25th ANNUAL PUBLIC RELATIONS EXECUTIVES MEETING

July 16-18, 2026

Hilton New Orleans Riverside
2 Poydras Street
New Orleans, LA 70130
(504) 561-0500
#PRE2026

Working Agenda

Thursday, July 16

6:00 – 8:00 p.m. **Dinner**
Antoine's Restaurant
New Orleans' oldest restaurant, established in 1840

713 St. Louis Street
New Orleans, LA 70130
(Less than a 10-minute cab ride from the Hilton in the French Quarter)

Welcome
Tonya Harris, *Director of Communications*
Council of the Great City Schools

Greetings
Dr. Fateama Fulmore**,** *Superintendent of Schools*
NOLA (New Orleans) Public Schools

Introduction of Guest Speaker
Joanne Coley, *Communications Manager*
Council of the Great City Schools

Guest Speaker
***Dana Peterson**, CEO of New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that every child in New Orleans has access to an excellent public education.*

Friday, July 17

7:30 – 10:00 a.m. **Registration**
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor

8:00 – 9:00 a.m. **Breakfast**
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor
***Sponsors:** ClassDojo, Class Intercom*

9:00 – 9:15 a.m. **Welcome & Introductions**
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor

9:15 – 10:30 a.m. **An Acorn of Truth: Returning to the Voice Beneath the Noise**
An interactive keynote experience that invites participants to reconnect with their inner voice and consider how presence shapes communication, offering a grounded approach to navigating complexity, crisis, and constant demand.

You spend your days managing other people's crises, crafting messages under pressure, and keeping leaders and communities informed. This session asks you to pause before the work begins. Through facilitated conversation and reflection, you will reconnect with what grounds you as a communicator with the clarity, steadiness, and inner resource to do your best work.

***Sean Goode,** Founder of Movement Makers, where he designs spaces where leaders practice belonging, not just talk about it.*

10:30 – 11:15 a.m. **Competing for Families: How Urban Districts Win the Enrollment Battle**
Families today are comparing more school options than ever, from district and charter schools to private and virtual programs. One district will share how they approached student recruitment in an increasingly competitive landscape and why visibility into recruitment activities, family engagement, and enrollment outcomes across schools matters more than ever.

You will walk away with practical ideas for modernizing student recruitment operations and connecting your communications strategy to enrollment goals.

Jonathan Wren, *Director of Magnet Schools, Metro Nashville Public Schools*
Matt Coats, *Chief Evangelist, SchoolMint*

11:15 – 11:30 a.m. **Coffee Break**

11:30 – 12:30 p.m. **Panel: Leading Through Decline: How Districts Manage Systemic Change Without Losing Community Trust**

Urban districts are navigating declining enrollment, funding cliffs, political polarization, staffing shortages, and growing public distrust. A recent New York Times analysis framed this not as a temporary post-pandemic dip but as a long-term structural shift driven by demographics, migration, and declining birth rates.

If you have ever had to communicate a school closure, budget cut, or a consolidation, this panel is for you. Three communications leaders from major urban districts will share how they kept community trust intact while leading through changes nobody wanted to make.

Moderator: Sherwin Johnson, *Executive Director of Public Engagement, Jackson Public Schools*

Candice Grose, *Chief of Communications, Portland Public Schools*
Alexandra Coppadge Wright*, Chief of Communications and Customer Service, School District of Philadelphia*
Chrystal Wilson, *Assistant Superintendent of Communications, Detroit Public Schools Community District*

12:30 –1:30 p.m. **Lunch**
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor
Sponsor: *Onflo*

1:45 – 2:45 p.m. **Who's Covering You Now: Media Relations in a Changing News Landscape**

The media environment serving urban school districts is changing rapidly. Traditional local newsrooms are shrinking, ownership consolidation is reshaping coverage, and a growing share of public conversation now happens through independent journalists, influencers, community creators, and other non-traditional voices.

In this session, a panel will examine how those shifts are changing media relations, from pitching stories and building press lists to responding to journalists with varying levels of experience. Panelists will explore practical strategies for adapting outreach, maintaining credibility, and ensuring accurate information reaches audiences across both traditional and emerging channels.

Moderator: Daisy Gonzalez-Diego, *Former Chief of Communications and Community Engagement, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Founder and CEO, DGD Communications.*

Taslin Alfonzo, *Executive Director of Public Relations, NOLA (New Orleans) Public Schools*
Gabrielle Brown*, Director of Media Relations, Guilford County Schools*
Leigha McNeil, *Emmy Award-Winning Anchor/Reporter, WWL-TV News Orleans*

2:45 – 3:00 p.m. **Coffee Break**

3:00 – 3:45 p.m. **On Brand: How to Create a Distinctive School Brand**
Simply put, your district's brand is your reputation. It's everything that comes to mind when families, students, and community members think about your schools. That means that every single experience people have with your district, from the user experience on your website to the first impression in the front office of your school, is a chance to build your brand.

