

# 2026 REGIONAL EQUITY SUMMIT



**Connected for Impact:  
Building Community, Amplifying Voice**

## BREAKOUT SESSIONS

**Morning Sessions: 10:15am - 11:45am**

**Session Title:** Project-Based Learning as an Equity Tool in Primary Classrooms

**Presenter:** Amye Ellsworth, *First Grade Teacher, Cheney School District*

**Session Description:** Project-Based Learning can be a powerful tool for equity when designed intentionally. In this session, participants will explore how project-based learning in early elementary classrooms can increase access, engagement, and belonging for all students—especially multilingual learners and students in Title I schools. Through real classroom examples, participants will see how inquiry, student voice, and authentic projects can help young learners connect their identities, communities, and experiences to their learning. Attendees will leave with practical strategies for designing developmentally appropriate projects that center student voice, build strong classroom culture, and support equitable learning outcomes for primary students. This session explores how intentional classroom practices can create spaces where every child feels valued, capable, and connected.

**Presenter Bio:** Amye Ellsworth is a first-grade teacher in Cheney School District and a passionate advocate for equity-centered instruction. She specializes in designing project-based learning experiences that amplify student voice, build belonging, and connect learning to students' identities and communities. Working in a Title I elementary school, Amye focuses on creating engaging, inclusive learning environments where all students can access rigorous academic experiences. She also supports colleagues through professional learning around project-based teaching, classroom culture, and equitable instructional practices.

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**Session Title:** Attendance Mentor Program: Finding and Overcoming Barriers to Attendance

**Presenter:** Tim Harse, *Assistant Principal, Westwood Middle School*

**Co-Presenters:** Alison Tobler, Maurice Thomas

**Session Description:** This session provides a comprehensive overview of how to implement an Attendance Mentor Program, including all key components needed for success. This proactive Tier 2 strategy pairs a staff mentor with a student who was identified as chronically absent in the previous school year. Through brief monthly check-ins, mentors develop relationships with students to consistently support them in setting individualized attendance goals, identifying barriers, and developing strategies for improvement. Students are encouraged and motivated through incentives, earning rewards as they meet their goals and make progress toward maintaining consistent attendance.

**Presenter Bio:** Tim Harse currently serves as the Assistant Principal and Athletic Director at Westwood Middle School, where he facilitates and supports Westwood's attendance systems and interventions. Prior to this role, he served as the Dean of Students at North Pines Middle School for two years. Before moving into administration, Tim spent ten years as a middle school language arts and social studies teacher, serving in both behavioral intervention and general education settings.

**Session Title:** Designing AI for Equity: Building Inclusive, Guard-railed Tools that Advance Student Achievement

**Presenter:** Caryn McGee, *Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Spokane International Academy*

**Session Description:** Artificial Intelligence is rapidly entering classrooms; however, without intentional design, it can amplify inequities, expose student data, and reinforce systemic bias. In this interactive session, Caryn McGee (Director of Curriculum & Instruction, Spokane International Academy) shares her work through the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition's AI for Equity Community of Practice and demonstrates two AI-powered tools she built using Playlab: one to support instructional leaders in evaluating lesson plans and tracking teacher growth over time, and another to help teachers generate targeted literacy and math questions aligned to students' instructional levels. Participants will see how these tools were intentionally designed with equity guardrails that protect student privacy, prevent deficit-based or exclusionary language, and align outputs with culturally responsive teaching practices. The session encourages educators to think critically about why they are using AI, how they are exercising professional agency in the process, and whether the use of these tools is deepening learning for both teachers and students. Beyond the demonstrations, participants will explore critical questions of access, bias, data privacy, and ethical implementation in K-12 settings. Designed for instructional leaders, teachers, equity teams, and administrators at all experience levels, this workshop offers practical strategies for evaluating AI tools through an equity lens and building guardrails aligned to Washington State CCDEI standards. Participants will leave with concrete frameworks and action steps to ensure AI integration advances, rather than undermines, equitable systems for students.

