NORTH DAKOTA

K-12 EDUCATION COORDINATION COUNCIL

2026 ANNUAL REPORT

COORDINATION • COLLABORATION • INNOVATION

September 2026

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A year defined by evidence, collaboration, and practical action

Dear Members of the North Dakota Education Community,

As I reflect on the work of the North Dakota K–12 Education Coordination Council over the past year, I am filled with pride and gratitude. Our work is not measured simply by meetings held or documents produced, but by the thoughtful hours our members have invested in asking difficult questions, examining evidence, listening to those doing the work every day, and seeking practical ways to improve opportunities for North Dakota students.

Much of that work has occurred through our subcommittees and special working groups. Whether examining reading growth, mastery-based learning, student engagement, statewide supports, duplication of services, attendance, or emerging policy needs, members have intentionally moved beyond assumptions. We have studied data, visited programs, and spoken directly with educators, administrators, families, students, and agency partners. Good policy should be informed not only by numbers, but by the experiences of the people responsible for turning policy into meaningful opportunities for students.

Perhaps no effort better reflects this approach than the Council's work on student attendance. With support from the 2025 Legislature, the Council partnered with the University of North Dakota Bureau of Evaluation and Research Services (BEARS) to examine schools and districts that had improved attendance outcomes. The study reinforced an important reality: absenteeism rarely has a single cause. Student, family, school, community, transportation, behavioral-health, and system-level factors often overlap, requiring both clear expectations and meaningful support.

Completion of the study was not the end of the work; it was the beginning of the next phase. The Council and Legislative Subcommittee have used the findings to explore early identification, tiered intervention, family engagement, local flexibility, and clearer responsibilities among schools and partner agencies. We are asking where barriers exist, where schools reach the limits of what they can reasonably provide, and where referral pathways among education, human services, courts, tribal partners, law enforcement, and community organizations can be strengthened.

As we look toward the 2027 Legislative Session, our recommendations must remain grounded in evidence, informed by practitioners, respectful of local context, and focused on actions that can make a measurable difference. We will continue asking what requires legislation, what can be strengthened through agency coordination, what belongs at the local level, and what requires additional study.

I am deeply grateful to Chair Luke Schaefer, our Council members, subcommittee leaders, agency and legislative partners, educators, families, students, and communities for their time and expertise. I am proud of what this Council has accomplished and encouraged by the momentum we have built for North Dakota students.

With sincere gratitude,

Dr. Mark Vollmer, Executive Director

LEGISLATIVE SUBCOMMITTEE

Turning research into thoughtful policy considerations

Luke Schaefer

Dr. Luke Schaefer
Chair, Legislative Subcommittee

MEMBERS

Amy De Kok
Maria Neset
Representative David Richter
Dr. Sarah Ricks
Stanley Schauer
Superintendent Levi Bachmeier
Tomi Cimarosti

YEAR IN REVIEW

- **Attendance research and policy pathways**
- **Earlier identification and tiered support**
- **Clearer cross-agency roles and referrals**

Research is the starting point—not a predetermined recommendation.

From Research to Thoughtful Action

The Legislative Subcommittee continued to help the Council move from research and discussion toward thoughtful policy considerations. Under the leadership of Dr. Luke Schaefer, the committee deliberately began with evidence rather than proposed legislation. Members examined where existing systems are working, where gaps remain, and whether potential solutions are best addressed through coordination, administrative guidance, local action, additional study, or legislative change.

"Highly trained teachers, strong curricular resources, and well-developed instructional systems are most effective when students are physically in their seats, engaged in learning, assessed for progress, and provided timely interventions or enrichment."
— Why Attendance Matters: White Paper: K12 Coordination Council, December 2025

Attendance: Understanding the Problem

The study also highlighted an important distinction: effective attendance work begins before a student becomes chronically absent. Strong approaches combine clear expectations with relationships, early identification, timely family communication, individualized intervention, and access to community supports.