This session is a hands-on journey into all the elements of a successful branding campaign that Birmingham City Schools used and how to differentiate your district in a new era of school choice.

Thomas Palladino, *Digital Webmaster, Birmingham City Schools*
Jen Thomas, *Director of National Business Development, Apptegy*

3:45 p.m. **Adjourn**

5:00 – 7:00 p.m. **Cocktail Reception**
Tujague's Restaurant
429 Decatur Street
New Orleans, LA
(Less than a 6-minute cab ride from the Hilton in the French Quarter)
Sponsors: *Apptegy, Finalsite, SchoolMint*

Saturday, July 18

7:30 – 10:00 a.m. **Registration**
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor

8:00 – 9:00 a.m. **Breakfast**
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor
Sponsor: *ParentSquare*

9:00 – 10:00 a.m. **AI in Action: How Communications Teams are Working Smarter Right Now**
School district communications teams are doing more with less, but the biggest barrier is usually knowing where to start, not the technology itself. This session starts with an AI readiness check so you can find your starting point, then walks through real workflows from LACOE's own communications team, including hands-on examples you can apply right away, and interactive discussions with your peers.

You'll leave with a clear next step, a resource library of prompts and templates, and a roadmap for bringing AI into your team's daily work, at whatever pace fits your team.

Elizabeth Graswich*, Executive Director, Public Affairs and Communication, Los Angeles County Office of Education*
Drew Mathias, *Co-Founder & CEO, Heartfelt Strategy*

10:00 – 10:45 a.m. **Accessibility in Action: Lessons from the Trenches**
With the Title II deadline extension, now is the time to get your accessibility approach in order, before expectations really tighten and the pressure ramps up.

Districts that wait will face the same challenges later, with far less room to adjust. If you're still figuring out how to manage accessibility across a large, decentralized system, this session will help you move forward with clarity.

Dr. Rebecca Kaye, *Senior Director of Policy and Strategic Projects, Guilford County Schools*
Jeannine Richardson, *Director of District Outcomes, Sales Management, Finalsite*

10:45 – 11:00 a.m. **Coffee Break**

11:00 – 11:45 a.m.

Strengthening a Destination District: The MMSD Rebrand Strategy

Rebranding a school district is not just a design project. It is a leadership challenge. These presenters had to build a new visual identity that honored what made each of its schools distinct while presenting a unified face to a community that was ready for change but protective of its history.

You will leave with practical insights on how to lead a rebrand that brings a divided community along, reshapes the district narrative, and strengthens its position as a school of choice.

Edell Fiedler, *Senior Executive Director of Communications, Madison Metropolitan School District*
Amy Knight, *Brand, Marketing, and Events Manager, Madison Metropolitan School District*

Noon – 1:00 p.m.

Lunch
Marlborough A+B, 2nd floor

1:15 – 2:00 p.m.

Climbing the Engagement Ladder: How to Turn Passive Followers into Passionate Advocates

Social media success isn't measured by follower count; it's measured by the strength of your community. In this session, you'll learn practical strategies for moving audiences beyond passive scrolling and into meaningful engagement.

Explore how to nurture every stage of the audience journey, from first-time viewers to loyal advocates, by encouraging conversations, responding with intention, recognizing your biggest supporters, and creating opportunities for participation. Walk away with a community-first framework you can apply to any organization, regardless of platform or audience size.

Sterling "Max" Smith, *Digital Content & Social Media Coordinator, Fort Worth Independent School District*

2:00 – 2:45 p.m.

Crisis-Ready: A Playbook for Communications Teams of All Sizes

Every school communicator knows how to handle a bus delay. But what happens when it is a fire, a chemical spill, or something worse? This session draws on two real incidents that occurred less than a year apart with completely different outcomes. One was a communications nightmare. The other was a success.

Drawing on 20 years of crisis communications experience across a fire department, a large university, and the largest K-12 district in Colorado, the presenter will share proven strategies for delivering timely, accurate information under pressure, keeping your community calm, and guiding families through reunification when every minute counts.

Scott Pribble, *Director of External Communications, Denver Public Schools*

2:45 – 3:15 p.m. **Looking Ahead to the 2026-2027 School Year**

As the conference comes to a close, conferees will have an opportunity to turn inspiration into action. In this session, each district will identify one new initiative, strategy, or idea they plan to launch in the new school year—whether it emerged from a conference session or a conversation during a meal function.

Attendees will leave with fresh ideas from peers across the country and a collective vision of how urban school communicators are shaping the future of public education.

3:15 p.m. **Adjourn**

Attire: Business Casual. Meeting rooms may be chilly. Please bring a sweater, blazer, or wrap.