscored a central tenet of ASBA's values based and nonpartisan approach: When legislators and communities truly see what students see, common ground emerges. Safe and functional schools are not a political issue. They are a shared responsibility. By standing together, school board members ensured these realities were not only heard, but understood, further strengthening ASBA's role as a credible and member led voice for Arizona's public schools.



Speak Up, Stand Up, Save a Life brings students together for change

September 30, 2025 | Speak Up, Stand Up, Save a Life

More than 60 schools from across Arizona gathered in Phoenix for the ninth annual Speak Up, Stand Up, Save a Life Conference, an event students, educators and community leaders say is making a measurable difference by giving young people the courage and tools to seek help.

Inside a packed auditorium, students sat alongside teachers, first responders and



local officials, united by a shared mission to recognize warning signs, confront mental health challenges and support one another in moments of crisis.

For nearly a decade, the conference has carried a clear message: No student should face depression, suicide, grief, abuse or bullying alone. Organizers say that message is more urgent than ever.

"Everybody goes through hard times," said prosecutor and founder Gina Godbehere. "We encourage students to speak up, connect with a trusted adult and find the resources they need."

Godbehere launched the program after seeing repeated instances of young people posting signs of distress online that went unanswered. What began as a response to that concern has grown into a

statewide effort focused on awareness, prevention and action.

That effort includes community advocates such as Brad Snyder, psychologist, author and executive director of the Dion Initiative for Child Well-Being and Bullying Prevention. Snyder said research shows that meaningful prevention requires involvement from peers and adults alike.

"We can't rely on students in crisis to ask for help on their own," Snyder said. "We need peers and adults to step in, speak up and support each other."

This year's conference centered on the theme of regulation, encouraging students to recognize stress in daily life and respond in healthier ways. Sessions focused on self-regulation skills to manage personal challenges and co-regulation strategies to help peers who may be struggling.

Snyder reminded students that difficult emotions are shared experiences and that connection can replace isolation when people know how to respond.

Bringing energy and creativity to the day was The Be Kind Crew, a Phoenix-based nonprofit that blends dance, spoken word and youth development. "Students today are dealing with more information and pressure than ever," said Anthony Kelly Akellez, the group's word choreographer and content development manager. "Learning how to regulate ourselves and understand each other can help prevent conflict."

For many students, the conference provided a rare opportunity to feel heard and supported.

"It makes me feel supported knowing that teachers and first responders are here, listening to our stories," said Charlie Bachman, a senior at Perry High School in

Chandler Unified School District. "Sometimes it's not the textbook signs, it's the little things."

Others shared that the event shines a light on issues often left unspoken and helps students realize they are not alone in managing school, activities and family responsibilities.

Since its founding, Speak Up, Stand Up, Save a Life has reached more than 420,000 students across 21 cities and more than 54 districts. Organizers say the growth reflects a simple truth.

"Every person has the power to be a difference maker," Godbehere said.

The message remains clear: listen, speak up and act. Even one conversation can save a life.



“
Every person has the power to be a difference maker.

- **Gina Godbehere**
Founder, Speak Up, Stand Up, Save a Life

Villa de Paz Elementary's Dreamscape learn lab: A new frontier in education

February 21, 2025 | Pendergast Unified School District

Villa de Paz Elementary School in the Pendergast Elementary School District is redefining what learning looks like through innovation in virtual reality and computer science. With the introduction of its Dreamscape Learn Lab and Computer Science Academy, the school is moving beyond traditional textbooks and creating immersive, hands-on learning experiences that spark curiosity and engagement.

The Dreamscape Learn Lab allows students to step into virtual worlds where complex concepts come to life. Through programming, robotics and digital design, students actively explore content rather than passively consuming it. Villa de Paz is the first elementary school to offer this modernized learning experience. While the program currently serves seventh and eighth



graders, plans are in place to expand it to younger students.

"There are some amazing teachers here, and the way of teaching computer science is special because not every school gets to teach it," said student Samuel Granado. "I feel very special that I get to learn computer science and coding because it is very important."

The Dreamscape Learn Lab transforms learning into an interactive experience. Students navigate alien ecosystems, solve environmental challenges and collaborate in shared virtual spaces.

These activities promote critical thinking, problem-solving and empathy while making learning memorable and exciting.

"Sometimes if you look to your left and right, you can see your friends and actually see them move around, and that's really cool," said student Oscar Salinas.

Educators say these immersive experiences increase motivation and deepen understanding. "Visualizing complex concepts in a 3D environment helps students grasp abstract ideas more easily, leading to better understanding and retention,"



said Dr. Shelmon Brown, chief academic officer.

Alongside virtual reality, Villa de Paz offers a robust Computer Science Academy that introduces students to coding, computational thinking and digital design. Through hands-on projects, students learn how technology connects to real-world applications and future careers.

