



CHICAGO

CULTURIZE
Institutes

2026



JUNE 23-24, 2026
EMBASSY SUITES BY HILTON CHICAGO NAPERVILLE



SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

Tuesday, June 23, 2026

- 7:30 - 8:30 AM Registration, Networking, & Coffee
- 8:30 - 9:45 AM Keynote
- 9:45 - 10:00 AM Break
- 10:00 - 11:15 AM Breakout Sessions
- 11:15 - 12:45 PM Lunch on Your Own
- 12:45 - 2:00 PM Breakout Sessions
- 2:00 - 2:15 PM Break
- 2:15 - 3:30 PM Breakout Sessions

3:30 - 5:30 Evening Social Gathering

Wednesday, June 24, 2026

- 7:30 - 8:30 AM Registration, Networking, & Coffee
- 8:30 - 9:45 AM Keynote
- 9:45 - 10:00 AM Break
- 10:00 - 11:15 AM Breakout Sessions
- 11:15 - 12:45 PM Lunch on Your Own
- 12:45 - 2:00 PM Breakout Sessions
- 2:00 - 2:15 PM Break
- 2:15 - 3:30 PM Keynote



CORE PRINCIPLES OF CULTURIZE

Every single day, teachers and leaders bring their best selves to work, ready to invest in their students and in their community. The Culturize Institute provides attendees with powerful tools and strategies to put the Core Principles into action. Each session of the Institute is aligned to one or more of the principles. Read about them here, and then make note of the associated icons listed with each conference session.

CHAMPION FOR STUDENTS



Never quit on a student. When a student doesn't meet your expectations, **invest more time to understand their story**. Show compassion and empathy. When we take time to connect to their experiences, it shows we value them and their voice.

EXPECT EXCELLENCE

What we model is what we get. **Model the behaviors you want others to emulate**. We should never ask others to do what we are not willing to do ourselves. Every school has average, but the best schools do not allow average to become the standard.



CARRY THE BANNER



Be a positive voice at all times for your students, colleagues, and families. Do your best to **create meaningful experiences** with those whom you come in contact with so when they walk away, they speak positively about their interaction with you.

MERCHANT OF HOPE

Believe that everyone wants to be great. No student, parent, or staff member wants to be a failure. However, there will be times when people lose their way. **Believe that you can inspire others** to be more and do more than they ever thought possible.





SESSION DETAILS

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026



7:30 - 8:30 AM

Registration, Networking and Coffee

8:30 - 9:45 AM

Welcome and Opening Keynote with Jimmy Casas and Garth Larson



Culturize – Every Student. Every Day. Whatever It Takes.



Average schools don't inspire greatness—and greatness is exactly what today's students deserve. In this powerful and inspiring keynote, Jimmy Casas and Dr. Garth Larson challenge educators and leaders to eradicate average by embracing the Four Core Principles of Culturize: Be a Champion for All Kids, Expect Excellence, Carry the Banner, and Be a Merchant of Hope. Drawing from their combined experiences as school and district leaders, authors, and national presenters, Jimmy and Garth bring to life what these principles look like in action across today's schools. They share real stories of impact, reflection, and transformation—reminding every educator of their purpose and reigniting the passion that drives great teaching and leadership. Participants will leave this session inspired and equipped to build cultures of excellence—where every student is known, valued, and part of something truly great.



9:45 - 10:00 AM

BREAK AND NETWORKING



EVERY STUDENT | EVERY DAY | WHATEVER IT TAKES



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026

10:00 - 11:15 AM Breakout Sessions



Time to Embrace Change - Effective Processes to Move Your System

Jimmy Casas

As educators, we must regularly ask ourselves: Why aren't we getting the results we want when implementing initiatives? Average results are no longer acceptable. In this session, participants will learn to embrace change through impactful strategies that promote clarity, collaboration, voice, and effective decision-making. Jimmy demonstrates how change can be inspiring and reignite our passion for the work when we take a systemic approach. More importantly, he reminds us that we can inspire our staff to never allow average to become the standard.



Expecting Excellence through Intentional Leadership - The 5 C's

Matt Degner

As superintendents and district leaders, the job has never been more complex. To find and maintain success, we have to commit to leading with intention while modeling the behaviors we wish to see repeated. In this session, participants will be introduced to the 5 C's Framework of Intentional Leadership. Leading with Core Values, providing Clarity, building Connections, fostering Collaboration, and transparently Communicating are fundamental to our success as district and building leaders. Attendees will gain practical strategies to bolster processes and relationships while providing confidence to the rest of the organization you lead.



