



Arizona's 2026 IDEA Conference

Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Tuesday, August 18, 2026

Individualized Session Tracks

We are excited to offer conference attendees six session tracks. If you are not sure which session to attend, our key can assist you.

Sessions marked with:



Saguaro: Youth/young adults



Pathway: Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)



Adobe Home: Parents and family members



Desert Wildflower: Early Childhood Special Education professionals



Compass: Special Education Directors



Arizona Sun: Academic and inclusionary practices

7:00–10:30 a.m. | Registration, Welcome, Opening Remarks and Keynote

7:00–8:30 a.m. Registration

Arizona Ballroom Foyer

7:00–8:30 a.m. Breakfast Buffet

Arizona Ballroom

8:30–9:30 a.m. Welcome: Sam Klein, Director of Special Projects, Exceptional Student Services, Arizona Department of Education

Opening Remarks: Alissa Trollinger, Deputy Associate Superintendent, Exceptional Student Services, Arizona Department of Education

Introduction of Keynote Speaker

Arizona Ballroom

9:30–10:30 a.m. Opening Keynote Address

Together We Are Limitless

Jeremy Poincenot

Arizona Ballroom

10:30–10:45 a.m. | Break, Vendor/Exhibitor Hall Open

10:45 a.m.–12:00 p.m. | Concurrent Sessions

First Floor

The S.E.E. Method: Unlocking the Power of Interdependence

What does it actually look like to live out the principles shared in *Together We Are Limitless*? This interactive session explores the S.E.E. Method: Seek Help, Embrace Help, and Extend Help as a practical framework for strengthening relationships, fostering resilience, and creating environments where everyone can thrive. Expect meaningful dialogue, audience participation, and practical takeaways you can immediately apply in your work and life.

Presenter: Jeremy Poincenot

Room: Arizona Ballroom

AI in Special Education: Trends, Cautions, and Practical Guidance for Educators, Leaders, and Families

Artificial intelligence is quickly becoming part of the day-to-day reality of special education. From lesson planning and documentation to parent communication and problem-solving, AI tools are shaping how information is generated, shared, and interpreted. At the same time, these tools raise important questions about accuracy, bias, privacy, over-reliance, and the role of professional judgment in high-stakes decisions affecting students with disabilities.

This session provides a practical, accessible overview of the most relevant AI trends influencing special education today. Participants will examine how educators, leaders, and families are currently engaging in AI, including emerging uses in planning, correspondence, documentation, and support processes. The session will also address a growing challenge: learning to be critical consumers of AI-generated content rather than assuming polished output is accurate, appropriate, or educationally sound. Designed for a broad conference audience, this session emphasizes safe, responsible, and informed use of AI in special education contexts. Participants will leave with a clearer understanding of where AI may be helpful, where caution is warranted, and how to keep human expertise, collaboration, and student-centered decision-making at the center. Because in education, “the computer said so” is not exactly a gold-standard methodology.

Presenter: Dr. James Basham

Room: Vaquero ABC

Solid as a Rock: Structuring Strong SPED Leadership

Building Systems That Stand — From Rural Roots to Urban Impact - This session is about one core belief: When your structures are solid, your leadership can soar. Whether you're leading SPED in a small rural district where you wear 12 hats or in a large urban system with layers of complexity, clear structure and strong processes create stability for students, staff, and families. Training Framework: The 5 Pillars of Rock-Solid SPED Leadership: Pillar 1: The Foundation - Vision and Values Pillar 2: The Framework - Policies, Legal and Compliance Pillar 3: The Clockwork - Timelines and Process Review Pillar 4: The Toolbox - Professional Development that Sticks Pillar 5: The Heart - Inspirational, Steady Leadership.

Presenter: *Melissa McCusker*

Room: Vaquero F1–F2

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Communication Strategies That Reduce Student Anxiety, Avoidance, and Defiance

The influence of both the language we use and our students’ language processing deficits on challenging behaviors is important but often overlooked. In this session, we will review the use of declarative language and visual supports: two low-effort, low-cost strategies that support understanding and executive functions, which can lead to reduced anxiety, defiance, and demand avoidance. Staff can make a big difference by making small changes in the way they present information to students, both verbally and visually. When it comes to challenging behaviors, prevention beats intervention every time.