**Presenter Bio:** *Caryn McGee is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction at Spokane International Academy, Washington's largest K-12 charter school. She leads curriculum alignment, assessment systems, and instructional innovation, with a focus on equity-centered practices which improve student achievement. Caryn recently participated in the Diverse Charter School Coalition's AI for Equity Community of Practice, where she designed AI-powered instructional tools that prioritize student privacy, inclusive language, and culturally responsive guardrails. With seventeen years of experience as a classroom teacher and instructional leader, she is passionate about building systems that advance academic rigor and equitable outcomes for all students.*

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**Session Title:** Leading From Lived Experience: How Our Stories Shape Our Leadership

**Presenter:** Dr. Larry A. Quisano, *Director of Recruitment and Workforce Diversity, Spokane Public Schools*

**Session Description:** This session invites educational leaders to reflect on their lived experiences and explore how those experiences show up in their leadership—both as strengths and as areas for continued growth. Grounded in reflective practice and equity-centered leadership, participants will engage in guided reflection, dialogue, and collaborative meaning-making to better understand the connection between identity, experience, and leadership behavior. Participants will leave with greater self-awareness, practical reflection tools, and a renewed commitment to leading with authenticity, humility, and purpose—while recognizing how their stories impact school culture, equity, and outcomes for students and communities.

**Presenter Bio:** *A 1st generation immigrant and the youngest of 8 kids, Dr. Larry A. Quisano is an educational leader, scholar, and advocate committed to equity-centered leadership in public education. He currently serves in a district-level leadership role in Spokane Public Schools focused on recruitment, retention, and workforce diversity, supporting schools and leaders in navigating complex systems while centering students, families, and communities. With experience across a wide range of roles in public education, Dr. Quisano brings a practitioner's lens to his work, emphasizing relationship-driven leadership, inclusive school culture, and sustainable leadership pathways. His leadership is based on the belief that strong schools are built through trust, collective responsibility, and the intentional development of equity-focused leaders. Dr. Quisano holds a doctorate in educational leadership, with research interests centered on the lived experiences of school leaders of color, as well as equity-focused and culturally responsive leadership. His scholarship and professional work aim to amplify the voices of historically marginalized leaders and translate research into practical strategies for systems change. He is passionate about mentoring aspiring leaders and creating spaces where educators can reflect, connect, and lead with authenticity. He is grounded by his marriage to his college sweetheart and their partnership in raising their three incredible daughters.*

**Session Title:** Increasing Access to Mental and Behavioral Health Services by Developing a Continuum of Supports in School Settings

**Presenter:** Dennis Sisco-Taylor, Ph.D., NCSP, *Assistant Professor & Program Director, School Psychology, Gonzaga University*

**Co-Presenter:** Maggie Cox, Ph.D.

**Session Description:** Limited access to mental and behavioral health services is a common issue for children and families at both the local and national level. However, this issue is of even greater concern for those living within marginalized communities. Due to a variety of logistical barriers, many of the children that need mental or behavioral health services do not receive them. K-12 schools are uniquely positioned to help address this problem – given that children spend a large portion of their day in schools, and schools employ various mental health professionals. Despite this reality, school-based mental health professionals are often unable to provide direct support to the children that present with mental or behavioral health concerns. This session will outline steps, strategies, and considerations for developing and implementing a continuum of mental and behavioral health supports in school settings by leveraging the American Psychological Association (APA) Layered Ecological Model framework. Policy considerations and opportunities for advocacy will be discussed.

**Presenter Bio:** *Dr. Sisco-Taylor is an Assistant Professor, and Director of the Psy.D. program in School Psychology at Gonzaga University. He was a PESB Faculty Research Fellow (2023-2025), and Co-Principal Investigator of the PESB-sponsored grant School Psychology Renewal for All Washington Learners (SPRAWL). He currently serves on the editorial boards for the International Journal of School and Educational Psychology, and School Psychology Training and Pedagogy. He also serves as Vice President of the Board of Directors for Child Care Aware Washington (CCA-WA). Dr. Sisco-Taylor has worked as a school psychologist in K-12 public schools in California, Utah, and Washington, and specializes in the development and implementation of multitiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks in schools.*

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**Session Title:** Diverse Students Need Diverse Schools

**Presenter:** Kenji Linane-Booey, *WA State Field Manager/Spokane Region Director, League of Education Voters Foundation*

**Co-Presenters:** Maria Esther Zamora, Deanna Dashiell, Marianne Sfeir, Karina Dautenhahn

**Session Description:** It is unfortunate yet common that many districts across Eastern Washington do not have a staff that reflects the identities of the students they serve. We know that having an adult, role model, or mentor who looks like you and comes from a similar culture allows you to engage in a much deeper level and to feel a part of the community you are learning in. Through the League of Education Voters, the Spokane Future Educators of Color Consortium has been working to understand how we can make our educator population reflect our student population here in Eastern Washington. Through strategic partnerships with highly invested educators, community partners, and school districts, we are ready to change the landscape of education in Eastern Washington. Please join us to engage in community practice conversations, a discussion of what a local educator pipeline could look like, and to learn best practices in trying to maintain an inclusive school environment.