Lead with Pride, Purpose, and Professionalism

Joy Kelly

Slogans don't create culture - behaviors do. This session challenges educators to "carry the banner" by modeling the behaviors they want emulated across their school community. Through stories, reflection, and dialogue, attendees will examine how everyday actions, language, and attitude shape school culture and influence others. Attendees will leave equipped with practical strategies for lifting others, strengthening relationships, and consistently embodying the culture they aspire to create.



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026

10:00 - 11:15 AM Breakout Sessions (continued)



A Culture of Investment: Building Individuals' Capacity for Excellence

Sarah Johnson

Educators can experience great challenges leading in classrooms, hallways, and in our communities through a range of social and cultural issues. Burnout and compassion fatigue are real in our profession, and we must do our best to build the capacity in ourselves and those we serve to mitigate the inevitable stress inherent in educational institutions. In this session, we will focus on strategies to build our capacity for personal excellence and reflect on ways to replicate that work with our colleagues and students every day. We must invest in ourselves so that we can build capacity to serve others with excellence, intentionality, and passion.



Learning Isn't One-and-Done: Reassessment that Reflects What We Believe

Becky Pepler

What does it say about our culture if one bad day can define a student's future? Reassessment is more than a grading strategy—it's a reflection of what we believe about students, learning, and growth. In this session, we'll explore how reassessment policies can either fuel inequity or foster hope. Using the Culturize framework, we'll examine how to create systems where second chances are the norm, not the exception. You'll walk away with practical strategies, policy examples, and tools to make reassessment a powerful part of your school's culture. Grounded in the Culturize core value of Merchant of Hope, this session is about reimagining reassessment as a tool to inspire—not discourage—student persistence and confidence.



11:15 - 12:45
LUNCH ON YOUR OWN
Gift cards will be provided.



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026

12:45 - 2:00 PM Breakout Sessions



The Opportunity Leader

Garth Larson

Leading a school today is no small task—but within every challenge lies an opportunity to lead with greater purpose, clarity, and impact. In this dynamic breakout session designed specifically for educational leaders, Dr. Garth Larson introduces the concept of the Opportunity Leader—a school leader who chooses to see every situation, setback, and success as a chance to create meaningful change. Drawing on real experiences from schools across the country, this session explores how elementary principals can reframe challenges into opportunities that support student achievement, build staff capacity, and foster a culture of optimism and resilience. Participants will engage in reflective dialogue, examine practical leadership strategies, and explore how to model an “opportunity mindset” in their own buildings. Whether you’re navigating change, managing competing demands, or simply looking to refocus your leadership lens, this session will equip you with actionable ideas and renewed energy to lead with intention and impact. Walk away reminded that the opportunity to lead forward is always right in front of you.



Cultivating Resilience: Practical Bounce Back Strategies for Passionate Educators

Sarah Johnson

In this session, educator, speaker, and resilience researcher Sarah Johnson, shares practical strategies to cultivate personal resilience, so you can be a merchant of hope that your school community needs. In this session, we explore how to navigate the challenges inherent in the profession while maintaining, and even enhancing, personal well-being. Practical strategies, such as setting healthy boundaries as well as personal wellbeing practices to reduce stress and mitigate the onset of burnout, are the focus. Participants will gain actionable tips to build up their own personal resilience to build a stronger sense of satisfaction in the school setting. Whether new or seasoned in the field of education, it’s time to invest in your well-being and unlock your resilience potential, and continue to cultivate hope.



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026

12:45 - 2:00 PM

Breakout Sessions (continued)



The Heart of Teaching

Kheila Casas

This session will focus on the power of connection in the classroom. We will dive into how strong relationships, thoughtful planning, and creative thinking can transform the way students engage and learn. Attendees will explore practical ways to build a learning environment where curiosity thrives and every student feels like they belong. Walk away with strategies you can use right away to meet the needs of all learners and create a classroom environment where relationships drive engagement.



The Courage to Forgive, Repair, and Lead Forward

Joy Kelly

Excellence in leadership isn't about perfection — it's about the courage to forgive, repair, and move forward with purpose. This session reframes forgiveness as a vital leadership skill that fosters trust and strengthens relationships. When leaders—defined as anyone who plays a pivotal role in shaping the culture and overall success of students and the school—extend grace without lowering expectations, they create cultures of accountability, compassion, and continuous improvement where everyone feels safe to learn, risk, and innovate.



