MARE Focus

AUGUST 18, 2026 | FROM THE DESK OF MR. KEVIN SANDLIN, MARE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ENDORSEMENTS

American Fidelity Assurance Co.

Claim Care, Inc.

Hamlin Energy

IMS Technology

L.J. Hart & Company

MASA MTS

MO. Consult. For Ed.

MOCAAT

M.U.S.I.C.

Veregy

MARE PARTNERSHIPS

- **LEGAL HOTLINE: EDCOUNSEL, GUIN MUNDORF, MICKES O'TOOLE, TUETH KEENEY**
- **EDPLUS**
- **AMERICAN LEGION BOYS STATE**
- **GIRLS STATE**

MISSOURI ADMIN. JOB POSTING

2026-2027 Superintendent Searches

– MARE prides itself in providing a thorough, district-focused and economical Superintendent Search service. If you are making plans to retire or leave your current district next year, please give MARE an opportunity to visit with your district about our Superintendent Search Program. We have a team of seven former district Superintendents who make up our search team. For the sixth year in a row, MARE has provided more facilitated searches than any other entity in the state. Please contact Kevin Sandlin, Executive Director, at (660) 747-8050 or ksandlin@moare.com for more information.

Details on Searches at Mountain View-Birch Tree R-III, Henry Co. R-I & Rich Hill R-IV Posting Soon!

Calling on & Counting on our Educational Leaders

MARE, MASA, GOCSD, EdPlus, Kansas City GCSD, MRTA and others are working together to combine advocacy efforts for the 2027 Legislative Session. More information will be forthcoming as this evolves. We will be asking our members to rally folks to attend various "We Love Missouri Public Schools Days" at the Capitol from January through May. We will also be encouraging folks to attend State BOE meetings and remaining Task Force Meetings. It is necessary that we all work together and do our part to fight for public education. The battle remains ahead of us. Recent victories in the elections have bolstered us, but there is much work ahead. Be ready to stand up when called upon, as I know you will!

2026 MARE/MO K-8 Conference

– Our conference is scheduled October 21st through October 23rd at the Lodge of Four Seasons. Make plans now to join us. More information can be found on the MARE website at www.moare.com.

Links to Registration, Exhibitor Registration, Conference Planner at a Glance, General Sessions & Small Group Sessions appear on the email accompanying this MARE Focus.

This is going to be a great conference! Please make your plans now to join us!

2026-2027 District Membership Invoices

– Invoices were mailed on June 17th. **If you have not received your annual membership invoice (dues statement), please email or call me so that I can resend. Membership invoices should be paid by September 16, 2026!** If you have any questions regarding your status as a MARE member, please reach out to me. If you are not a current member, we would love to have you join the other 422 MARE member school districts across the state!

MARE is 422 Member School Districts Strong!

Foundation Formula Modernization Task Force – The next meeting is on Monday, September 14th at 10:00 a.m. in Jeff City. **Scenarios are on the horizon!** For more information on this work, please check out the website at this link: Missouri School Funding Modernization Task Force. **Please note and share the link below for community input on this process.**

Submit Comments to DESE Task Force

Quote of the Week

"Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out!" (Robert Collier)

MSPMA – Opportunities for Conference & Facilities/Equipment

Our conference is open for registration at www.mspma.com.

The 2 items that I've attached are: The conference scholarship for districts that have not been to our conference, or haven't participated in several years due to new leadership. We waive all fees and cover 1 hotel room for 2 nights in the conference center (very nice accommodations). Also, we have made some surplus funds available ($500,000) for districts to upgrade their facility care equipment (scrubbers, buffers, mowers, etc.) It's a low interest loan for 24 months with 4 pay cycles. Schools can then negotiate their best price, or purchase used equipment and not be entangled to a loan situation that doesn't always work well.

MSPMA Equipment Fund Flyer
MSPMA - New District Scholarship Fund

Opportunity to Recognize Outstanding Staff

The Missouri Association of Rural Education will present awards for outstanding performance in the area of rural education. Four such awards will be given during the luncheon on **Thursday, October 22nd** as part of the Annual MARE/MO K-8 Conference at The Lodge of Four Seasons, Lake Ozark, Missouri. One award will be presented in each of the following areas.