**Presenter Bio:** *Kenji Linane-Booey was born and raised in Spokane, Washington. He comes from a family of six who taught him the importance of building community at an early age. Whether it was through community engagement events or Sunday family dinners, understanding others has always been a part of who he is. Kenji went to Shadle Park High School and then on to Gonzaga University as an Act Six scholar. Throughout his adult life, he has been focused on working for and with underserved communities and is excited to support students all across Washington state and throughout the Spokane region.*

**Session Title:** A Culturally Responsive Agenda for Multilingual Learner Success: Insights from Washington State's Strategic Plan

**Presenter:** Kadriye El-Atwani, Multilingual Education Program Supervisor, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

**Co-Presenter:** Katie Sperling

**Session Description:** Washington State's Multilingual Learner Statewide Strategic Plan advances a vision in which multilingual students thrive both academically and linguistically. The plan emphasizes cultivating asset-based mindsets, strengthening inclusive and high-quality instructional practices, and expanding meaningful pathways such as dual language, heritage language, and tribal language programs. Central to this work is building educator capacity and fostering authentic collaboration with students, families, and communities to develop equitable, culturally responsive systems that sustain success over time. Multilingual learners engage with complex academic concepts in a language they are still acquiring, often interacting with a curriculum that may not fully reflect their cultural perspectives. Culturally responsive instruction is essential for supporting meaning-making and academic growth; it affirms students' identities, builds on their existing knowledge, and creates bridges between their lived experiences and new learning. This presentation highlights the mindsets and skill sets educators develop to foster cultural competency, honor diversity, expand equitable access to learning, and create inclusive environments where multilingual learners feel supported and valued within the framework of Washington State's Multilingual Learner Statewide Strategic Plan. It also explores how these commitments align with CCDEI standards by strengthening culturally responsive learning and encouraging educators to deepen their awareness of students' home cultures and lived experiences. This understanding supports the design of instruction that remains accessible as students simultaneously develop academic content knowledge and acquire a new language. To extend this work, participants will engage with interactive tools and activities that demonstrate how culturally responsive learning aligns with the plan's four focus areas and reflects the expectations embedded in CCDEI standards.

**Presenter Bio:** *Kadriye El-Atwani (a.k.a Dr. Kad) is a Multilingual Education Program Supervisor at the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), currently residing in Eastern Washington. Before joining OSPI, Dr. Kad served as a Multilingual Education Specialist at the New Mexico Public Education Department. She brings both personal and professional passion to her work, advocating for Multilingual Learners through a culturally responsive mindset and skillset aimed at closing opportunity gaps and supporting the success of culturally and linguistically diverse students.*

*Katie Sperling is a Multilingual Education Program Supervisor with more than 20 years of experience teaching and leading K-12 language development programs across Washington State. In her current role at OSPI, Katie provides statewide leadership and technical assistance to support effective, culturally sustaining multilingual programs that honor students' linguistic assets and identities.*

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**Session Title:** The Parachute Principle: Moving from Compliance to Competency-Based Grading

**Presenter:** Sam Abrams, *Superintendent, Hayden Canyon Charter*

**Session Description:** In this high-impact session, Sam Abrams challenges the "Participation Trophy" culture of traditional grading. For too long, our assessment methods have rewarded "playing the game of school"—averaging grades, tracking behavior as "points," and allowing compliance to mask a lack of skill. Using the "Parachute" analogy, Sam explores how educators can shift toward a system where grades are a transparent, reliable measurement of what a student can actually do when it matters most.