Communicating to Support and Empower Students and Staff

Jim Wichman

Excellence doesn't happen by chance—it's cultivated through high expectations, authentic support, and empathetic communication. In this fast-paced, high-energy session, participants will uncover how communication is often the hidden barrier between intent and impact. Using the DiSC framework as a guide, Jim Wichman helps leaders learn to “speak the language” of those they serve—students, staff, and colleagues alike. Come ready to laugh, learn, and practice specific strategies that make communication more efficient, relationships stronger, and leadership more human. Participants will leave with meaningful, manageable, and tangible tools to elevate their culture and Expect Excellence every day.



2:00 - 2:15 PM

BREAK AND NETWORKING



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026

2:15 - 3:30 PM

Breakout Sessions



The Enemies of Efficacy - What's Sabotaging Your Team's Belief?

Jenni Donohoo

Even the most well-intentioned collaborative teams can be undermined by hidden forces that erode their collective belief in what they can accomplish together. Blame. Isolation. Comparison. Ambiguity. These "enemies of efficacy" silently sabotage teams' shared confidence and derail improvement efforts. In this powerful session, you'll learn to recognize the twelve enemies that prevent collective efficacy from taking root in schools and discover practical strategies to overcome them. Through real-world scenarios and honest reflection, you'll identify which enemies are at work in your own context and walk away with actionable micro-moves to protect and strengthen your team's belief in their collective capacity. When we name the enemies, we can defeat them—and build the hope and excellence our students deserve.



Fueling the Right Fires: Building a Culture of Learning Through Grading Practices

Becky Peppler

This session explores how grading practices shape school culture and how small missteps can unintentionally undermine the values we say we believe. Through real grading scenarios, we'll reflect on how to align our systems with our commitments to students by Championing for Students, ensuring our practices support, not penalize, learning; Expecting Excellence, defining and reporting learning with clarity and purpose; and Carrying the Banner, modeling consistent, transparent grading practices that strengthen trust across classrooms. Using the Culturize framework, we'll examine formative practice, separating behavior from achievement, and aligning grades to learning, not compliance. You'll walk away with tools, examples, and strategies to build a stronger culture of learning in your school.



Leading for Lasting Impact

Stephen Speck

The most influential educators and leaders do more than inspire in the moment. They create ripples that last well beyond their time in the classroom or school. In this session, we'll explore how to lead in ways that shape culture, strengthen relationships, and influence others with purpose. Walk away with strategies to ensure your impact is not felt just today, but continues to grow in the hearts, minds, bodies, and souls of those you lead.



Tuesday
JUNE 23, 2026

2:15 - 3:30 PM

Breakout Sessions (continued)



Fostering School Leader Efficacy

Don Smith

Collective teacher efficacy remains at the top of the list of influences that impact student achievement. Recent research has shown that a Principal's sense of leadership efficacy influences collective teacher efficacy, as well as student achievement. This workshop is designed to delve into the research, identify ways to foster Principal efficacy, and leverage it to maximize collective teacher efficacy and student achievement.



Walking With Purpose: Leaving Work With Energy, Not Empty

Jim Wichman

Educators often hear phrases like "Remember your why" or "Lead with purpose"—but what happens when those words no longer fuel the tank? In this powerful and reflective session, Jim Wichman helps participants rediscover what it truly means to walk with purpose. Through community, conversation, and guided reflection, attendees will explore strategies to leave work energized rather than depleted, ensuring the best of who they are shows up at home, in their schools, and for their students. You'll leave with a clearer vision, renewed focus, and actionable tools to sustain your purpose every day.



**Join us for the Day 1
Social in the Embassy
Suites Atrium.**

3:30-5:30 pm



SESSION DETAILS

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE



Wednesday
JUNE 24, 2026



7:30 - 8:30 AM

Registration, Networking and Coffee

8:30 - 9:45 AM

**Welcome and Opening Keynote with
Joe Sanfelippo**



Lead From Where You Are



I'm just...It's a phrase we hear all the time. I'm just a teacher, I'm just a paraprofessional, I'm just a custodian....the list is long and is often followed by reasons something CAN'T happen. Leadership is an action and it starts with you. Leading with INTENTION creates purpose. Leading with CONNECTION creates momentum. Leading with DIRECTION creates collective efficacy. Leading with all three in mind will build your capacity and foster an environment where everyone in your organization has the best opportunity to lead from where they are.



9:45 - 10:00 AM

BREAK AND NETWORKING



Wednesday
JUNE 24, 2026

10:00 - 11:15 AM Breakout Sessions



Teaching with Impact: Strategies for Student Growth and a Culture of Excellence

Shelly Daun and Kelly Barkovich

It's no secret that ALL students should be afforded high-quality instruction that promotes growth and achievement. In this session, we will explore high-impact instructional strategies that elevate every student. Rooted in a belief that all students deserve access to exceptional, growth-oriented instruction, we'll dive into evidence-based practices that enable each learner to thrive. Attendees will walk away equipped with practical techniques to foster a culture of belonging, inspire ownership, and address diverse needs, ensuring that every student feels valued, challenged, and capable of success.