"Our district's mission is to prepare students to succeed in a globally connected society, and Villa de Paz's Computer Science Academy exemplifies this commitment," said Superintendent Dr. Jennifer Cruz. "When visitors tour Villa de Paz, they are often struck by students' confidence and capability. That excellence is the standard we expect every day."

These programs also help students build essential life skills such as collaboration, adaptability and communication. For students who struggled in traditional settings, virtual reality and hands-on learning have opened new pathways to confidence and success.

"I think that cutting-edge technology can really help in immersive and different levels of education because everybody learns differently," said Don Neville, e-learning specialist.

Beyond technology, Villa de Paz is grounded in a strong sense of community. Teachers, staff and families work together to support students and encourage creativity and exploration.

"What makes the school so special is the kids and the teachers and being able to have fun and enjoy what they teach me," said student Alexander White.

As technology continues to shape the future, Villa de Paz is preparing students not just to keep up, but to lead. "Families, educators and community partners work together to create opportunities for students," said Principal Abraham Gonzales. "We ensure they have the resources and encouragement to succeed."

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Our district's mission is to prepare students to succeed in a globally connected society.

– Dr. Jennifer Cruz

Superintendent, Pendergast ESD





SHARE YOUR DISTRICT'S STORY

Every district has moments worth celebrating. ASBA's District Highlight feature helps you tell those stories.

Our ASBA team comes to you! We take time to listen, learn and immerse ourselves in your district's story, capturing the moments, voices and details that make your work meaningful.

This is more than coverage. It is an opportunity to **elevate your district's work**, showcase your impact and spotlight the people behind your success.

What your District Highlight includes:

- A professionally written feature article
- A high-quality video produced on location
- Visibility through ASBA platforms
- A lasting piece you can share with your community



Scan to schedule a district highlight!

District Highlights are designed to celebrate meaningful moments and amplify the positive impact your schools have on students, families and communities across Arizona.

Submit your school request?

Scan the QR code or visit our website to submit a District Highlight request, and let us help you share what makes your district exceptional. **This is a complimentary service.**



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Advocacy, reclaimed: A renewed, united voice for Arizona's students

ASBA advocacy has entered a purposeful and clearly defined chapter, shaped by member leadership, grounded in shared values, and focused squarely on student success. Across Arizona, school board members continue to demonstrate that while district contexts may vary, the fundamentals of good governance remain the same. Every student deserves a safe, functional learning environment and the opportunity to thrive.

ASBA's political and legislative agenda is values-based and nonpartisan. It reflects what unites governing boards statewide rather than what divides them. By representing member districts on education policy issues, convening leaders from across the state, and providing training and advocacy tools, ASBA ensures that local perspectives are elevated at the state level. Maintaining membership ensures continuity of advocacy and connection, allowing districts to speak with a consistent and credible voice over time.

A member-led approach rooted in governance

ASBA's advocacy is guided by locally elected school board members who understand firsthand how state decisions affect classrooms, budgets and communities. While Arizona's districts differ in size and geography, board members consistently align around core priorities. Students should learn in safe facilities, have access to up to date instructional materials, and be supported by stable, predictable funding.

"These aren't partisan issues. They're governance," said Ellen White, ASBA Executive Director. "When school board members advocate together, the focus

stays where it belongs, on students and the conditions they need to succeed."

Advocacy in action: What our students see

That values-based approach was on full display during ASBA's successful Advocacy Day at the Arizona State Capitol, centered on the theme, *What Our Students See*. School board members from across the state met with lawmakers to share the realities inside Arizona's public schools, realities shaped by aging buildings, extreme temperatures, sanitation challenges and deferred maintenance.

Noise in classrooms, overheated gymnasiums, mold on ceilings and a lack of potable drinking water all affect a student's ability to learn. When infrastructure fails, it diverts attention away from instruction and places additional strain on educators.

"Facilities funding isn't abstract. It's visible to students every single day," said Jimmy Arwood, ASBA Director of Governmental Relations. "Advocacy Day gave board members the opportunity to connect policy decisions directly to what students experience when they walk into a school."

“

When school board members advocate together, the focus stays where it belongs, on students and the conditions they need to succeed.

-Ellen White

Executive Director, ASBA

Through briefings with ASBA's Government Relations team, members deepened their understanding of the state of school facilities funding and strengthened their effectiveness as advocates in meetings with legislators. The message was clear and consistent. When policymakers see what students see, common ground emerges.

Sustained advocacy delivering results

ASBA's advocacy extends well beyond a single day at the Capitol. The association remains engaged wherever policy, regulation or legal interpretation directly affects Arizona's public schools. As a plaintiff in *Glendale Elementary School District et al. v. State of Arizona*, a landmark case filed in 2017 challenging the state's failure to adequately fund school capital needs, ASBA has played a central role in advancing long-term facilities solutions. A recent ruling in favor of the plaintiffs marked a significant victory for public education and affirmed the power of sustained, member-driven advocacy.