**Presenter Bio:** *Sam Abrams is a visionary educational leader and systems architect with over 20 years of experience driving mastery-based innovation across the globe. From founding the award-winning Qatar Academy for Science and Technology to his current role as Superintendent of Hayden Canyon Charter, Sam has specialized in restructuring schools to prioritize authentic achievement over mere compliance. With a background in Secondary Math and a Master's in Educational Leadership, he combines data-driven accountability with brain-based pedagogy. Sam is dedicated to moving the needle on student success by ensuring that grading systems aren't just a record of attendance, but a guarantee of competency.*

**Session Title:** From Survival to Learning: Using Brain Science to Create Equitable Classrooms

**Presenter:** Keith Orchard LCSW, *Mental Health Coordinator, Coeur d'Alene School District*

**Session Description:** Students impacted by adversity don't walk into classrooms equally ready to learn - and that's not a motivation problem, it's a brain and body reality. This session bridges neuroscience and equity by examining how trauma and chronic stress shape development, behavior, and access to learning. Educators will deepen their understanding of how lived experiences influence student readiness, and - more importantly - what to do about it. Grounded in practical application, this workshop equips educators with a deeper understanding of why some students struggle along with strategies to create classrooms where students experience safety, connection, and the conditions necessary for learning.

**Presenter Bio:** *Author, Speaker, and Coach with decades of experience supporting the people and systems that care for our most vulnerable children, Keith Orchard brings insight, heart, and real-world solutions to every training, keynote, and coaching session. A Licensed Clinical Social Worker and current Mental Health Coordinator for Coeur d'Alene Public Schools, Keith's background spans the classroom, wilderness therapy, nonprofit leadership, and international service in the Peace Corps. His diverse experience allows him to connect with audiences from every corner of education, mental health, and youth services. Keith's presentations are engaging, inspiring and most importantly, practical. Whether delivering a high-energy keynote, leading an experiential workshop, or offering one-on-one coaching, Keith is known for his warmth, patience, and deep understanding of the challenges facing today's educators and caregivers. His trainings are grounded in real-world application, offering strategies that educators can implement immediately to increase confidence, reduce burnout, and build resilience—both in themselves and in the students they serve. Keith's book for educators: *The Fostering Resilience Workbook - Strategies and Steps to Support Our Learners*, offers coaching-based tools for navigating even the most difficult student situations with clarity and compassion. Find out more at [coachorchard.com](http://coachorchard.com).*

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**Session Title:** From Initiative to Innovation: Leading for Inclusive Learning

**Presenter:** Tabitha Ellison, *Special Education Consultant, Shifted Perspectives*

**Session Description:** The landscape of learning is shifting and so must our approach. Inclusion can't live as an initiative on the side; it has to be the design of the learning itself. When inclusion becomes the blueprint for how we teach, it doesn't just support students, it fuels innovation, strengthens resilience, and builds adaptive expertise in educators. Yet, even with shared commitments to "meeting students where they are," many school systems struggle to move from belief to practice. Teachers feel stretched between ideals and daily realities, and leaders are left wondering how to sustain momentum without adding "one more thing." In this interactive session, participants will explore a concrete, research-aligned framework for transforming inclusive practices from a lofty aspiration into a sustainable driver of schoolwide innovation. Through real examples, reflective dialogue, and collaborative design, leaders will learn how to bridge the gap between theory and implementation, equipping teams to strengthen engagement, access, and belonging across their schools.

**Presenter Bio:** *Tabitha Ellison is an educational leader, founder, and consultant whose work centers on translating neuroscience into inclusive, sustainable school practices. After beginning her career in traditional compliance-based systems, she experienced a transformative shift through her study of educational neuroscience and its impact on teaching, learning, and leadership. Tabitha serves on the executive board of Neural Education, where she contributes to advancing research-informed professional learning for educators. As a founder and special education consultant, and a former Student Services Director with an M.Ed. in Educational Leadership, she has guided districts in integrating neurodiversity-affirming approaches that strengthen autonomy, self-efficacy, and belonging for all learners. Her leadership is grounded in a commitment to removing barriers and designing systems that foster both student and educator growth.*