Observable Impact for Educators

Shannon Myers

In this interactive session, educators will go beyond posters, slogans, and buzzwords to identify what we would observe students and educators doing in a thriving culture. Together, we will work through the process of defining clear, observable behaviors that reflect strong relationships, engagement, and high expectations. Designed for teachers, instructional specialists, and leaders, this session offers practical tools, collaborative learning, and a clear framework for turning vision into action. Attendees will leave with a process they can take back to their schools to define, observe, and strengthen a culture that inspires and engages every student and educator.



Building Collective Efficacy - When Teams Believe, Students Achieve

Jenni Donohoo

What separates high-performing collaborative teams from those that struggle? It's collective efficacy—the shared belief among educators that together, they can make a profound difference for every student. In this interactive session, you'll discover how to intentionally build this powerful force within your teams through the four sources of efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, persuasion, and affective states. Learn how to recognize and celebrate small wins, create opportunities for teachers to learn from one another, and foster the psychological safety necessary for honest reflection and growth. Walk away with concrete strategies to cultivate teams who don't just work together—they truly believe in their collective capacity to reach every learner.



Wednesday
JUNE 24, 2026

10:00 - 11:15 AM **Breakout Sessions (continued)**



Recalibrating PLCs: Building Collaborative Teams that Drive Impact

Gabe Hackett

In many schools and districts, PLCs have become stale and repetitive. Discover how to elevate your Professional Learning Communities to meet the demands of our current and future education landscape. Our PLCs have the potential to help collaborative teams drive observable improvements in student learning outcomes. In this session, we'll explore collaborative tools that lead to impact in the classroom and create a vision for effective collaborative teams. Participants will walk away with proven strategies that foster a culture of collective efficacy, align team actions with learning goals, and prioritize impact in the classroom.



Crafting the Culture

Joe Sanfelippo

Nailing down a precise definition of culture can be tricky; at times, it seems as if culture is more a "feeling" than anything that can be quantified, measured, or seen. Yet, the feeling about culture one gets when entering any school or classroom is palpable. It is relatively easy to distinguish between schools and classrooms with strong cultures from those with less productive cultures. Any leader interested in maximizing their influence on others and the performance of those they lead, whether first-grade students, a group of teachers, or a team of business professionals, must be intentional about focusing on the culture they are trying to build and maintain.



11:15 - 12:45
LUNCH ON YOUR OWN
Gift cards will be provided.



SESSION DETAILS

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE



Wednesday
JUNE 24, 2026

12:45 - 2:00 PM Breakout Sessions



From Co-Existing to Co-Teaching: Making the Models Work

Shelly Daun and Kelly Barkovich

Great co-teaching doesn't happen by accident; it takes intentional planning, shared responsibility, and a belief that every student deserves excellent instruction. In this session, you'll explore the five foundational co-teaching models and learn how to use each one with purpose and impact. Whether you're just getting started or looking to take your partnership to the next level, you'll walk away with practical tools to collaborate more effectively, engage all learners, and lead by example in your school. It's time to move beyond just sharing space and start creating something powerful together.



Engaging Students and Families to Maximize Student Achievement

Rachel Edoho-Eket

Strong family-school partnerships are the foundation of student success. This interactive session explores practical, research-based strategies that help educators and administrators build meaningful connections with students and their families relying on connections that directly impact motivation, engagement, and academic growth. Drawing from real-world experience across urban, suburban, and affluent school communities, participants will discover how to:

- Foster trust and authentic communication with families from all backgrounds.
- Create welcoming environments that empower families as active partners in the learning process.
- Design targeted learning experiences that connect home and school expectations.
- Implement engagement strategies that improve attendance, behavior, and achievement.

Through stories, examples, and ready-to-use tools, attendees will leave with actionable steps to strengthen relationships, elevate family participation, and create a school culture where every student, and every family, feels seen, valued, and supported.



SESSION DETAILS

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE



Wednesday
JUNE 24, 2026

12:45 - 2:00 PM

Breakout Sessions, (continued)



Building a Culture of Collaboration through Challenge

Gabe Hackett

Collaboration isn't tested when things are easy—effective PLCs are developed in the moments when teams navigate differing beliefs, personalities, and perspectives. This session will focus on practical ways to build and sustain a culture of collaboration even when facing common challenges such as team dynamics, resistance, or conflicting priorities. Participants will engage in structures and strategies to address these obstacles with clarity and courage, turning tension points into opportunities for growth and stronger collective impact.