That same commitment has guided ASBA's work in regulatory and legal arenas. The association has intervened before the Arizona Corporation Commission to oppose utility rate increases that would disproportionately burden school districts, recognizing that fiscal stewardship extends beyond traditional education policy.

Most recently, ASBA joined The Trust and Valley Schools Management Group in filing an amicus brief addressing requirements for out-of-state attorneys not admitted to the Arizona State Bar who are seeking to represent parents or students in special education due process hearings and later seek attorneys' fees from school districts in settlement. Following oral arguments on Feb. 10, 2026, the court upheld the requirement that such attorneys seek pro hac vice admission, meaning they must formally request permission from the court to temporarily practice law in Arizona for that specific case. The judge relied on

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the analysis presented in ASBA's brief and granted the motion to include it in the official record, reinforcing professional standards in administrative proceedings and marking another meaningful win for Arizona's schools.

Looking ahead with purpose

ASBA's advocacy today is defined by clarity, consistency, and collaboration. It is not tied to politics or personalities, but to a shared commitment among school board members to speak up for students and communities.

Values based. Nonpartisan. Member led.

Those principles continue to guide ASBA's work and ensure that Arizona's school boards remain a trusted and united voice for public education, now and for years to come.



School board members have a critical role in selecting employee health insurance



As a school board member, each of your decisions significantly impacts the well-being and satisfaction of your district's employees. One of the most important choices you can make is selecting the right health insurance. This decision could affect staff health, as well as district finances and retention rates.

Why your role matters

Health insurance is a crucial part of employee compensation. Your selection must provide comprehensive coverage, be financially sustainable and meet diverse employee needs.

Consider ASBAIT for your district's health insurance needs

The **Arizona School Boards Association Insurance Trust (ASBAIT)** is a premier health plan option for many Arizona schools and community colleges. Established in 1981, ASBAIT offers:

- **The largest group health care pool in Arizona.** Serving only public schools and community colleges.
- **44 years of innovation.** Efficient and effective health care solutions.
- **A full suite of benefits.** Nine medical plans to meet every school budget. Plus, additional offerings including dental, vision, life, health savings accounts and more.
- **A tremendous focus on member health.** High-quality care and comprehensive service. Including, but not limited to, programs that improve member access to care, such as Hinge Health, SkinIO, Virta Health, EAP and Teladoc Health. As well as, Thrive3SixtyFive, our comprehensive Wellness Program.
- **Sustainability.** Financial stability and low administrative costs.
- **Extensive networks.** In addition to the Aetna National Network, ASBAIT plans have exclusive access to the Banner|Aetna three-tier network and an option to include a Mexico Network.

Real-life impact: How ASBAIT benefits our employees

Imagine the diverse workforce in your district, from teachers to custodians to cafeteria staff. One employee may need regular specialist visits and medications for a chronic condition. Another might rely on preventive care services to stay healthy and avoid serious issues. A third supports a family and needs comprehensive coverage that includes dental and vision care for their children.

With ASBAIT, every employee benefits from comprehensive health coverage that meets their varied needs. They have access to an extensive provider network, affordable prescriptions, regular checkups and family health benefits. This support helps them stay healthy, reduces absenteeism and provides peace of mind knowing their health care needs are covered.

Your next steps

Engage with your fellow board members, district administrators and employees to gather input and ensure a transparent decision-making process. By thoroughly evaluating key points and asking the right questions, you can select a health insurance plan that best serves your district's needs and ensures a healthy and thriving school community.

Remember, your decision impacts not just the health of your employees, but the overall success and stability of your district. Make a decision that benefits your employees and strengthens your district.

Need more information?



Contact:
Chuck Nelson

ASBAIT Sales Executive
Meritain Health®

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ASBAIT
ARIZONA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION INSURANCE TRUST

Adequately and Equitably Fund District Schools to the National Median per Pupil Funding

- Maximize state funding to:
 - Provide competitive salaries to attract, recruit, and retain talented teachers and staff;
 - Increase the pipeline of certified teachers;
 - Increase the diversity of the teaching workforce, and fill difficult positions, including CTED instructors
- Provide consistent, dedicated sources of base funding based on most recent statewide cost study that equips all Arizona public schools with adequate support to address the academic, social and emotional needs of its students including:
 - Up to date curriculum, technology, and classroom support to enrich academic success and engagement.
 - Student support staff dedicated to enhancing safe and effective learning environments;
 - Exceptional student services, gifted students, and early intervention programs;
 - Before and after school programs;
 - Fine arts education;
 - Career and technical education;
 - Transportation, including maintenance and increased costs for CTEDs and rural schools;
 - Ensure the formula addresses the unique financial needs of schools serving students in poverty and in rural and remote schools;
 - Fund distance learning at 100%;
 - JROTC.
- Repeal the constitutional aggregate expenditure limit via legislative referral to the voters.
- Fully fund full-day kindergarten and include kindergarten students in the override calculations.
- Preserve and protect the voters' original intent for Propositions 123 and 301. Protect voters' intent in funding K-12 education and oppose legislation that attempts to supplant or divert additional voter-approved funding streams.
- Index district additional assistance (DAA) funding for inflation.
- Provide funding for new space before existing schools become overcrowded; advocate for the SFOB to set a standard for replacement of buildings that have exceeded their useful life; advocate for the SFOB to use a professional demographer firm in determining school construction; advocate for capacity standards that reflect the design of instructional space; include funding for capital repairs.
- Provide consistent, dedicated and flexible sources of ongoing state capital funding to Arizona public schools to fully maintain and renew physical assets that were built with either local or state taxpayer dollars.
- Eliminate unfunded mandates and administrative burdens.
- Protect desegregation funding and return it to a primary tax levy.
- Fully fund preschool programs in the K-12 funding formula for districts that offer preschool.
- Replace current year funding with a transparent, reliable system that provides districts stable annual budgeting ability and technical reliability.
- Prorate funding over the entire school year among all schools that a student has attended during the year.
- Give districts the authority to provide affordable housing options to faculty and staff based on the local housing market.