### **Session Title:** What Makes Social and Emotional Learning Work?

**Presenter:** Dr. Melanie M. Kelley, *Program Coordinator, Office of a Pedagogy of Hope - School of Education*

**Session Description:** Despite widespread adoption of social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, educators continue to experience uneven implementation shaped by personal beliefs, institutional conditions, and systemic constraints. Grounded in a qualitative case study of secondary educators, this session examines characteristics of successful SEL curriculum and implementation through teachers' perspectives using Weiner's Attribution Theory. Participants will explore how dispositional and situational attributions influence teacher buy-in, perceptions of success, and equity in SEL access for students. Moving beyond research presentation, the session incorporates structured reflection activities that invite K-12 practitioners to examine their own interpretations of SEL challenges, identify leverage points within their systems, and strengthen alignment between belief, practice, and purpose. This session supports educators in building reflective awareness, professional agency, and practical strategies for sustaining SEL as an equity-driven practice.

**Presenter Bio:** *Melanie joined the Office of a Pedagogy of Hope (PoH Office) bringing a diverse background in education and a deep commitment to equity and inclusion. With an MST in Teaching, a BS in Psychology, and a School Administration certificate, Melanie most recently obtained her Doctorate in Educational Administration and Leadership at Southern Nazarene University. Having taught across a range of grade levels and educational environments, Melanie brings a particular passion for behavior intervention and supporting students through responsive, inclusive practices. As a military spouse and mother to three children (and one beloved dog), she brings both personal and professional experience navigating complex systems with empathy and resilience.*

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### **Session Title:** Making Future-Ready Skills Visible: An Equity Move for Access and Agency

**Presenter:** Tracie Lenihan, *Teaching & Learning Instructional Leader, East Valley School District*

**Session Description:** Future-ready skills appear frequently in strategic plans, profiles of a graduate, and classroom goals. Employers often refer to these same competencies as "soft skills," such as collaboration, communication, adaptability, and problem-solving. Yet in schools, these skills are often implied rather than explicitly taught. When expectations remain invisible, access becomes uneven—students who understand unspoken norms benefit, while others are left navigating ambiguity. This session is designed for classroom teachers, instructional coaches, and district and building leaders who want to move beyond aspirational language toward equitable, coherent practice. Participants will explore why making future-ready skills visible is both an instructional and leadership responsibility, and how explicit skill instruction supports access, agency, and consistency across classrooms and systems. Using real classroom and district examples, participants will examine where future-ready skills are named but not clearly defined in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation. Teachers will practice translating broad skill language into clear, student-friendly learning targets that can be embedded into existing lessons. Leaders will explore how those same skills can be supported through aligned look-fors, PLC structures, feedback, and professional learning—without adding initiatives or increasing workload. The session emphasizes concrete, low-inference language to reduce subjectivity and bias while honoring multiple ways students demonstrate competence. Participants will leave with practical tools to clarify expectations, strengthen instructional practice, and support shared understanding across roles. Making future-ready skills visible is an equity move. When educators and leaders align around clear skill language, schools create conditions for consistency, transparency, and increased access and agency for all learners.

**Presenter Bio:** *Tracie Lenihan is a district instructional leader focused on equity, instructional coherence, and making future-ready skills visible in practice. She works with secondary and CTE teams in PLCs to analyze data, clarify expectations, and strengthen instructional practices, helping educators translate aspirational goals into clear, actionable moves that increase access, agency, and consistency across systems.*

## **Session Title:** Poetry Saves Lives

**Presenter:** Mery Noel Smith, *Poet Laureate, Spokane Arts*

**Session Description:** This poetry class invites attendees to explore language as a tool for self-discovery and expression. Through reading, writing, and sharing poems, we will learn to identify and develop our voices while honoring our current, experiences and hard truths. The course emphasizes creativity, reflection, and courage. We will bear witness to one another as we take risks with our words and listen deeply to each other.