It's Not About the Technology: AI as a Mirror That Reflects School Culture

Tony Frontier

Recent research shows teachers and administrators have serious concerns about the impact of widespread access to AI tools on student learning and academic integrity. While AI detectors and revised academic integrity policies can treat the symptoms of these challenges, they fail to address - and embrace - underlying opportunities to strengthen and improve school culture. In this session, you'll learn empathetic design techniques and instructional strategies that help you be a champion for all students and support their academic excellence in an era where AI tools are everywhere.



Culturize Your Instructional Coaching

Danica Lewis

The Culturize framework encourages teachers and leaders to be their very best for every student. As instructional coaches, this is our #1 goal! In our roles as supporters and leaders, we can show the way for those we serve. Real, sustainable academic and cultural improvement requires support for teachers that goes beyond what the typical teacher in-service day can offer. When teachers have access to intentional, job-embedded coaching, they are more likely to take risks, try new approaches, and stick with those strategies that work for the long haul. In this session, we will work through several strategies for questioning, feedback, and conversation that can be leveraged by coaches and leaders to empower teachers as they develop classroom instruction that drives student learning and growth. Participants will walk away with ready to use tools that will make a difference in the success of teachers and students.



Wednesday
JUNE 24, 2026



2:00 - 2:15 PM

BREAK AND NETWORKING

2:15 - 3:15 PM **Closing Keynote with Rachel Edoho-Eket**



Boundaries before Burnout: How to Sustain Joy as an Educator



Are you feeling overwhelmed and exhausted as an educator? Do you struggle to find joy in your work with the daily demands and ongoing pressure? Join this powerful session designed specifically for teachers and school administrators who are seeking practical solutions to prevent burnout and reignite their passion for education. In this session, you'll learn practical and actionable strategies to maintain joy and balance in your professional and personal life. Through insightful discussions and real-life examples, you'll gain valuable tools to manage stress, prioritize self-care, and create a healthier work environment without feeling guilty! By attending, you'll connect with like-minded leaders, share experiences, and develop a personalized plan to enhance your well-being and effectiveness. Don't miss this opportunity to transform your educational approach and rediscover your joy for this great profession!

PRESENTER INFORMATION

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE

Keynote SPEAKERS



**Jimmy
Casas**

Jimmy Casas is the CEO and President of J Casas and Associates, an educational leadership company aimed at serving teachers, principals and superintendents in school districts across the United States by providing high quality, practical and meaningful coaching support. Jimmy served twenty-two years as a school leader. He is a best selling author, speaker, leadership coach, and a state and national award winning principal. Under Jimmy's leadership, Bettendorf High School was named one of the best high schools in the country three times by Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report. Jimmy was named the 2012 Iowa Principal of the Year and was runner-up NASSP 2013 National Principal of the Year. In 2014, Jimmy was invited to the White House to speak on the Future Ready Pledge. Finally, in 2015, he received the Bammy Award for the National Principal of the Year.



**Rachel
Edoho-Eket**

Rachel Edoho-Eket is a wife, mother, principal, TEDx speaker, author, and the President of the Maryland Association of Elementary School Principals. With decades as a teacher and leader in public education, she has earned the reputation as a strong instructional leader, passionate educational advocate, and dedicated mentor. As the Principal of a National Blue Ribbon school in Maryland, she is a life-long learner who strives for excellence not only for herself, but also for everyone she serves. She also serves as an adjunct professor at McDaniel College helping to support the personal and professional growth of aspiring and current school leaders, and is an ASCD faculty member.

Named as one of the Top 100 Influencers in Education by District Administration magazine, Dr. Edoho-Eket's belief in fostering meaningful relationships serves as the foundation for everything she does, and her highly effective teaching and leadership style continues to inspire up and coming aspiring teacher leaders. During her educational career, she has proudly served as a classroom teacher, instructional team leader, mentor teacher, Assistant Principal, and Principal. Her first best-selling book, "The Principal's Journey: Navigating the Path to School Leadership" provides a helpful and practical blueprint for educators to follow as they transition into new leadership roles. Her second bestselling book, "Relational Intelligence: The Key to Exceptional School Leadership" centers on the importance of trusting and authentic relationships as the driver of school success. Dr. Edoho-Eket holds a B.S. in Early Childhood and Elementary Education from Temple University, a M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction from McDaniel College, and a Doctorate in Leadership and Professional Practice from Trevecca Nazarene University.