- ***Outstanding Rural Teacher (1 award)***
  (Teachers from any grade level are eligible.)
- **Outstanding Rural Support Staff Member (1 award)**
  (Secretaries, aides, cafeteria employees, bus drivers, bookkeepersetc.)
- ***Outstanding Rural Administrator (1 award)***
  (Principals and Superintendents are eligible.)
- ***Outstanding Rural School District (1 award)***
  (Any MARE member school district is eligible.)

To submit a nomination for an award, please complete the nomination form for each nominee. (No limit on number of nominees a school district may submit.) A minimum of three support letters is needed to validate the nomination. The support letters should provide information

explaining why the individual or school district is being nominated. Nominations may be submitted by:

- Completing the nomination form on the MARE website and linked here 2026 Outstanding Rural Education Awards Nomination Form or
- Mailing or emailing (ksandlin@moare.com) all the requested information in an envelope marked, **"Award Nomination"** to the MARE office at the addressed listed above.

All nominations & materials must be received by 12:00 noon on Friday, September 25, 2026 to be eligible for consideration by the Awards Committee!

MARE/MO K-8 Conference - October 21st-23rd

iCEV Certification Opportunity at MARE/MO K-8 Conference



Board Training Schedule for 2026 – See dates/locations below!

Lake Ozark, MO – The Lodge of the Four Seasons (Conference)

- Wednesday, October 21, 2026 (11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.)
- Thursday, October 22, 2026 (8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.)

Lake Ozark, MO - The Lodge of the Four Seasons

- Friday, December 4, 2026 (12:00 noon - 6:00 p.m.)
- Saturday, December 5, 2026 (8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.)

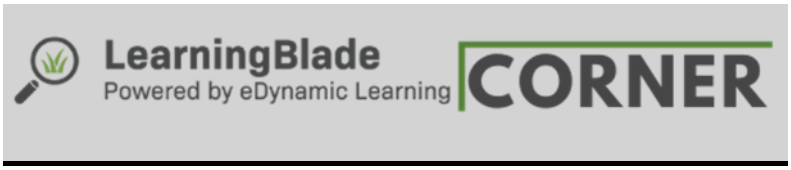
***** Please share this information with any new Board member who has not completed the 18.5 hours of required training! MARE is an approved Board Training provider!**

To register, please contact ksandlin@moare.com

New Superintendent Boot Camp

– New Superintendent Boot Camps are scheduled for Tuesday, September 15, 2026 at the Mickes O'Toole Offices in St. Louis and on Wednesday, September 23rd at the Springfield Public Schools. For more information on these free PD events, please call (314) 878-5600 or go to seminars@mickesotoole.com.

Learning Blade Corner – Back to School



Kick Off the School Year with Learning Blade

As students head back to school, there's no better time to introduce engaging lessons that connect learning to real-world careers. We're proud to recognize Tonji Stringfellow, Learning Blade's 2025-2026 Missouri Educator of the Year, for creating those meaningful learning experiences.

"My students were introduced to the world of AI and learned how technology has changed over time as well as future predictions of how AI will be an integral part of their world. As a result of participating in the Learning Blade missions, my students are demonstrating strong academic growth across content areas as measured by our district's assessment." Read more about Tonji's impact here.

As you prepare for the new school year, remember that Learning Blade is available to schools across Missouri at no cost. Get started with your free account here.

Conference Theme - Forever Rural!

MOCAAT – What Can You Do for Me?

MOCAAT™



The Empty Chair at the Coffee Table – Jesse Uhlmeyer

Every small town has one.
It's not listed on a map.
It isn't a tourist attraction.
But everyone knows where it is.
It's the morning coffee group.
Around here, in Canton, MO, it gathers in the local gas station downtown.
About mid-morning, a handful of familiar faces gather around a table with steaming cups of coffee.
The conversation rarely follows an agenda.
It moves from the weather to local news.
From grandkids to high school sports.
From the latest town news (some call it gossip) to who has started planting or harvesting first.
Some people stay ten minutes.
Others stay an hour.
The coffee isn't really what brings them together.
It's the community.
Every now and then, though, there's an empty chair.
Not because someone quit coming.
Because someone who is always there...isn't.
Almost immediately someone asks,
"Has anyone seen Bill?"
"I heard Mary hasn't been feeling well."
"Somebody ought to check on Jim."
In a rural community, an empty chair isn't just an empty chair.
It's a reminder that someone is missed.