Preserve, Respect, and Strengthen Local Control

- Ensure local control and flexibility in managing funds and programs, within the Arizona constitutional requirements of a general and uniform public school system.
- Change "override/budget increase" language to better reflect what voters are being asked to support. Update requirements associated with school district voter-approved bonds and overrides to improve efficiency and permit more accurate presentations of estimated property tax rates.
- Allow school districts full flexibility in the divestiture or use of taxpayer-funded assets.
- Oppose legislative intrusion on school site budgeting decisions.
- Maintain exclusive local authority over any measure that would propose to consolidate, unify, or restructure school districts.
- Support local board authority regarding open enrollment policies.
- Amend current statute to allow school board members to use the e-equal system in addition to in-person signatures to appear on the ballot.
- Oppose any legislation that intends to lessen or curtail the legal authority of locally elected school boards, including their authority to approve curriculum.
- Oppose legislative efforts to ban educational and supplemental materials that provide an inclusive and historically accurate, well-rounded education.
- Oppose any legislation that seeks to make school board elections partisan.
- Modify the number of signatures required for CTED board candidates to align with similar school board candidates.

Improve Opportunities and Outcomes for All Students

- Increase the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18 years or the attainment of a high school diploma or GED before the age of 18.
- Repeal and replace Prop. 203 with research-based bilingual education. Reform English Language Learner models of instruction to increase integration of English Learners and give schools flexibility and resources to administer them.
- Fully restore 9th and 12th grade CTED funding and allow them to serve students through age 21 regardless of graduation status to expand the window of opportunity students have to complete industry-recognized CTE programs.
- Support policy that recognizes, respects, and promotes teaching as a profession.
- Defend against efforts to limit the free speech rights of school employees.
- Oppose regulations, policies, and restrictions that overburden or unreasonably penalize educators and support staff as they educate and care for students.
- Redefine the role and purpose of standardized testing and develop meaningful assessments and other measurable outcomes.
- Support legislation and access to funding that would allow school districts to offer school meals to all students free of charge.
- Support policy that protects school district employees and students from all types of discrimination.

Require Public Accountability And Transparency for Taxpayer Dollars Spent on Education

- Establish financial and academic transparency for all institutions and individuals who accept public funds. Enforce financial audit requirements and seek recovery of improperly received and/or expended funds by individuals, charter and public schools, private schools, and organizations.
- Repeal any program that gives funds for private schools, vouchers (Empowerment Scholarship Accounts) and private school subsidies (School Tuition Organizations) and prevent any future expansion.
- Require comparative classroom spending audits for school districts and all other institutions that accept public funds and define "classroom spending" as both instructional spending and student support spending.
- Increase public school tax credit donation limits to match those allowed for private schools.

Arizona's Rural and Remote Schools

- Ensure that students in Arizona's small, rural and remote schools are considered by policymakers alongside students in large metropolitan schools.
- Equitably invest in technology modernization, reliable internet broadband access, technology support capability and professional development.
- Protect rural and remote school districts from inequitable impact due to formula adjustments, including transportation.

School Safety and Security

- Provide funding to individual districts to implement locally directed research-based school safety programs and mental health and wellbeing initiatives.
- Support policy that promotes social-emotional wellness as a critical component of improving social climate, safety and learning for all students and staff.
- Arizona's school boards call upon all state, federal, tribal and local officials to address the causes and impact of increased self-harm and violence in our school communities.
- Arizona's school boards call upon all state, federal, tribal and local officials to address the causes and impact of increased gun violence directed at K-12 schools.
- Fund programming to engage and support families and caregivers in culturally relevant and appropriate ways.
- Develop a more comprehensive harassment/bullying definition and system to better enhance the clarity of understanding and the protection of our youth.

Federal Advocacy

- Advocate for maintenance and improvement of bus routes on tribal and federal land.
- Fully fund Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Protect Impact Aid funding and the Secure Rural Schools Program for Arizona school districts that receive it.