"Time and time again we hear schools remind us that getting students to learn is something they can do but getting students to school can be much harder"
— Dr. Luke Schaefer, Council Chair

Student attendance and chronic absenteeism were central to this year's work. Building on the Council-supported UND BEARS study, the subcommittee reviewed findings from North Dakota schools and districts that had improved attendance. The research reinforced that absenteeism is rarely caused by one factor. Family circumstances, transportation, behavioral health, student engagement, school climate, access to services, and broader system issues can overlap.

Earlier Identification and Tiered Support

The subcommittee explored the value of a statewide attendance continuum or MTSS-style framework that could establish common expectations while preserving local flexibility. Discussion included common definitions and data expectations, early-warning indicators, root-cause analysis, attendance teams, family outreach, and progressively more intensive supports as absences accumulate. The goal is not to add

requirements for their own sake, but to help schools recognize patterns sooner and respond before problems become more difficult to address.

Clarifying Cross-Agency Responsibility

Members also focused on what happens when schools have exhausted the supports available within the education system. Schools may know that a student or family needs help but be uncertain about the next referral, the responsible agency, or the services available. The committee therefore examined the roles of schools, NDDPI, NDHHS and CHINS, courts, law enforcement, tribal programs, and community organizations, with an eye toward clearer referral pathways and fewer unnecessary hand-offs.

Preparing for 2027

As the Council prepares for the 2027 Legislative Session, the subcommittee will continue separating issues that truly require legislation from those better addressed through coordination, guidance, local policy, or further study. Potential areas for continued work include an attendance continuum, a cross-agency responsibility and referral map, improved resource navigation, and stronger capacity to assist districts facing significant attendance challenges. The objective remains practical: recommendations that are evidence-informed, locally responsive, and capable of improving outcomes for students and families.

SUPPORT & INNOVATION

Learning from promising practices and student-centered innovation

Dr. Sarah Ricks
Chair, Support & Innovation Subcommittee

MEMBERS

Beth Slette
Harlan Johnson
Senator Ryan Braunberger
Sonia Meehl
Dr. Luke Schaefer
Wayde Sick

YEAR IN REVIEW

- **Exemplar schools and promising practices**
- **Mastery and personalized learning**
- **Using existing state resources to support innovation**

Practical innovation should strengthen teaching, engagement, and student opportunity.

Learning From Promising Practice

The Support & Innovation Subcommittee, chaired by Dr. Sarah Ricks, continued to identify practices that can strengthen student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and give schools meaningful flexibility in meeting student needs. The committee has approached innovation not as the pursuit of the newest program or initiative, but as an opportunity to identify practices that are producing meaningful results, understand why they are working, and determine how those lessons might inform improvement efforts across the state. The subcommittee has also examined how schools are using programs, resources, and opportunities created by the Legislature to encourage educational innovation and support improved outcomes for students.

Its work includes identifying exemplar schools and districts demonstrating high achievement or significant growth in student attendance, family engagement, and student engagement; examining the policies and practices contributing to that success; exploring mastery frameworks and personalized learning practices;

examining how schools are using existing state-created programs and opportunities to support innovation; and continuing to study schools implementing elements of mastery-based learning.

Looking Beyond the Numbers

A central principle has been to move beyond statewide averages and ask what is happening inside schools that are improving. Data can point to growth, but numbers alone do not explain the leadership decisions, instructional practices, relationships, or school culture behind it. School visits, interviews, engagement data, and conversations with practitioners have helped the committee distinguish authentic improvement from changes that may reflect staffing, survey administration, or other external factors.

Exploring Mastery-Based Learning

The subcommittee devoted significant attention to mastery-based practices. Members observed that some schools with improving student engagement were already using elements of mastery learning, even when they did not formally use that label. Common characteristics included clearer learning targets, stronger alignment among standards, instruction, and assessment, greater transparency about proficiency, responsive instruction, opportunities for reassessment and revision, and stronger use of formative assessment.

The work also reinforced that mastery is more than a grading change. A meaningful framework requires a coherent learning continuum, proficiency-based assessment, responsive instruction, and student ownership. In promising settings, students were increasingly involved in goal setting, reflection, and monitoring their own progress—helping them understand what they are learning, where they are, and what comes next.