**Presenter Bio:** *Mery Smith is a Spokane resident and the city's current Poet Laureate. Mary has been bringing her poetry workshops into underserved communities in WA in collaboration with local libraries, public schools, Spark Central and Writers in the Community Outreach as well as Treatment centers and Crosswalk youth Shelter. Mery's work is focused on healing through imagination. Looking to creativity as healing, storytelling as a unique and sometimes more accessible way to tell the truth. Mery believes that everyone's art matters! She says, "challenging what people think about themselves as artists or not, is the most fun a sober person can have! Mery's work has been featured in publications such as The Comet, The Inlander, The Spokesman Review, The Lilac Local, InRoads, Listen to your Mother the anthology, The Trestle Creek Review where her poem, Genesis was nominated for a Pushcart Prize 2024, and more online at Merynoel.com She is the author of one chapbook, crumbs 2021.*

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## **Session Title:** Designing Equitable High School Writing: Thinking Tasks, Digital Composition, and Responsible AI

**Presenter:** Sara Hedlund, *Regional Literacy Coordinator, ESD123*

**Session Description:** High school writing is changing under Washington's revised ELA standards—and students are composing in a world shaped by digital media and AI. This session supports educators in designing equity-centered writing instruction that maintains rigor while removing barriers for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and historically underserved students. Participants will apply Building Thinking Classrooms principles to ELA by transforming writing assignments into thinking tasks that promote collaboration, visible reasoning, and student ownership. Educators will also explore practical ways to integrate AI tools ethically into planning, revision, and feedback cycles without outsourcing thinking.

**Presenter Bio:** *Sara J. Hedlund serves as a Regional Literacy Coordinator at ESD 123 in Washington State, where she supports educators and school leaders in strengthening literacy instruction and building equitable systems for student success. She also co-leads the Regional Literacy Coordinators and facilitates professional learning centered on writing, structured literacy, and effective supports for multilingual learners and students with disabilities. Sara holds two master's degrees—Curriculum and Instruction and Learning Experience Design—which shape her approach to practical, engaging, and research-aligned learning experiences.*

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## **Session Title:** High Standards, Clear Pathways: Practical Design Moves for Equitable Classrooms

**Presenter:** Trisha Dotts, *Academic and SEL Interventionist, Deer Park School District*

**Session Description:** If you're seeing more hesitation, stalling, and shutdown than you used to, you're not imagining it. If you've ever thought, "They could do this if they'd even try," this session gives you a practical way to diagnose what's getting in the way of trying. We'll separate rigor from friction.

Even with strong teaching and good intentions, friction can show up as unclear success criteria, heavy process load, public failure risk, and help costs. You'll learn a simple four-part design tool you may actually remember in the fall:

Map, Markers, Signals, and Signs.

These tools will make success visible, improve checkpoints, shorten feedback loops, and improve UI. The focus is on practical, inclusive design that widens access to demonstrating mastery while keeping expectations steady.

**Presenter Bio:** *Trisha Dotts, NBCT, is an educator and intervention specialist with 25+ years in classrooms, focused on resilience, motivation, and high-standards systems that make success more accessible and sustainable for students, without watering down rigor. On top of teaching, she brings life experience as a mom, wife and one-handed person living a ranch and backcountry lifestyle.*

**Session Title:** Balanced Discipline for Equitable Classrooms: Centering Structure, Care, and Accountability

**Presenter:** Keith Orchard LCSW, *Mental Health Coordinator, Coeur d'Alene School District*

**Session Description:** One of the most common questions after a trauma-informed schools presentation is: "This is great, I understand kids from hard places struggle...but what about accountability?" This workshop explores how to discipline students effectively while balancing multiple goals: increasing motivation, teaching problem-solving skills, maintaining order, and sustaining strong relationships within a responsive learning environment. This workshop provides practical tools to reduce power struggles, strengthen relationships, and ensure all students are supported in meeting high expectations.

**Presenter Bio:** *Author, Speaker, and Coach with decades of experience supporting the people and systems that care for our most vulnerable children, Keith Orchard brings insight, heart, and real-world solutions to every training, keynote, and coaching session. A Licensed Clinical Social Worker and current Mental Health Coordinator for Coeur d'Alene Public Schools, Keith's background spans the classroom, wilderness therapy, nonprofit leadership, and international service in the Peace Corps. His diverse experience allows him to connect with audiences from every corner of education, mental health, and youth services. Keith's presentations are engaging, inspiring and most importantly, practical. Whether delivering a high-energy keynote, leading an experiential workshop, or offering one-on-one coaching, Keith is known for his warmth, patience, and deep understanding of the challenges facing today's educators and caregivers. His trainings are grounded in real-world application, offering strategies that educators can implement immediately to increase confidence, reduce burnout, and build resilience—both in themselves and in the students they serve. Keith's book for educators: *The Fostering Resilience Workbook - Strategies and Steps to Support Our Learners*, offers coaching-based tools for navigating even the most difficult student situations with clarity and compassion. Find out more at [coachorchard.com](http://coachorchard.com).*