A Different Kind of Crowd

A few weeks ago, my family spent several days on vacation in Destin, Florida.
The beaches were beautiful.
The restaurants were packed.
The sidewalks were filled with people from all over the country.
There were thousands of people around us every day.
Yet something felt strange.
Other than the people in my own family, I didn't know anyone.
No one waved.
No one stopped to visit in the WalMart parking lot.
No one asked if I was ready for school to start.
No one knew my kids.
No one recognized my family van.
I realized how unusual that felt.
Back home, it's almost impossible to go anywhere without seeing someone you know.
The grocery store.
The ball field.
Church.
The local restaurant.
Even a quick trip to the gas station usually turns into a conversation.
Some people see that as one of the challenges of living in a small town.
I've come to see it as one of its greatest strengths.
Because when you know people...
You notice when they're missing.

The Leadership Lesson

I've often thought about that empty chair at the coffee table.
The same lesson applies in leadership.
Every board meeting has empty chairs.
Every school event has people who couldn't make it.
Every community has voices that are never heard.
It's easy to focus on the people who show up.
They're the ones asking questions.
Sharing ideas.
Offering opinions.
But servant leaders learn to think about the people who aren't in the room.
The young family working two jobs.
The grandparent raising grandchildren.
The farmer trying to beat the weather.

The new resident who isn't sure where they fit.
The parent who wants to come but has to stay home with a sick child.
Their chair may be empty.
Their voice still matters.

Go Where the People Are

My wife always chuckles when I tell her I need to go to this or that because "I need to make an appearance". She quickly reminds me that I am not a celebrity.
But one of the greatest lessons rural communities teach us is that relationships aren't built by waiting.
They're built by going.
You meet people where they already are.
At the county fair.
On the sidelines of a game.
In the Dollar General parking lot.
After church.
In the aisle of the grocery store.
You don't wait for someone to walk into your office before you care about their story.
You go find it.
That's what neighbors do.
And I believe that's what leaders should do too.
Leadership isn't about filling every chair.
It's about making sure every person knows they have a place.

The View from the Gravel Road

I've learned that one of the greatest gifts of rural life is that people are rarely invisible.
We notice when a neighbor hasn't been seen.
We ask questions.
We check in.
We show up.
Maybe that's why rural communities have always been so resilient.
Not because we have more resources.
But because we have more relationships.
The strongest communities aren't built because everyone agrees.
They're built because people know they belong.
And belonging begins when someone notices you're missing.

Beyond the Gravel Road

You don't have to live in a rural town to lead this way.
Maybe your community has 500 people.
Maybe it has 500,000.
The leadership lesson is the same.
Every organization has empty chairs.
Every school has families who never attend events.
Every business has employees whose ideas are never shared.
Every church has people who quietly slip in and out without feeling connected.
Every community has voices that are easy to overlook.
Great leaders don't just serve the people they see.
They intentionally look for the people they don't.
That may mean walking the halls instead of staying in the office.
It may mean calling the parent who never comes to conferences.
It may mean eating lunch with a different group of students each week.
It may mean visiting a local business just to ask, "How are we doing?"
It may mean listening more than talking.
The setting may change.
The principle never does.
Whether you're leading a rural school district, a suburban campus, a large urban school, a business, or a nonprofit, people want the same thing.
They want to know they matter.
They want to know their voice counts.
They want to know someone would notice if their chair were empty.
That's not a rural leadership lesson.
That's a human leadership lesson.

The UnCommon EdLeader Principle

An empty chair isn't just an empty chair.
It's a person.

A story.
A neighbor.
UnCommon leaders don't just listen to the people who are in the room.
They care enough to notice the people who aren't.
Because the best leaders don't simply fill chairs. They build communities where every person knows they matter—and every empty chair reminds us to go find the story behind it.

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