Innovation That Can Last

The committee has remained mindful that innovation must be practical and sustainable across North Dakota's diverse school communities. School size, staffing, leadership stability, local resources, and community context all influence implementation. Moving forward, the subcommittee will continue examining mastery frameworks and personalized learning practices, identifying exemplar schools, and asking how existing programs and resources can be leveraged to create better outcomes. The goal is to strengthen existing improvement systems rather than create another disconnected initiative.

STATEWIDE PROJECTS, DUPLICATION & REPLICATION

Learning from success while strengthening statewide systems

Brandt Dick

Chair, Statewide Projects, Duplication & Replication Subcommittee

MEMBERS

Jeremy Mehlhoff
Representative Pat Heinert
Sara Medalen
Senator Donald Schaible
Dawn Ulmer

YEAR IN REVIEW

- **Learn from North Dakota success**
- **Identify transferable practices**
- **Reduce duplication and strengthen statewide systems**

Identify what is working, understand why, and adapt what can travel.

Learning From North Dakota Success

The Statewide Projects, Duplication & Replication Subcommittee, chaired by Brandt Dick, continued its practical work of identifying what is working in North Dakota schools, understanding why it is working, and considering what can be adapted elsewhere. At the same time, the committee examined statewide programs and supports to determine where stronger coordination can reduce duplication and make existing resources easier for schools to use.

"In a time when we hear so much about what's wrong in education, it was a gift through our work on the North Dakota K-12 Education Coordination Council to hear stories from North Dakota schools about what's working!"
— Sara Medalen, Member, Statewide Projects, Duplication and Replication Committee

What Strong Reading Systems Have in Common

A major focus was an informal study of North Dakota schools and districts demonstrating notable growth in reading outcomes. The subcommittee spoke with representatives from Phoenix Elementary in Grand Forks, Central Valley School District, and Rolette Public School. The purpose was not to identify a single preferred curriculum or program, but to understand the combination of practices contributing to measurable improvement.

Several themes emerged consistently. Successful schools used data systematically through MTSS processes, regularly reviewed student progress, and adjusted interventions based on need. Academic and behavioral information were considered together rather than as separate systems. Relationship-building structures, mentorship, student goal setting, and progress monitoring helped connect students more intentionally to adults and to their own learning.

Systems, Not a Single Program

The school interviews reinforced that sustainable improvement rarely comes from one initiative. Stronger outcomes were associated with layered interventions, aligned curriculum and instruction, thoughtful use of technology, strong leadership, and staff collaboration. Technology was used as a tool rather than an end in itself, while educators maintained attention to deeper reading, comprehension, and individual student needs.

Replication Without Uniformity

Replication does not mean asking every North Dakota school to operate in exactly the same way. Districts differ in enrollment, geography, staffing, demographics, resources, and student needs. The committee's task is therefore to identify principles that travel—such as integrated academic and behavioral supports, intentional relationships, student ownership, targeted intervention, and leadership alignment—while allowing local schools to determine how those principles fit their context.

Coordinating What Already Exists

The subcommittee also examined statewide agencies, programs, and support systems that can help address barriers to attendance and engagement. Before recommending a new program or investment, the Council is asking whether a similar service already exists, whether current efforts can be strengthened or better connected, and whether schools know how to access them. This work is central to the Council's mission: learn from success, connect existing expertise, reduce unnecessary duplication, and focus new attention on genuine gaps.

ASPIRATIONAL GOALS

Connecting Council priorities to North Dakota's renewed PK-12 vision

Superintendent Levi Bachmeier
Chair, Aspirational Goals Subcommittee

MEMBERS

Angel Lindseth
Maria Neset
Representative David Richter
Dawn Ulmer
Ellie Shockley
Stan Schauer

YEAR IN REVIEW

- **Renew the PK-12 Strategic Vision**
- **Align Council goals to statewide priorities**
- **Prepare students for a changing future**

What do we want for every North Dakota student—today and for the future they will inherit?