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**Session Title:** Building Authentic Student Friendships with the Best Buddies Club and Exceptionalities Elective

**Presenter:** Erin Damrel, *Life Skills Teacher, Lakeside High School/Nine Mile Falls SD*

**Co-Presenters:** Alecia McAdams, Lakeside Alumni

**Session Description:** Come see behind the scenes of Lakeside's award winning inclusion programs. Learn from staff and student mentors why they can't get enough of our Exceptionalities classes and Best Buddies club. Find out how these programs foster a schoolwide community of inclusion. Take home some insights, ideas, and inspiration for laying relational foundations that build capacity among your staff and student body to create, grow, and sustain an inclusive learning culture.

**Presenter Bio:** *A 19 year educator, and a University of Kansas grad, Erin joined Nine Mile Falls School District's Special Education team at Lakeside High School in 2019. She lives in Eastern Washington with her family. Erin loves reading, crocheting, and embroidery and is most proud of her kids who make a difference in the world tomorrow. Erin's work not only helped Lakeside to receive the 2025 AWSL Culture Kick-Off Award and to receive a Washington Best Buddies Spotlight as the largest high school chapter in the state, her inclusive programs have inspired numerous alumni to choose special education as their future vocation.*

**Session Title:** Pedagogy in Motion: Bringing Native Literacy Principles to Life Through Regional Practice

**Presenter:** Bawaajigekwe Boulley, *Office of Native Education Native Student Success, OSPI*

**Co-Presenters:** Theresa “Tere” Hernandez, PhD, NBCT, Michelle Norwood

**Session Description:** What does it look like to move from literacy guidance to living practice in classrooms, schools, and communities? This interactive session invites educators into a regional learning model grounded in Washington State’s Native Literacy Guidance (NLG). Building from a successful statewide Professional Learning Community (PLC), participants will experience a facilitation approach that centers principles, connects them to existing literacy practices, and supports educators in translating guidance into meaningful, culturally grounded instruction. Through a blend of reflection, dialogue, and application, participants will explore how Native Literacy Principles—such as fostering belonging, centering identity, and engaging students through culturally respectful practices—align with and strengthen current literacy efforts. This session emphasizes that the NLG is not an “add-on,” but a lens that brings coherence, relevance, and deeper impact to the work educators are already doing. Participants will engage in a crosswalk process to connect principles to practice, collaborate with peers across contexts, and identify actionable next steps for their own classrooms, schools, or regions. This session is designed for educators, leaders, and partners interested in advancing equitable, culturally responsive literacy systems through collaboration with Educational Service Districts (ESDs) and local communities.

**Presenter Bio:** Bawaajigekwe Boulley is an Indigenous educator and program supervisor with the Washington Office of Native Education, where she leads equity-centered initiatives in service of students and educators. An enrolled member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe and of the Turtle Clan, her work is grounded in an Anishinaabe worldview, with a focus on culturally sustaining pedagogy and systems transformation. With over 15 years of classroom teaching experience in K-12, regular and special education, she brings a deep, practice-rooted commitment to supporting educators. Bawaajigekwe is a doctoral candidate in Indigenous Education at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay and serves on the national advisory board for the Jim Thorpe Center for the Futures of Native Peoples, contributing to work that advances truth-telling, honors Indigenous living histories, and supports Indigenous sovereignty and future generations.

**Co Presenter Bio:** Dr. Theresa Hernandez is the Regional Literacy Coordinator at Educational Service District 105 and an adjunct professor at Yakima Valley College. She partners with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and educators across Washington to strengthen literacy instruction and support multilingual learners. With more than 20 years of experience in classrooms and alongside educators, her work is rooted in practical application, collaboration, and a deep commitment to ensuring every student has access to strong literacy instruction. She focuses on helping educators connect research to practice in ways that feel meaningful, manageable, and impactful  
Follow me on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/trhernandez/>

**Co Presenter Bio:** Michelle Norwood serves as the Regional Literacy & Multilingual Coordinator at NEWESD 101, partnering with districts to strengthen literacy systems and improve outcomes for all learners. With over 25 years in education, she has worked across public and private settings, both internationally and in Washington State, bringing a broad and experienced perspective to her role. Michelle leads regional professional learning, including LETRS and ELA Fellows, and supports educators in implementing research-aligned, equitable literacy practices. She has also served on the Native Literacy PLC workgroup for the past two years, contributing to statewide efforts to center culturally grounded literacy practices. Michelle was recently honored with the InnerNorthwest Dyslexia Alliance’s Community Advocate Wave Maker Award for her leadership and advocacy in literacy for all students.