Presenter(s): Celeste Nameth, Doug Cutler, and Mitch Galbraith

Room: Vaquero G1–G2

Second Floor

Inclusive by Design—From Collaboration to Coherence: High Leverage Practices as the Bridge

This Featured Speaker presentation will explore how *High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities* (HLPs) can transform instruction to ensure success for all learners, including those with varied learning needs. Grounded in evidence-based practices, this session will help participants:

- discover how HLPs—such as collaboration, data-driven planning, and explicit and intensive instruction—can enhance student engagement and improve academic and behavioral outcomes within core instruction.
- unpack the essential principles behind HLPs and learn practical strategies for integrating these practices into everyday classroom routines.
- examine how HLPs serve as a shared language across classrooms, schools, and district systems—strengthen collaboration, support coherence, and ensure inclusive practices are sustainable and scalable.

- explore real-world examples and engage in reflective dialogue to deepen understanding of how HLPs intersect to support all learners.

Participants will leave with actionable tools and resources to strengthen instruction, foster inclusive learning environments, and build a foundation for sustainable improvement across classrooms and schools.

Presenter(s): Dr. Jocelyn Washburn

Room: Arroyo C-E

Accessible Digital Content that Works for Learners with Disabilities

Learn the basics of creating digital documents (Google Docs or Word) that are accessible to students with (and without) disabilities. This session will introduce several fundamental practices, including proper heading structure, meaningful links, and alt text. Leave with new skills for creating accessible content, as well as resources for continued learning.

Presenter(s): Dr. Brenda Smith and Kristen Perez-Rickels

Room: Dunes AB

Healthcare Transition Readiness for Children and Young Adults with Chronic Illness 🏠 🌵

Healthcare transition is a longitudinal process that prepares youth with chronic illness to successfully navigate the adult healthcare system. Ideally, transition planning begins in pediatric care and continues through the initial years of engagement with adult providers. In this session, participants will gain insight into local and national efforts shaping healthcare transition, as well as key challenges, service gaps, and differing expectations across pediatric and adult care systems. This collaborative presentation will also highlight cross-system partnerships and statewide initiatives aimed at improving coordination and streamlining the transition process for youth in our state.

Presenter(s): Vinny Chulani, Kellie Kruger, Matthew Hoerth, and Bethany Brown

Room: Hyatt

Journeys to Independence—Education 🌵

Every education journey looks different—and young adults are leading the way in defining what success means for them. In this session, young adult leaders from Diverse Ability Incorporated share

their experiences navigating education pathways, including college, career training, and other post-secondary options. Panelists will discuss how they chose their paths, accessed support, and developed the self-advocacy skills needed to succeed. Participants will learn about campus resources, planning tools, and strategies that help young adults stay on track and reach their goals. The session emphasizes real stories, practical advice, and empowering approaches to learning and growth. Time will be dedicated to audience participation and Q&A, creating space for meaningful discussion and connection with panelists.

Presenter(s): Diverse Ability Youth Ambassadors

Room: Markland

Mathematical Practices for Empowering Exceptional Learners

This session highlights how the Standards for Mathematical Practice (SMPs) can guide inclusive instruction and support exceptional learners across school, home, and community settings. Drawing on practices such as perseverance, reasoning, modeling, and precision, we connect the SMPs to Universal Design for Learning and strength-based decision-making.

Presenter(s): Eboney McKinney, Marisa Tualla, and Laurel Cherry

Room: Sonoran AB

12:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. | Lunch

1:00–2:15 p.m. | Concurrent Sessions

First Floor

AI in Special Education: Trends, Cautions, and Practical Guidance for Educators, Leaders, and Families (Repeat Session)

Artificial intelligence is quickly becoming part of the day-to-day reality of special education. From lesson planning and documentation to parent communication and problem-solving, AI tools are shaping how information is generated, shared, and interpreted. At the same time, these tools raise

important questions about accuracy, bias, privacy, over-reliance, and the role of professional judgment in high-stakes decisions affecting students with disabilities.

This session provides a practical, accessible overview of the most relevant AI trends influencing special education today. Participants will examine how educators, leaders, and families are currently engaging in AI, including emerging uses in planning, correspondence, documentation, and support processes.

The session will also address a growing challenge: learning to be critical consumers of AI-generated content rather than assuming polished output is accurate, appropriate, or educationally sound.

Designed for a broad conference audience, this session emphasizes safe, responsible, and informed use of AI in special education contexts. Participants will leave with a clearer understanding of where AI may be helpful, where caution is warranted, and how to keep human expertise, collaboration, and student-centered decision-making at the center. Because in education, “the computer said so” is not exactly a gold-standard methodology.

