2026 School Leadership Conference

Breakout Session Descriptions, and Bios

Tuesday, September 29 - Day 1 Sessions

SESSION 1: Private School Legal Checkup: New Developments and Recurring Risks

This legal update will review key legal developments affecting private schools, with particular attention to emerging religious liberty issues. The presentation will also address recurring legal questions that school leaders regularly face, including employment matters, student discipline, parent disputes, policies, contracts, and risk management. Attendees will receive practical guidance for planning for and identifying legal issues early and responding in a way that protects the school's mission, community, and legal position.

Presenter: *Sam Nelson, Attorney and Owner*, ***Nelson Law, PLLC***



Bio: Sam Nelson is an attorney and owner of Nelson Law, PLLC. His firm advises private schools and churches on the wide range of legal issues they face, including employee and student issues, governance matters, and policy and contracts. Prior to starting his own law practice, Sam was a partner at a downtown St. Paul firm. Sam lives in Stillwater, MN with his wife and six children.

SESSION 2: Reimagining Enrollment: Data-Driven Strategies for Sustainable Growth

Independent and faith-based schools are navigating shifting demographics, heightened competition, and increasingly discerning families. This session explores how schools can move beyond reactive enrollment tactics toward a sustainable, data-informed enrollment strategy that aligns mission, marketing, admissions, and retention. Participants will examine how to identify enrollment friction points, measure what matters most, and turn insights into action that strengthens both growth and community trust.
Session focus:

- Leveraging enrollment data to inform recruitment and retention strategies
- Using technology to streamline inquiry-to-enrollment workflows
- Benchmarks and KPIs for measurable improvement

Presenters: *Rachael Cramond, Sr. Director of Customer Experience & Christy Frost, Director of Customer & Product Marketing, VenturEd Solutions*



Bio: Rachael is the Director of Customer Experience at VenturEd. She has worked with VenturEd Solutions' products for 11 years at all levels of family and school support, as well as product implementation. She previously worked for 4 years in special education prior to her time at VenturEd Solutions. She lives in the Twin Cities in Minnesota with her husband and two young children. Rachael attended Catholic school and is now a parent of a child in Catholic school.



Bio: Christy Frost, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, brings hands-on experience in both schools and edtech to her work in education marketing. As former Director of Enrollment and Markering for a private K-8 school in Minnesota, she developed a passion for helping schools better support students and families - work she carried into the education technology space. There, she has contributed to solutions addressing student mental health and supporting enrollment in private and independent K-12 schools. Guided byb a committment to mission-driven education, Christy blends strategic marketing expertise with a deep understanding of school communities. Her 25-year career in marketing spans startups and Fortune 500 companies, giving her a broad range of experience and perspective to create meaningful impact.

SESSION 3: Thriving in School Leadership: Protecting Your Well-Being While Leading Others

School leadership is demanding—but it does not have to come at the cost of your well-being. With the right awareness and strategies, it is possible to lead effectively while maintaining energy, clarity, and a strong sense of purpose.

This session focuses on how leaders can recognize early signs of stress and burnout and respond in ways that restore, rather than deplete, their capacity. Participants will explore how leadership strain often shows up in subtle ways—such as decision fatigue, reduced patience, or constant urgency—and how small, intentional shifts can significantly improve day-to-day experience and long-term sustainability.

Rather than adding more to an already full plate, this session offers practical, realistic strategies that help leaders protect their time, energy, and focus. Emphasis is placed on building habits and systems that support both personal well-being and professional effectiveness.

Participants will leave with:

- A clear understanding of how to recognize early signs of burnout
- Practical strategies to maintain energy and focus throughout the school year
- Tools to set boundaries and prioritize what matters most
- A framework for modeling sustainable, healthy leadership within their school communities

Presenters: *Dr. Jules Nolan, CEO and President, LP, Psy.D., NCSP, & Elizabeth Carver, Vice President and Chief of Operations, MSW, LICSW, Phoenix School Counseling*



Bio: Dr. Jules Nolan is a licensed psychologist, and past president of the Minnesota School Psychology Association. Her published works include peer-reviewed articles on classroom behavior, school achievement, student well-being, social/emotional learning, and a college textbook on adolescent development. She is an invited speaker locally, nationally, and internationally on issues of mental health, parenting, and child development.



Bio: Elizabeth Carver has been an integral member of the Phoenix School Counseling team since 2019. She joined the leadership team in 2022, was promoted to Chief of Operations in 2024, and assumed the role of Vice President and Chief of Operations in 2026.

With more than 15 years of experience in educational settings ranging from preschool to higher education, Elizabeth supports leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Her background as a mental health clinician provides a deep skill set focused on children and adolescents, including ADHD, learning differences, behavioral issues, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and family transitions.

Elizabeth earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota and her graduate degree from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She also completed a post-graduate fellowship in child and adolescent mental health at Harvard University.

She is the mother of two children and enjoys training for and running races with her husband and their goldendoodle, Antonio.

Wednesday, September 30 - Day 2 Sessions

SESSION 4: Implementation and Governance Strategies for AI in Education

As AI becomes a powerful force in education, school leaders face real challenges in ensuring its safe, ethical, and effective use. This session will equip you with the tools to confidently navigate AI adoption by guiding you through the process of writing an AI policy, building strong governance, and setting up practical guardrails to protect your school community. You'll learn from real-world examples, discover the essential elements of responsible AI use, and leave with actionable strategies and resources to safeguard students, staff, and data privacy. Join us to build a roadmap for trustworthy, innovative, and well-governed AI in your school

Presenters: *Bob Thompson, President, and Mike Blanchard, Vice President of IT, Canopy IT Solutions*



Bio: Bob is the founder of Canopy IT Solutions. He has 30 years of experience in information technology. Bob won't rest until your business technology needs are met.



Bio: Mike is the VP of IT for Canopy IT Solutions. He has 30 years of experience in information technology.

SESSION 5: The Human Side of Leadership

Leadership is often viewed as a collection of strategies, systems, and skills. Yet the most important tool any leader brings to their work is themselves. In this session, school leaders will explore how self-awareness and character shape trust, relationships, and influence within their schools. Participants will examine the connection between personal growth and leadership effectiveness and consider how their way of being impacts the culture they create. Leaders will leave with a deeper understanding of how leadership begins within and extends outward through every relationship they build.

Presenter: *Paul Meunier, President and CEO, Youth Intervention Programs Association (YIPA)*



Bio: Paul Meunier is a leadership speaker, author, and President and CEO of the Youth Intervention Programs Association (YIPA). Drawing on a background in psychology, youth development, and organizational leadership, he helps leaders understand how self-awareness, character, and human connection shape trust, influence, and organizational culture. Before leading YIPA, Paul spent 17 years as a psychologist and led a multidisciplinary team supporting students with emotional and behavioral challenges in Minnesota's largest school district. His presentations invite leaders to recognize that the journey of leadership begins by leading themselves, because the most important tool they will ever bring to others is who they are.