ASBA Policy Services: What We Offer



Ensure Compliance with State and Federal Laws

A subscription to Policy Services provides ASBA member districts with a comprehensive, cost-efficient way to keep the District Policy Manual in compliance with state and federal laws and regulations. We offer a license to the ASBA Model Policy Manual® and timely Policy Advisories and Alerts issued throughout the year, along with various supports to ensure effective and efficient policy adoption, implementation, and review.

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- **Complimentary Policy Manual Reviews:** Comprehensive reviews of the District Policy Manual are recommended every four years and are complimentary for policy subscribers.
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- **Complimentary Employee Handbook Service:** Access to the ASBA Employee Handbook Service, customizable to connect district policy with employment rules and expectations.
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More 



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Policy implementation can be complex. Our policy and governance experts, who are experienced educators with first-hand expertise in applying policy in educational settings, are available for on-call information and assistance at no additional cost to Policy Services subscribers. ASBA is committed to providing timely support, ensuring a response within 24 hours, if not before, via phone and email.

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ASBA hosts the most current version of the District Policy Manual through the PolicyBridge® platform at no additional cost. This web-based format provides 24/7 public access, is easily navigable, and is available on both the district and ASBA websites. The platform includes editing, search, and comparison functions to save time and enhance customization.

Policy Manual Reviews: A Streamlined, Time-Saving Process

ASBA recommends a complimentary policy manual review every four years for subscribing districts to ensure compliance and address local needs, priorities, and practices. Our policy services team handles the entire process, preparing and sending a detailed pre-analysis prior to conducting an in-person or virtual, comprehensive review. This streamlined approach reduces the time required from district staff, saving your district valuable time and effort while identifying gaps and opportunities for customization.

Policy Amendment Assistance

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EDUCATE. ADVOCATE. ELEVATE.

Teaching beyond the lesson plan:

Tiffani Jaseph and the power of inclusion



For Tiffani Jaseph, teaching has never been about delivering lessons from the front of the room. It has always been about relationships, about knowing students deeply, believing fiercely in their potential and building classrooms where every child is seen, supported, and valued.

With more than 15 years in education, Jaseph's career reflects a steady evolution toward purpose. A graduate of the University of Arizona, where she earned both her bachelor's degree in elementary education and her master's degree in special education, she began her journey in general education classrooms, teaching second and third grade and serving as a reading interventionist. Those early years sharpened her instructional skills, but they also revealed something more enduring: *a calling to serve students who needed not just a teacher, but an advocate.*

Finding the work she was meant to do

"As the oldest of four children, I've always had a passion for helping young people and being a role model," Jaseph says. That instinct made education a natural path, but it was her time in the College of Education that confirmed it. "Once I started my coursework, I knew I was exactly where I was meant to be."

Teaching, she discovered, offered something rare; a profession that felt less like a job and more like a calling. She loved witnessing students' "light bulb" moments and guiding them toward confidence and understanding. That sense of purpose deepened when she transitioned from general education to special education.

"In special education, I realized I'm not only an educator," she reflects. "I'm also an advocate for inclusion."

That advocacy took shape across three Arizona school districts. In Sunnyside Unified School District, she taught in an

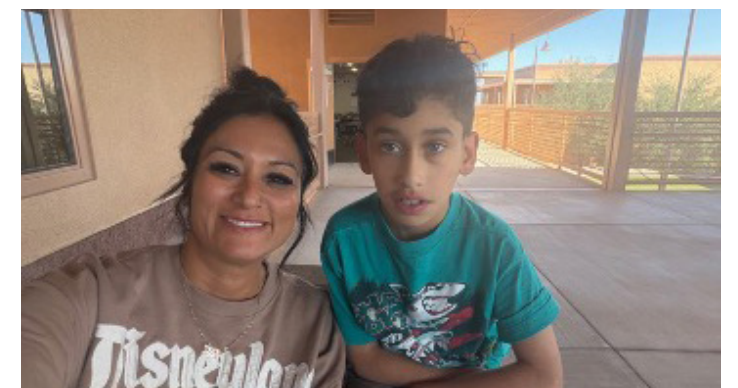
extended-day special education program for fourth and fifth graders who split their time between general and special education settings. In Yuma, she supported students in kindergarten through sixth grade in a resource model, facilitating targeted intervention groups designed to meet a wide range of academic needs.

Today, Jaseph teaches at Copper View Elementary School in Sahuarita Unified School District, working with kindergarten through fifth-grade students in an Extended Resource setting for children with higher support needs. Whenever possible, she supports students in general education classrooms, often alongside an inclusion assistant. When students need a smaller or more structured environment, academically, socially or medically, her classroom becomes a place of stability, trust and growth.

The moments that define the work

Ask Jaseph what keeps her grounded in the profession, and she points not to awards or outcomes, but to relationships, especially with families.