Presenter: Dr. James Basham

Room: Vaquero ABC

Prior Written Notice: Know the Requirements, Meet the Standard

Statewide monitoring data show that Prior Written Notices (PWNs) remain an area of ongoing noncompliance. This session will review PWN requirements and ADE resources. Participants will also explore monitoring data, uncovering common patterns of noncompliance, and examining the root causes behind them. The presentation will include an interactive workshop using real-world scenarios to apply new knowledge. Participants will walk away with a clearer understanding of PWN requirements and resources to support compliant practices.

Presenter(s): Heidi Putnam and Scott Dobkovsky

Room: Vaquero F1–F2

Improving Students’ Ability to Set Goals, Manage Emotions, and Complete Challenging Tasks Using Self-Regulation Instruction and Individualized Supports

Do your students struggle with understanding how to make progress toward a goal? Do they have difficulty managing emotions when they experience challenges? Self-regulation instruction can help. In this session, participants will learn and practice self-regulation instructional activities that support

students in understanding how to set realistic goals and manage their emotional reactions while working toward task completion. Participants will also learn how to embed self-regulation instruction and practice into the five-step intervention cycle, which includes developing behavioral outcomes, benchmarking student progress, and assessing students' growth in self-regulation. Teachers providing self-regulation instruction have observed students' improved ability to monitor their progress toward goals, increased reflection on successes and areas for improvement, and a stronger understanding of the connection between actions and progress (Gaumer-Erickson & Noonan, 2025).

Presenter(s): Elise Heger

Room: Vaquero G1–G2

Second Floor

Inclusive by Design—Instructional Planning Through HLPs

Effective inclusive instruction begins with intentional planning, and *High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities* (HLPs) provide the foundation for designing learning experiences that ensure access, rigor, and meaningful participation for all students. This session will highlight how educators can purposefully collaborate to integrate key HLPs that will create instructional environments where every learner can succeed. In this session, participants will explore:

- how establishing a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment creates the structure and predictability necessary for all students to engage meaningfully in instruction (HLP 7).
- what explicit instruction (HLP 16) can be used to design lessons that scaffold learning, build independence, and promote deep understanding.
- how providing positive and constructive feedback advances learning by supporting clarity, motivation, and continuous academic growth (HLP 8 and 22).
- how using multiple sources of data to inform instruction and interventions supports responsive planning and ensures instruction meets the evolving needs of diverse learners (HLPs 4-6).

Participants will learn practical strategies for integrating these HLPs into daily planning routines, review real examples of inclusive lesson design, and leave with tools to strengthen instructional coherence and elevate learning outcomes across classrooms.

Presenter(s): Dr. Jocelyn Washburn

Room: Arroyo C–E

Closing Gaps & Improving Access to Educational Materials

Discover NCADEMI's Quality Indicators for the Provision & Use of Accessible Educational Materials. Learn how these indicators help SEAs and LEAs plan, implement, and evaluate coordinated systems for accessible materials and technologies. Explore critical components, practical action steps, and resources to strengthen accessibility culture, foster collaboration, and drive immediate improvements.

Presenter(s): Dr. Brenda Smith and Kristen Perez-Rickels

Room: Dunes AB

The Pyramid Model Big 5 Preschool Strategies #1: Use a Five-One Ratio of Positive Attention 🌱

The 5:1 ratio of positive attention is based on research that has shown that children are more successful in preschool settings when adults spend the majority of their time attending to positive behavior and not challenging behavior. Using a five to one ratio of deposits (positive attention) to withdrawals (demands and directions) is one of the big five effective strategies that support social-emotional development and positive child outcomes for our youngest learners. Please join us in this session to learn how to implement a system for ensuring 5 deposits to every 1 withdrawal to create a positive preventative system to support children's growth and social-emotional development.

Presenter(s): Lenka Stogsdill and Priscilla Sachs

Room: Hyatt

Journeys to Independence—Employment and Independent Living 🌵

Every education journey looks different—and young adults are leading the way in defining what success means for them. In this session, young adult leaders from Diverse Ability Incorporated share their experiences navigating education pathways, including college, career training, and other post-secondary options. Panelists will discuss how they chose their paths, accessed support, and developed the self-advocacy skills needed to succeed. Participants will learn about campus resources, planning tools, and strategies that help young adults stay on track and reach their goals. The session emphasizes real stories, practical advice, and empowering approaches to learning and growth. Time

will be dedicated to audience participation and Q&A, creating space for meaningful discussion and connection with panelists.

Presenter(s): Diverse Ability Youth Ambassadors

Room: Markland

Designing Futures: Bringing the Course of Study to Life!