**Session Title:** Educating for Peace: Montessori Strategies that Transform Tier I and Close Opportunity Gaps

**Presenter:** Rhonda Turnipseed, *Principal Spokane Public Montessori, Spokane Public schools*

**Co-Presenters:** *Kathryn Picanco and Nicole Markealli*

**Session Description:** Join us in Spokane for a practical and thought-provoking session that opens the doors to public Montessori and its powerful, equity-driven approach to education. Rooted in the philosophy of Maria Montessori, this session will move beyond theory to explore how Montessori principles can be intentionally adapted into traditional public school settings to better serve all students. Participants will gain an inside look at the core elements of high-functioning public Montessori programs—multi-age communities, student agency, purposeful work cycles, and environments designed for independence and how these structures naturally strengthen Tier I instruction. We will highlight how these practices proactively address many Tier II concerns by fostering self-regulation, engagement, and a deep sense of belonging before intervention is needed. This session is designed for educators and leaders seeking actionable strategies to close opportunity gaps without lowering expectations. Attendees will explore how Montessori-aligned practices such as uninterrupted work time, culturally responsive materials, and explicit grace and courtesy instruction can be integrated into any classroom to create more inclusive, responsive learning environments. Grounded in the concept of “education for peace,” participants will leave with a clear understanding of how to normalize human flourishing for all students by designing systems that prioritize dignity, independence, and community. Whether you are Montessori-trained or working in a traditional setting, this session will provide transferable tools and a renewed vision for what equitable, student-centered education can look like in practice.

**Presenter Bio:** *Rhonda Turnipseed is a veteran educational leader and principal of Spokane Public Montessori, with nearly three decades of experience dedicated to equity, innovation, and student-centered learning. A passionate advocate for public Montessori education and a member of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector network, she leads with a commitment to shared leadership, restorative practices, and asset-based community building. Throughout her career, Rhonda has served in a variety of roles including principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, and classroom teacher across diverse school settings. Her work focuses on closing opportunity gaps through rigorous, inclusive instruction, strong family and community partnerships, and systems that support both academic and social-emotional growth. Known for her collaborative and reflective leadership style, Rhonda is dedicated to building capacity in educators and empowering students to thrive. She believes deeply in education as a pathway to peace and human flourishing, and she continues to design and lead programs that bring that vision to life in public education.*

**Co-Presenter Bios:** *Nicole Markealli is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) and school counselor with 12 years of experience supporting children, families, and school communities through a trauma-informed, equity-centered lens. Working within a public Montessori setting, she focuses on creating inclusive systems that honor student voice, relationship-based practices, and whole-child development. She deeply believes in advocating for the whole child by recognizing the importance of emotional safety, belonging, regulation, identity, and connection as essential foundations for learning and growth. Her work bridges the counseling and mental health domains, helping educators better understand behavior through the lenses of attachment, regulation, and belonging.*

*She is trained in trauma-informed practices, Circle of Security, and equity-centered approaches, and is passionate about helping schools create environments where all students feel safe, seen, and valued. Through her work in both school counseling and clinical mental health, she supports students in developing social-emotional skills, resilience, and authentic connection while partnering with educators to build equitable, compassionate, and student-centered school cultures.*

*Kathryn Picanco, Ed.D. began her professional career as an elementary school teacher, later becoming a district differentiation specialist and coordinator of the Gifted and Talented Education program. Kathryn joined the faculty in the School of Education at Whitworth University in 2006. She currently teaches in the undergraduate teacher preparation program and Graduate Studies in Education. Kathryn’s research interests are in inquiry-based instruction, differentiation, and Montessori education. A long-time advocate for public Montessori programs, she is the founding and current director of the Master of Education in Montessori degree programs and teacher training center at Whitworth.*