One conversation in particular continues to stay with her. After working for more than five years with a student whose primary needs were behavioral, Jaseph had built a close partnership with the child's mother. One summer, the parent called to share that she and her husband were separating and that she was considering moving back to Louisiana to be closer to family.





As she talked through the possibility at home, her son was clear: He didn't want to leave his teacher.

"That moment really stopped me," Jaseph says. "It reminded me how much families trust us. They leave their children with us every day, trusting us to care for them, keep them safe, love them and be their voice."

Ultimately, the family decided to stay, believing it was in their child's best interest to remain in a setting where he felt supported and understood. For Jaseph, it was a powerful reminder that the impact of teaching often reaches far beyond the classroom walls.

High expectations, grounded in empathy

Teaching students with significant needs requires constant balance between empathy and accountability, structure and flexibility. Jaseph describes her role as "a balancing act," one that begins with knowing each student as an individual.

She carefully assesses where students are and develops data-driven, attainable goals through their Individualized Education Plans. Those goals may look very different from

child to child, but each one is rooted in progress and possibility.

"For one student, success might be staying in a general education class for 30 minutes," she explains. "For another, it might be learning to wash their hands independently. What matters is that the goals reflect who they are and what they can do."

Her philosophy centers on strengths rather than limitations, a mindset that shapes how students see themselves and their potential.

Why governance matters in the classroom

From her perspective as a classroom educator, Jaseph sees strong school board governance as essential to effective teaching and learning. Decisions around budgeting, policy and leadership directly affect what happens in classrooms every day.

"When school boards listen to teachers and parents, they're able to make informed decisions that truly support schools," she says. "They help unite everyone around a common vision."

Looking ahead with hope

As Arizona Teacher of the Year for 2026, Jaseph carries the honor with humility and optimism. After more than 15 years in the classroom, she sees encouraging shifts across public education in Arizona.

"There's a stronger emphasis on inclusion, neurodiversity and social-emotional learning," she says. "We're looking beyond test scores and really getting to know the children we teach."

For a special education teacher whose career has centered on belonging, that evolution brings hope. "Children come to us with different needs and experiences," she says. "It's our responsibility to adapt our teaching, not to try to make children fit a single mold."

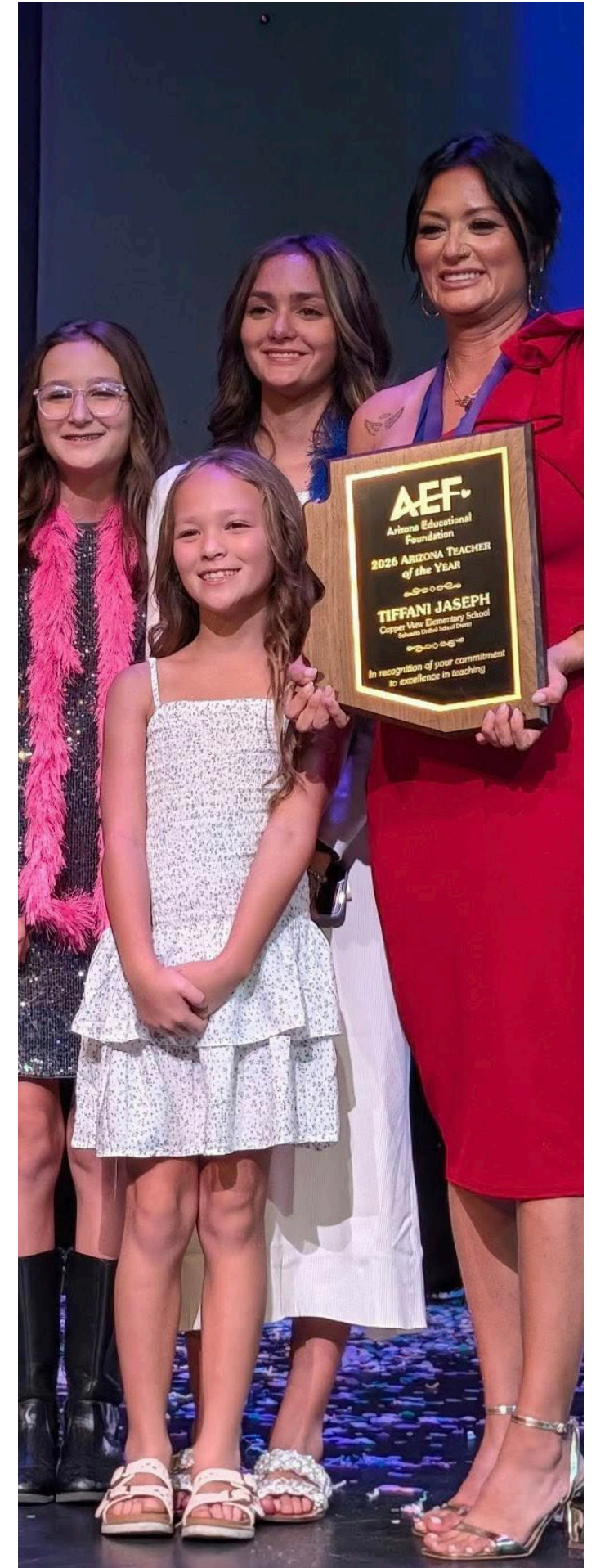
In classrooms across Arizona, educators like Tiffani Jaseph are quietly shaping that future; one built on trust, inclusion and the belief that every child deserves to belong.