Join the Arizona Department of Education for an engaging professional learning session designed to bring the secondary transition plan's Course of Study to life for students with disabilities. This session goes beyond compliance, offering a clear, practical roadmap for developing a meaningful, individualized course of study that intentionally promotes skill development, readiness, and growth aligned with each student's postsecondary vision. Participants will examine how IEP teams—working collaboratively with school counselors—can design and refine course of study plans that are both student-centered and grounded in graduation requirements, academic pathways, and postsecondary expectations. Emphasis will be placed on integrating counselor expertise in scheduling, credit requirements, career and college planning, and available coursework options to ensure alignment between a student's measurable postsecondary goals and their high school experience. Through real-world examples, collaborative discussions, and guided application, participants will learn how to intentionally connect student schedules, measurable postsecondary goals, and coordinated transition activities into a cohesive plan. The session will highlight how ongoing collaboration between special education teams and school counselors supports courses of study that evolve across grade levels, maximizes available opportunities, and leads to successful, measurable postsecondary outcomes.

Presenter(s): Lisa Livesay and Emily Brown

Room: Sonoran AB

2:15–2:30 p.m. | Break, Vendor/Exhibitor Hall Open

2:30–3:45 p.m. | Concurrent Sessions

ADE Dispute Resolution: Insights Behind the Data

Disagreements in special education are not uncommon, but they do not have to be confusing. This engaging and informative session provides a comprehensive overview of dispute resolution options available under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including facilitated IEP meetings, mediation, state complaints, and due process hearings.

This session will review dispute resolution data and trends while highlighting areas of compliance. Participants will explore the purpose, structure, benefits, and considerations of each option. Through real-world scenarios and guided discussion, attendees will learn how to determine which dispute resolution pathway best fits specific situations while maintaining a focus on collaboration, compliance, and student-centered outcomes.

Effective dispute resolution is not about “winning”; it is about ensuring meaningful educational outcomes for students while maintaining trust, compliance, and professionalism.

Designed for educators, administrators, service providers, and family advocates, this session blends legal clarity with practical application while empowering participants to approach conflict with confidence, strategy, and a sense of possibility.

Presenter(s): Nicole Barnette, Laura Boever, and Jeffrey Studer

Room: Vaquero ABC

Supporting, Supervising, and (Sometimes Investigating) Your Staff

Education leaders strive to improve student outcomes while navigating difficult staffing challenges. Special education administrators must hire, train, and retain diverse professionals, as staff quality directly affects student success. This training focuses on onboarding, mentoring, and retaining skilled staff. Despite best efforts to support staff and focus employees on students' well-being, administrators must also be prepared to handle issues related to staff conduct and professionalism. This training will cover how special education administrators should investigate

concerns and take appropriate disciplinary action, when necessary, to support stronger systems and outcomes.

Presenter(s): Tina Kauffmann and Todd Liolios

Room: Vaquero F1–F2

Be the Thermostat; Keeping your Cool when Behavior Heats Up

Students are presenting themselves with more complex social and emotional needs. It can be difficult to know how to manage and respond to big feelings and big reactions in the classroom and within the school community. This session will explore strategies adults can employ to support their own ability to regulate, relate, and reason in stressful interactions with escalated students. In addition, participants will be able to apply knowledge of brain states to meet students more effectively in the moment and maintain safe environments and positive interpersonal connections.

Presenter(s): Heather Schlemmer and James Schlemmer

Room: Vaquero G1–G2

Second Floor

Work is Possible: Setting a Vision for Employment

Having a real job for real pay brings many benefits, including enhanced community connections and the empowering feeling of working as part of a team. This session will highlight the importance of individuals with disabilities getting the opportunity to explore competitive employment and give families the strategies and tools needed to support their loved ones towards employment success. Topics include an overview of the employment process, tools for making a good job match, and tips on how families can help build work skills.