PRESENTER INFORMATION

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE

Keynote SPEAKERS



**Garth
Larson**

Garth Larson, Ed.D is the Co-Founder and CEO of FIRST Educational Resources. He began his career as a high school English teacher and Associate Principal, later serving as an elementary principal and the Director of Learning for the Winneconne Community School District in Northeast Wisconsin. In 2015, he co-founded FIRST Educational Resources, aiming to enhance student achievement across the United States. Since then, over 2000 school districts worldwide have partnered with his company. Garth consults globally, providing customized professional development on topics such as Professional Learning Communities, Learning-Centered Grading Practices, Leadership, and School Improvement. He is the author of six books, including Collaborative Systems of Support, PLC 2.0, Grading for Impact, The STAGR Process Roadmap, Extinguishing the Fires Within Assessment and Grading Reform, and Simplifying School Improvement: A Framework for Impact in Today's Schools.



**Joe
Sanfelippo**

Joe Sanfelippo, retired Superintendent of the Fall Creek School District in Wisconsin, is an educational leader and author. During his tenure, the Fall Creek School District was recognized as an Innovative District twice by the International Center for Leadership in Education. Joe authored multiple books, including best-sellers "Hacking Leadership" and "Lead From Where You Are." Honored as one of 117 Future Ready Superintendents and among the 50 Personalized Learning Leaders by the US Department of Education, Joe was also named one of the 100 Most Influential Educators by District Administration Magazine. In 2019, Education Dive awarded him National Superintendent of the Year.

PRESENTER INFORMATION

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE

Breakout SPEAKERS



**Kelly
Barkovich**

Kelly Barkovich is an experienced educator with over 16 years in public education, currently splitting her time between special education consulting and serving as a virtual special education teacher. She is also the Co-Director of the Co-Teaching Center, where she collaborates with educators to improve co-teaching practices and enhance student outcomes. Her background includes leadership as an elementary school principal, Special Education Instructional Coach for grades Pre-K through 12, and special educator across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Kelly's expertise includes co-teaching, instructional coaching, assessment practices, and supporting the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students. Kelly was recognized with the Inclusion Partnership Award for her dedication to creating inclusive, student-centered learning environments. With a deep commitment to the field of special education, Kelly is passionate about helping educators grow their impact and support all students.



**Kheila
Casas**

Kheila Casas currently serves as a teaching and learning coach for J Casas and Associates, where she collaborates with educators and school leaders to implement strategies that drive measurable classroom success. With over 20 years of experience in education, Kheila has worked as an Elementary Classroom Teacher, Instructional Coach, and Director of Innovation. Her passion lies in leveraging technology to ignite creativity across subjects and using student interests as natural motivators for learning. As an Apple Distinguished Educator and the 2021 Innovator of the Year at the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Expo and Conference, Kheila is dedicated to transforming education through innovation and student-centered approaches.



Shelly Daun

Shelly Daun is an accomplished education leader with over 30 years of experience, currently serving as the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in a northeastern Wisconsin school district and the Director of the FIRST Education Math Center, a division of FIRST Educational Resources. Honored as the "Instructional Leader of the Year" for Wisconsin in 2022 by the Wisconsin Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Shelly has dedicated her career to driving instructional excellence, systems change, and comprehensive school reform. Her expertise spans curriculum design, data analysis, standards and assessment development, and research-based instructional pedagogy, with a strong commitment to student equity, leadership development, K-12 mathematics instruction, and sustainable action planning. Shelly has successfully guided numerous school districts through impactful improvement initiatives, fostering success and growth at every level.

PRESENTER INFORMATION

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE

Breakout SPEAKERS



**Matt
Degner**

Matt Degner has served in the Iowa City Community School District since July of 2013. Matt was Principal of South East Junior High for the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. Since that time he has served as Director of Secondary Schools, Assistant Superintendent, and now Superintendent. In Iowa Matt has been recognized as the Governor's Scholar Education Program - Favorite Teacher, the Iowa Technology and Education Connection Administrator of the Year, received the Innovation in Education Spark Award as well as the Excellence in Diversity Award. Matt has also been a Bammy Award nominee. Prior to Iowa City, Matt served two different school districts in Iowa; Williamsburg and Bettendorf. Matt has one child at Southeast Middle School, one child at City High School, and one child at St. Ambrose University. His wife, Dr. Kate Degner is a teacher in the District and an adjunct professor at the University of Iowa. Matt is passionate about engagement and innovation in education.