“

It reminded me how much families trust us. They leave their children with us every day, trusting us to care for them, keep them safe, love them and be their voice.

-Tiffani Jaseph

2026 AEF Teacher of the Year





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Rethinking access so every student can thrive

By **Kathy Hoffman, MS, CCC-SLP**

With contributions from **Erin Rotheram-Fuller, PhD** and **Jesse Fleming, PhD**
Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University



Kathy Hoffman, MS, CCC-SLP



Erin Rotheram-Fuller, PhD



Jesse Fleming, PhD

When educators, researchers, policymakers and families come together with a shared purpose, the future of public education begins to look radically more inclusive. That shared vision is driving Project OASIS (Optimizing Access for Students in Schools), a Learning Futures Collaborative that is reimagining what it means for all students to belong and succeed in Arizona's public schools.

Launched in 2023 at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Project OASIS brings together more than 300 participants from across the state. Educators, researchers, district and charter leaders, families, business and nonprofit partners, and community members engage in a collective effort to rethink special education systems; not as parallel structures, but as integrated, accessible designs that benefit every learner.

At the heart of this initiative is former Arizona superintendent of public instruction,

Kathy Hoffman and co-founder Dr. Erin Rotheram-Fuller.

"Project OASIS invites us to imagine what schools could be when every student has access to the instruction, strategies and partnerships that help them thrive," Hoffman said. "We want to create a future where special education is not about separation, but about maximizing access to meaningful learning for all children."

A powerful question guiding the work

Central to Project OASIS is a deceptively simple yet transformative question: How can we build educational models where special education and disability labels are no longer necessary for students to access an optimal educational experience?

That future-focused inquiry, grounded in access, evidence and shared expertise, sets the tone for this collaborative work. Rather than prescribing one solution, Project OASIS creates space for dialogue, research and



reflection across diverse district contexts, recognizing that inclusive systems must be both intentional and adaptable.

"Inclusion isn't an add-on," said Dr. Erin Rotheram-Fuller, professor and co-director of Project OASIS. "It has to be baked into systems from classroom practices to staffing models to policy decisions. That's where sustainable change happens."

From placement to participation

Project OASIS leaders are clear that inclusion is not simply about where students sit, but how they participate.

"Inclusive practices mean meaningful integration of students of all abilities in the general education classroom," Hoffman explained. "When students with disabilities have consistent access to grade-level instruction, peer models and high expectations, they demonstrate stronger academic growth."

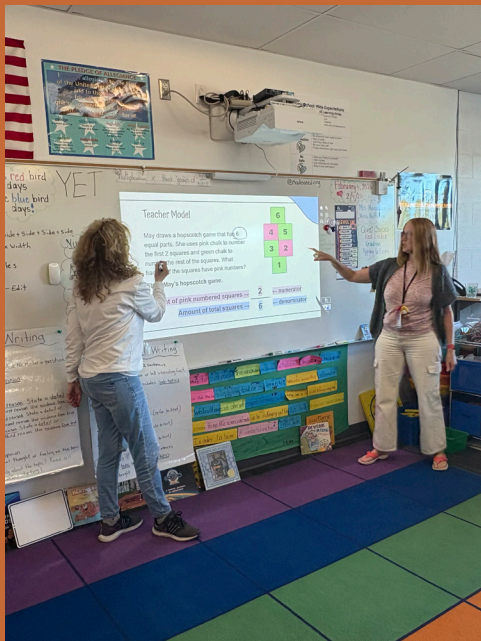
In Arizona, approximately 70 percent of students with disabilities spend at least 80 percent of their school day in general education classrooms. For preschool students, however, that figure drops to about 30 percent, often due to developmental preschool models that serve only students with disabilities. Through school tours and research partnerships, Project OASIS is examining how early learning systems can be redesigned to embed inclusion from the start.

“

Inclusive practices mean meaningful integration of students of all abilities in the general education classroom

-Kathy Hoffman

Executive Director, Innovations and Special Education Initiatives,
Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation



Above: In Madison School District, a general education teacher and a special education teacher co-teach a third-grade classroom. The co-teaching model exemplifies shared responsibility for all learners, allowing students of varying abilities to engage in grade-level instruction while benefiting from differentiated support within the same learning environment.

One recent tour highlighted an inclusive preschool model at the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center, where classrooms intentionally enroll autistic students alongside peers without disabilities. Educators trained in applied behavior analysis use play-based strategies to build communication and social skills for all learners; demonstrating what access can look like when it is designed intentionally.