A Renewed Vision for North Dakota

The Aspirational Goals Subcommittee, chaired by State Superintendent Levi Bachmeier, is responsible for keeping the Council's priorities connected to a clear, forward-looking vision for education. During this reporting period, the committee intentionally allowed the broader statewide PK–12 Strategic Vision process to advance before undertaking a comprehensive rewrite of the Council's aspirational goals. That sequencing ensures the Council's goals will support—not compete with—the direction North Dakota establishes for its education system.

"This Council is an opportunity for stakeholders from across the state, including legislative and executive branches of government, to truly understand the cross-sections of ND's education environment."
— Dr. Luke Schaefer, Council Chair

Listening Across the State

Superintendent Bachmeier has brought together educators, legislators, community leaders, and other stakeholders to revisit and reauthorize North Dakota's PK–12 Strategic Vision. Community and educator surveys have gathered perspectives on the strengths of the current system, emerging needs, and the knowledge, skills, experiences, and opportunities students will need in the future.

The process recognizes that the future of education cannot be defined by the education system alone. Families, students, policymakers, employers, community leaders, postsecondary institutions, workforce partners, state agencies, and others all share responsibility for preparing young people for what comes next. Their perspectives help ensure the vision is developed with North Dakotans rather than simply for them.

Preparing Students for a Changing Future

The visioning work comes as schools navigate changing student needs, workforce expectations, technology and artificial intelligence, instructional practices, behavioral-health needs, community demographics, and new ways for students to access and demonstrate learning. At the same time, the fundamental responsibility remains constant: every student should have meaningful opportunities to learn, grow, and prepare successfully for life beyond high school.

Alignment Before Revision

Once the renewed PK–12 Strategic Vision is completed, the Aspirational Goals Subcommittee will reconvene and evaluate the Council's existing goals against the new statewide direction. Some goals may remain appropriate; others may need refinement, consolidation, expansion, or replacement. The committee will then revise the Council's aspirational goals so they establish meaningful outcomes, support measurement over time, and help focus the Council's coordination efforts where they can have the greatest impact.

From Vision to Action

This next phase will provide an important bridge between aspiration and action. The statewide vision can define where North Dakota wants to go; the Council's goals can identify the outcomes that deserve sustained attention and coordination. At the center of the work is a question that reaches beyond any single initiative: What do we want for every North Dakota student—not only today, but for the future they will inherit?

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

The right people. The right seats. A shared direction.

COORDINATION IS THE WORK

The right people in the right seats

Meaningful improvement rarely comes from one program, agency, or piece of legislation. It comes when people with different expertise work toward a shared purpose. That is the Council's central role: to coordinate, connect, convene, and help good work move forward.

Across attendance, innovation, successful school practices, statewide supports, and future goals, the Council has consistently found that better outcomes depend on stronger connections among educators, families, policymakers, agencies, tribal partners, communities, and other organizations serving students.

Coordination Is the Work

As the Council reflects on the year, one theme connects every area of work: meaningful improvement does not come from a single program, organization, agency, or piece of legislation. It happens when the right people are connected, their expertise is used well, and their efforts move in a shared direction. That is the central role of the North Dakota K–12 Education Coordination Council—to coordinate, connect, convene, and help good work move forward.

"As a State Senator and member of the K12 Coordination Council it has been a valuable resource to inform my policy making decisions by providing me access to experts in the schools systems across the state."
— Senator Ryan Braunberger

Attendance has shown the need for education, human services, behavioral health, courts, tribal partners, families, and communities to understand their respective roles. The Council's work with successful schools has demonstrated the value of learning directly from practitioners who are producing results. Support & Innovation has reinforced the importance of promising practices that respect local context, while Aspirational Goals is ensuring that future priorities are informed by voices from across North Dakota.

The Right People in the Right Seats

North Dakota does not lack talented people or good ideas. Across the state, educators, leaders, agencies, policymakers, families, and community organizations are doing remarkable work for students. The

opportunity is to connect those people more intentionally, identify where expertise already exists, reduce unnecessary duplication, address genuine gaps, and make successful practices easier to share.