**Jenni
Donohoo**

Jenni Donohoo, PhD is a professional learning facilitator, author, and researcher with more than 25 years' experience in leading school improvement. Jenni has multi-year partnerships with numerous organizations and government agencies where she works alongside system and school leaders supporting high-quality professional learning designed to improve outcomes for all students. She is a five-time best-selling author, and her books have been translated into several languages. Jenni has been recognized internationally as an educational thought leader. Jenni has been a keynote speaker at conferences including WorldEduLead, Raising Student Achievement, Annual Visible Learning, Corwin's Women in Education, the LEAP Conference in Australia, the Forward Learning Conference Singapore, and the Developing Successful Schools Conference in New Brunswick. She has presented at faculties of education around the globe including Auckland University and the University of Antwerp.



**Tony
Frontier**

Tony Frontier, PhD is an award-winning educator with 30 years of experience as a teacher, principal, curriculum director, university professor, and consultant who works with teachers and school leaders across the globe to help them prioritize efforts to improve student learning. Tony facilitates engaging, practical, research-based workshops on a variety of topics, including classroom assessment, student engagement, curriculum development, meaningful feedback, technology integration, and strategic planning. His books include *AI with Intention: Principles and Action Steps for School Leaders and Teachers* (2025) with a foreword by Jay McTighe; *Teaching with Clarity: How to Prioritize and Do Less So Your Students Understand More* (2021), and *Effective Supervision, Supporting the Art & Science of Teaching* (2011) with Bob Marzano.

PRESENTER INFORMATION

2026 CULTURIZE INSTITUTE

Breakout SPEAKERS



**Gabe
Hackett**

Gabe Hackett is the director of the PLC Center with FIRST Educational Resources. He recently spent a year as the interim principal of Annandale Middle School in Annandale, Minnesota. He also spent 10 years as the principal of Little Mountain Elementary in Monticello, MN. Gabe and his teams have helped to develop Observable Impact tools and structures currently used by many schools across the United States and around the globe. Gabe is passionate about using the Observable Impact tools and protocols to strengthen collaborative teams by connecting action to impact. He enjoys working with schools across the United States to develop strong collaborative teams and finally answer the question, "What instructional strategies really work in our classrooms?". He is the co-author of Building PLCs from the Ground Up Laminated Guide. Gabe lives in South Haven, MN with his wife (Heidi) and two kids (Griffin and MarLee).



**Sarah
Johnson**

Sarah Johnson has served in educational leadership roles in Northwestern Wisconsin since 2004 as a school principal at all building levels as well as an English teacher, writing coach, and school improvement facilitator. She is passionate about assisting others in developing strong leadership foundations as well as seeking greater satisfaction in all areas of their full lives by helping them go beyond work-life balance. Sarah is deeply vested in the J Casas & Associates' mission to inspire others to be more and do more than they ever thought possible, especially when it comes to leading the learning and shaping the cultures of our schools. Sarah is the author of Lead with Faith: Building a Strong Foundation So You Can Rise Up, Slay Fear, and Serve Well and co-author of Balance Like a Pirate: Going Beyond Work-Life Balance to Ignite Passion and Thrive as an Educator. Sarah is an experienced and impactful national keynote speaker and workshop presenter featured at educational conferences such as NASSP National Principal Conference, ASCD Leadership Summit and ASCD Empower, Women Leading Wisconsin, Minnesota Elementary Principals Conference, Colorado Association of School Executives, and more.



Joy Kelly

Joy Kelly brings over 30 years of experience in education as a teacher, principal, and executive leadership coach. A passionate advocate for cultivating trust, excellence, and meaningful relationships, Joy was recognized as the 2015 Iowa Associate Principal of the Year. She believes that a strong, positive culture is the foundation of every successful school. She is the co-author of Handle with Care: Managing Difficult School Situations with Dignity and Respect, written with Jimmy Casas, which provides educators with practical strategies to navigate challenges with professionalism and compassion. Today, Joy works with school leaders across the country, helping them clarify core values, cultivate trust, hold themselves and others accountable, and build leadership capacity. Her work inspires schools to become places where educators thrive, parents feel confident, and students excel in safe, engaging environments.

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**Shannon
Myers**

Shannon Myers has served as the Assistant Superintendent for the Bermudian Springs School District in York Springs, Pennsylvania, since October 2021. She has had a diverse career in education and administration spanning more than two decades, with experience in both Maryland and Pennsylvania. In recognition of her leadership and impact, Shannon was honored with the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators' (PASA) Wanda McDaniel Award for Outstanding Female Leadership. Over the course of her career, Shannon has held various roles, including kindergarten and first-grade teacher, elementary reading specialist, elementary assistant principal, elementary principal, and middle school principal. Her passion lies in strengthening curriculum and instruction to ensure all students have access to engaging, rigorous, and meaningful learning experiences. Shannon is deeply committed to supporting teachers in designing instruction that not only meets standards but also inspires curiosity, creativity, and growth in every classroom.