Presenter(s): Sean Roy and Christopher Tiffany

Room: Arroyo C–E

Overcoming Challenges to Meet Every Student's Needs: Creative Strategies for Small School Districts

Small, rural school districts face distinct challenges in meeting the diverse academic and behavioral needs of students while maintaining a full continuum of services. This interactive session will examine common barriers encountered by small districts, including multi-grade classrooms, limited access to specialized service providers, and the difficulty of sustaining rigorous, engaging curriculum options with constrained resources. Using real-world examples and facilitated discussion, participants will explore innovative, practical strategies for addressing these challenges. Topics will include creative staffing models, flexible scheduling, strategic use of technology, and intentional networking to maximize existing resources and deliver targeted student support. The session will also highlight how small districts can strengthen partnerships with local community organizations, develop cross-curricular instructional teams, and utilize specialized staff in flexible, multi-faceted roles to support inclusive practices. By the end of the session, participants will leave with actionable tools and strategies they can immediately implement in their own settings. Attendees will gain best practices for fostering meaningful teacher collaboration, designing sustainable professional learning opportunities, and cultivating a culture of flexibility, innovation, and shared responsibility. This collaborative workshop will encourage participants to share their own experiences and solutions, creating a dynamic exchange of ideas focused on improving outcomes for students in small school districts.

Presenter(s): Melinda Suarez and Jenny Bellah

Room: Dunes AB

The Pyramid Model Big 5 Preschool Strategies #2: Schedules and Predictability in

Daily Schedules

Developing a daily schedule and directly teaching children what comes next is about maintaining a routine and keeping all of the children informed about the routine. This strategy maximizes children's ability to predict what comes next. In this session, participants will learn environmental and instructional strategies that support young children's development and ability to learn and progress in a preschool classroom.

Presenter(s): Camille Verdugo and Tamara Rosario

Room: Hyatt

Resource Haul: Leveraging Assessment Tools for Effective Secondary Transition Planning

Wakelet collection is a powerful tool for strengthening transition planning and improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Designed for educators, transition specialists, administrators, and agency partners, the session highlights practical strategies and interventions across essential domains, including career exploration, employment preparation, skill development, postsecondary education and training, independent living, accommodations, and health. Attendees will explore how assessment tools—such as age-appropriate transition assessments, work-based learning supports, classroom-ready skill-building materials, and Arizona-specific guidance—can be used to enhance IEP and ECAP development, reinforce Indicator 13 compliance, and support collaborative transition planning. The session incorporates opportunities for active participation through guided demonstrations, optional mini-tasks, and structured discussion prompts designed to help attendees connect the materials to their own practice. Participants will also have dedicated time for reflection and sharing, allowing them to exchange ideas, highlight promising approaches, and consider how to adapt the featured tools for diverse student needs and settings. By the end of the session, participants will walk away with a deeper knowledge of high-value transition resources and a clearer vision for incorporating them into effective, student-centered transition planning.

Presenter(s): Elena Rosenthal and Melissa Wojtak

Room: Markland

Inclusive by Design: Voices from the Field on Co-Teaching, Collaboration, and Instructional Impact

This field-based panel brings together practitioners from schools and districts who are actively designing and implementing inclusive instructional systems. Through diverse examples of UDL implementation, co-teaching models, and collaborative planning, panelists will share how intentional design and teaming structures are supporting access, rigor, and meaningful participation for all learners. The facilitators will highlight how their approaches naturally align with the core principles

behind HLPs: collaboration, data-driven planning, and instructional practices. Panelists include: Amphi School District – districtwide UDL and co-teaching transformation, and Madison School District – co-teaching as a primary instructional model across schools. Participants will explore practical, real-world models of inclusive design and leave with actionable strategies and insights grounded in authentic implementation.

Presenter(s): Chelsey Branham, Rob Wolf, Heidi Edmondson, Edie Dolan, Kim Moran, and Dr. Andrea Wymore

Room: Sonoran AB

Evening Events

Youth/Young Adult Evening Event

Glow Up Your Future is lighting up the 2026 IDEA Conference Youth/Young Adult Evening Event! Dive into a hands-on craft with the Musical Instrument Museum, level up your fun with gaming from the ADE Assistive Technology Loan Library, and experience an exclusive live concert by The Dueling Durkins Band.

Come ready to eat, game, and rock out—this is one night you won't want to miss.

Hosted By: Arizona Department of Education Exceptional Student Services Staff, Musical Instrument Museum, Dueling Durkins Band and ADE Assistive Technology Loan Library

Parent and Family Evening Event

So, what, Now What?: Connecting, Celebrating, and Setting Your Next Steps

After a long day of learning and processing you may be ready for a break. Join us for a fun and interactive opportunity to celebrate your student, connect with other families, and begin setting a vision for your next steps. This session will include information on taking a strengths-based approach to life after high school, embracing competitive employment as part of your student's future, and helping your student gain new experiences and be the driver of their own plan. Woven in will be a chance to share your own experiences with other families. Attendees will be given a short next steps planning tool that will help put into action all the useful information learned at the conference.

Presenter(s): Sean Roy

Room: Vaquero G1–G2