Having the right people in the right seats also means recognizing when another organization is better positioned to lead. Coordination does not require the Council to own every initiative. Often, its greatest contribution is identifying an issue, bringing the appropriate partners together, establishing a common direction, and supporting the people or organizations best equipped to carry the work forward.

Nowhere to Go but Up

There is much to celebrate in North Dakota education, and there is also significant work ahead. Attendance, academic achievement, student engagement, workforce readiness, rapidly changing technology, behavioral-health needs, staffing challenges, and changing expectations will continue to demand thoughtful attention. The Council approaches that work with optimism because North Dakota already has the people, relationships, resources, and capacity to continue improving.

Continuing the Work

The work described in this report is a foundation, not a finish line. Research must lead to discussion; discussion to collaboration; collaboration to thoughtful action; and action to better opportunities and outcomes for students. The Council will continue examining evidence, identifying successful practices, asking difficult questions, strengthening partnerships, reducing duplication, and keeping students at the center of every conversation.

"This is not easy task, to assemble a few times per year and connect online to discuss matters in which no single identifiable solution may be present. Yet, the members continue to work towards improving the system of education in ND so that all students can graduate Choice Ready."
— Dr. Luke Schaefer, Council Chair

The right people are getting on the bus. Our direction is becoming clearer. Together, we will continue moving North Dakota education forward.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU

Recognizing service, leadership, and partnership

The North Dakota K-12 Education Coordination Council extends its sincere appreciation to the members whose terms concluded during the past year. Their leadership, expertise, and commitment have contributed greatly to the work of the Council and to our shared mission of strengthening education across North Dakota.

We gratefully recognize **Marc Bluestone**, Superintendent of New Town School District and Tribal School Representative; **Melissa Vollmer**, Director of Peace Garden Special Education, representing North Dakota's special education units; **Justin Fryer**, Superintendent of Lisbon Public School District, representing the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders; and **Kirsten Baesler**, former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, who now serves as Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to our ex-officio members, whose expertise, guidance, and ongoing support are invaluable. Their willingness to collaborate, provide perspective, and work alongside Council members helps turn ideas into action and keeps our collective efforts moving forward.

A very special thank you is extended to Shawna Marchus for her many years of dedicated support to the Council. Her commitment and assistance have been deeply appreciated and have played an important role in supporting the Council and its work.

We are equally grateful to Jill Schwab, whose guidance, expertise, and steadfast support are a true benefit to everyone who serves on the Council. Her knowledge, perspective, and willingness to assist continue to strengthen both the Council and the important work it undertakes.

To all who have served and supported the Council—thank you for your time, your leadership, your partnership, and, most importantly, your commitment to North Dakota's students, educators, schools, and communities.

CURRENT COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP

North Dakota K-12 Education Coordination Council

Amy De Kok North Dakota School Boards Association	**Angel Lindseth** North Dakota School Counselor Association
Beth Slette Public School Administrator Representative	**Brandt Dick** North Dakota Small Organized Schools
Harlan Johnson North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL)	**Jeremy Mehlhoff** Public School Principal Representative
Dr. Luke Schaefer Regional Education Association Director • Council Chair	**Maria Neset** Governor's Office
Melissa Vollmer Special Education Unit Director Representative	**Nick Archuleta** North Dakota United
Representative David Richter Legislative Management Assembly Member	**Representative Pat Heinert** House Majority Legislative Assembly Member
Sara Medalen Public School Elementary Teacher Representative	**Dr. Sarah Ricks** Public School Secondary Teacher Representative
Senator Donald Schaible Senate Majority Legislative Assembly Member	**Senator Ryan Braunberger** Senate Minority Legislative Assembly Member
Sonia Meehl State Board for Career and Technical Education	**Superintendent Levi Bachmeier** Superintendent of Public Instruction
Tomi Cimarosti Tribal School Representative	