**Danica
Lewis**

Danica Lewis has 20 years of experience in schools, serving as an elementary teacher and later as a school and district administrator, including school building leadership, early childhood leadership, special education leadership, and curriculum & assessment leadership in urban and suburban schools. Danica led the implementation of standards-aligned instruction, assessment, and grading as both a district-level and building-level administrator and implemented a coaching program for a medium sized district. Danica facilitates powerful professional learning around instructional coaching, literacy, standards-aligned instruction and assessment, rigorous teaching, data analysis, and professional learning community leadership. In 2017, the Wisconsin Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development recognized Danica as the "Instructional Leader of the Year" for the State of Wisconsin. Danica has a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership from Marian University in Fond du Lac, WI and has a Bachelor's of Science in Human Development and Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (WI).

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**Becky
Pepler**

Becky Pepler is the Director of the FIRST Education STAGR Center, a division of FIRST Educational Resources. With over 18 years in public education, she is dedicated to helping schools navigate the challenges of grading and assessment reform to create systems that support student learning and growth. A former 6-12 Instructional Coach and science educator, Becky has played a pivotal role in guiding numerous schools through full transitions to Standards-Based Grading. She has worked with over 100 districts nationwide, helping educators design grading practices that are meaningful, accurate, and student-centered. Her expertise includes developing clear learning targets, designing meaningful assessments, implementing effective reassessment policies, and ensuring grades reflect student achievement rather than behavior. She is passionate about supporting schools in building grading systems that foster deeper learning, meaningful communication, and improved transparency between teachers, students, and families. Becky is the co-author of the best-selling book, *Extinguishing the Fires of Assessment and Grading Reform* and the STAGR Process Roadmap Laminated Guide, collaborating with Dr. Garth Larson and Ken O'Connor. Her work continues to drive impactful change in grading practices, helping educators create systems that truly support student success.



Don Smith

Don Smith has 20 years of professional experience in public schools. Don previously served as the Director of Teaching and Learning for the Winneconne Community School District, in Wisconsin. Prior to that, Don was the Director of Teaching and Learning in the School District of Waupaca. Don also served as the Principal at Fond du Lac STEM Academy and Fond du Lac STEM Institute, as well as the District Assessment Coordinator for the Fond du Lac Area School District (WI). Don is a co-author of the best selling book, *Extinguishing the Fires of Assessment and Grading Reform*, as well as a co-author of the laminated guide, *Leveraging the Block Schedule for Student Learning Growth*. Don continually leads professional development sessions centered on research based practices in instruction, assessment and grading. In 2022, Don began working full time with FIRST Educational Resources.

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**Stephen
Speck**

Stephen Speck began his career in education as an elementary classroom teacher, where he spent nearly a decade inspiring students while also serving as head coach for two high school athletic programs. His passion for leadership and teamwork led him to oversee the athletic departments of three school districts across two states for a combined 15 years, concluding his educational career as the Director of Athletics for the South Western School District in Hanover, Pennsylvania.

Stephen believes that every staff member has the capacity to lead and is dedicated to helping educators and administrators cultivate high-performing teams built on trust, collaboration, and shared purpose. He currently serves as a leadership coach for J Casas and Associates, where he focuses on leadership development, personal growth, and strategies that strengthen staff morale and empower individuals to bring their best selves to work each day.



**Jim
Wichman**

Jim Wichman is a twenty-five year veteran of education administration who possesses a plethora of urban/rural public school experiences. Growing up in poverty and even temporarily homeless, Jim knows the importance of constantly supporting students and the adults who serve those students. Jim's years of experience at wide-ranging levels and within varied settings culminate for a specialist perspective. Jim takes pride in his innovative, dedicated approach to procure collective efficacy within each building he has served. His consistent focus on "Respecting, Supporting, and Valuing" has allowed for ongoing enhancement of staff, students, and systems. Jim is the former Prairie Ridge Middle School Principal in Ankeny, Iowa, serving over 1100 middle schoolers where he "shook the world as he went by." Additionally, Jim has been a featured speaker and leadership coach throughout the country from Arizona to New York, focusing on organizational culture and employer/employee relationships. Jim also served as Iowa's NASSP State Coordinator for 4 years where he worked with elected officials on understanding the current state of education. Jim is married to his wife Amy, also a lifelong educator, and they have three children, EmmaKate, Evallyn, and Everhett.

**THANK YOU FOR
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