Learning from Arizona districts

Under the Project OASIS umbrella, ASU faculty and doctoral students partner with districts across Arizona to study inclusive practices and inform leadership decision-making. Collaborations with districts such as Madison School District and the Vail Unified School District offer practical examples of how inclusion can be implemented at scale.

In Madison, co-teaching models pair general and special education teachers in the same classroom, creating shared responsibility for all learners. Research shows that students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms often achieve higher academic outcomes than peers in more restrictive settings, while students without disabilities report increased engagement and access to support.

"Inclusive classrooms work best when teachers are supported, coordinated and valued for their expertise," Hoffman said. "We have seen in Madison how co-teaching allows educators to reimagine instruction so all students can learn, share and demonstrate understanding in different ways."

Leadership sets the conditions

Across districts, Project OASIS has found that successful inclusion depends on leadership clarity. School boards and superintendents play a pivotal role in articulating the purpose of inclusion, aligning policies with values and ensuring professional development and staffing structures support educators.

In Vail, inclusion has been embedded into district policy and community identity for years. A governing board policy affirms that every student has the right to be a member of the general education classroom, supported by a common language and consistent expectations across schools.

"Redesigning systems is not quick work," said Dr. Jesse Fleming, assistant professor and co-director of Project OASIS. "But when boards and district leaders commit to shared ownership and thoughtful implementation, inclusion becomes sustainable rather than aspirational."

Beyond academic outcomes

While academic growth is a key measure of success, Project OASIS leaders emphasize that inclusive classrooms also build empathy, collaboration and resilience.

"There are benefits that go beyond what test scores can capture for students without disabilities when they learn alongside peers with complex needs," Hoffman noted. "All students develop patience, problem-solving skills and the ability to work through challenges together, skills they will

need long after graduation."

Looking ahead

As Project OASIS continues to evolve, its leaders are clear that the work ahead will require courage, curiosity and collaboration. Redesigning educational systems from early childhood through secondary school demands sustained commitment from governing boards, superintendents and community partners.

Yet the promise is compelling.

For Arizona's educational leaders and the students, they serve, Project OASIS offers a vision of public education where access is intentional, inclusion is systemic and every child is empowered not only to belong, but to thrive.



Left: In the Vail School District, the director of special education welcomes Project OASIS participants with an overview of the district's inclusive vision before leading a classroom tour. The session highlights how board-supported policies, professional learning and community values come together to ensure students with disabilities spend meaningful time in general education settings.



2026 ASBA POLICY SERVICES

Recommended
& Required Dates

What can you find in the calendar provided by your ASBA policy team?

The policy services team maintains a calendar of recommended and required dates for subscribers. This calendar is not a comprehensive list of everything ASBA offers or every date a board member must know about. Instead, it is a comprehensive list of statutory deadlines and where those deadlines are listed in the ASBA model policy manual. The calendar is intended for use by district administrators in conjunction with the ASBA policy manual.

This calendar may be used by district administrators and executive staff to identify deadlines to achieve statutory compliance.



2026 Calendar of Recommended and Required Actions by Arizona School Districts — Quick Reference

JANUARY & FEBRUARY

- Jan.** BDA—Board Organizational Meeting and Board President Duties
- Feb. 28** JQ—Student Fines, Fees, and Charges

MARCH & APRIL

- Mar. 31** JFAB—Tuition/Admission of Nonresident Students
- Apr. 1** IHB—Special Instructional Programs
- Apr. 15** EB—Safety Program

MAY & JUNE

- May - June** Sine die, the Arizona legislature adjourns its session annually in May or June, usually.
- May 15** DB-R—Annual Budget: Schedule, Preparation/Planning, Format, and Posting/Submission
- June 30** JFAB—Tuition/Admission of Nonresident Students

JULY & AUGUST

- July 1** IHB—Special Instructional Programs
IHBB—Gifted and Talented Education
- July 5** DB-R—Annual Budget: Schedule, Preparation/Planning, Format, and Posting/Submission
- July 15** DB—Annual Budget: Schedule, Preparation/Planning, Format, and Posting/Submission
IHAA—English Instruction
- Aug. 29** DB-R—Annual Budget: Schedule, Preparation/Planning, Format, and Posting/Submission

SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER

- Sept.-Oct.** Conduct first and second reads of annual legislative policy advisories
- Sept. 1** JEB—Entrance Age Requirements
- Sept. 15** IHAA—English Instruction
- Sept. 30** JFAB—Tuition/Admission of Nonresident Students
- Oct. 1** IHB—Special Instructional Programs
- Oct. 15** DIC—Financial Reports and Statements
FA—Facilities Development Goals/Priority Objectives
GCBA—Professional Staff Salary Schedules

NOVEMBER & DECEMBER

- Nov. 15** JLCB—Immunizations of Students
- Dec. 31** JFAB—Tuition/Admission of Nonresident Students

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