

Speakers Insight & Events

Join us August 18–20, 2026, with Preconference sessions on August 17, at the Grand Hyatt Scottsdale Resort.

Check out this highlight of national speakers and exciting topics for this year's conference.



Keynote Speakers

Brandon Wright

IDEA Legal Keynote Speaker

Brandon K. Wright is an attorney in Illinois who focuses his practice on K-12 special education law, serving as legal counsel to school districts and special education cooperatives throughout Illinois. Brandon spends a significant amount of time providing professional development and continuing education opportunities across the country.



He has trained administrators and teachers about managing legal issues involving students with disabilities and other school law concerns, having presented to educational professionals in 26 states (and counting). Brandon serves on the Executive Committee of the Illinois Council of School Attorneys and is a past Chair. He has previously taught as an adjunct faculty member at Southern Illinois University and Eastern Illinois University.

Jeremy Poincenot

Opening Keynote Speaker

Jeremy Poincenot is a world champion blind golfer and sought-after keynote speaker known for inspiring audiences with his message of resilience and growth. At age 19, he lost his central vision due to a rare genetic disorder (LHON), an experience that initially felt limiting but ultimately became a catalyst for transformation.



With determination and support from his family—especially his father as his guide—Jeremy returned to the game he loved and went on to win three World Blind Golf Championships, nine National titles, and multiple international tournaments. Recognized by CNN as the world's best blind golfer, he has also been honored as the San Diego Hall of Champions Challenged Athlete of the Year. Today, Jeremy travels globally, sharing his story and emphasizing themes like turning adversity into opportunity and the power of interdependence. His powerful message and engaging style have earned him features on major media platforms and speaking engagements with leading organizations such as Aflac, Honda, Kaiser Permanente, and Wells Fargo.

[Stay up-to-date on the IDEA Conference website](#) for announcements. Please [send questions to the IDEA Conference inbox](#).



Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Malcolm Mitchell

Early Childhood Special Education Keynote Speaker

Malcolm Mitchell is a former NFL wide receiver best known for his time with the New England Patriots, where he was part of the team that won Super Bowl LI. After his football career was cut short by injury, Mitchell became a nationally recognized literacy advocate, inspired by his own struggles learning to read as a child.

He founded the Share the Magic Foundation, which promotes youth literacy and access to books through reading events and programs.

Mitchell is also a celebrated children’s book author, with titles including *The Magician’s Hat* and *My Very Favorite Book in the Whole Wide World*, both encouraging a love of reading among young audiences.



Winston Clements

Youth and Family Keynote Speaker

Winston Clements is a global speaker and accessibility consultant with lived experience of Osteogenesis Imperfecta. He helps organizations create inclusive cultures where people with disabilities can thrive, drawing from his background working at major tech corporations.

He is now a trusted advisor for global brands including Google, Disney, Accenture, and Ernst & Young. His work is rooted in lived experience, professional insight, and a deep belief that inclusion must be intentional to be effective. Winston’s keynotes are renowned for their heart, humor, and lasting impact.



Connect with Experts and Innovators



This year's conference will feature **numerous professional learning opportunities**, including IDEA legal issues and updates, instructional practices, national trends and hot topics, special education compliance, preschool special education, secondary transition, and content tailored for related service providers.

Learn with experts from around Arizona:

- Arizona Department of Education/Exceptional Student Services units
- Other Arizona Department of Education teams
- Agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Encircle Families, Diverse Ability Incorporated, Sonoran UCEDD, Arizona school districts, and more
- Session tracks for youths/young adults with disabilities and family members/caregivers
- Community partners and vendor/exhibitor tables



Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Premier Speakers

Dr. Brenda Smith

Dr. Brenda Smith is an Associate Director for the Center for Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE) at the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP) at Utah State University. In her role, she provides technical assistance and facilitation services for contracts with State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies.



She has experience leading several contracts and projects, including Indicator 8 parent surveys, Indicator 14 postsecondary outcomes surveys, and program evaluations. Brenda has stakeholder group facilitation experience at the local, state, and national levels. She has a Ph.D. in Disability Disciplines with a specialization in Disability Studies. Her research includes activism among college students with disabilities and representation of students with disabilities in charter schools compared to traditional public schools. Brenda is also the Principal Investigator for the National Center on Accessible Digital Educational Materials & Instruction (NCADEMI) and provides technical assistance on the provision of accessible digital educational materials and instruction.

Dr. Brianna Soares

Brianna Rose Soares, Ph.D. is an Assistant Research Professor at the Center for Transition and Career Innovation (CTCI) at the University of Maryland. Her research and professional practice focus on secondary transition, self-determination, and interagency collaboration for students with disabilities.



Dr. Soares earned her Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she was a U.S. Department of Education Doctoral Scholar and actively contributed to the CIRCLES project and the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C). Prior to her current role, Dr. Soares served as a special education teacher, transition specialist, and registered behavior technician in both public and private education settings. Her work emphasized inclusive instructional practices, vocational preparation, and person-centered planning for students with extensive support needs. She has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in special education, presented nationally on transition-focused interventions, and contributed to peer-reviewed publications and technical reports on evidence-based practices.



Arizona's IDEA Conference

[Stay up-to-date on the IDEA Conference website](#) for announcements.
Please [send questions to the IDEA Conference inbox](#).



Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Dr. Emily Malouf

Emily is a Research Scholar at Transition Tennessee at Vanderbilt University. In her current role, Emily delivers technical assistance to providers of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and engages in research to improve the quality of Pre-ETS for students across the state.



Prior to her work in Tennessee, Emily received her Ph.D. in Special Education from University of Illinois Urbana – Champaign in 2023 and has over 15 years of experience working with youth, teens, and adults with extensive support needs. Emily has worked in public and non-public schools in Ohio, Illinois, Texas, New York, and California as a teacher and administrator, and her published work broadly focuses on the transition from school to work for individuals with disabilities, with particular interests in self employment, community-based work experiences, and Pre-ETS delivery.

Dr. Magen Rooney-Kron

Dr. Magen Rooney-Kron is an Assistant Professor of Inclusive Education at the University of Missouri- St. Louis (UMSL). As a former high school teacher, Dr. Rooney-Kron is dedicated to preparing educators to support students with disabilities in achieving their post-school goals.



Her work focuses on equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively include students with IDD in high-quality, work-based learning experiences. She also works closely with the Office of Post-Secondary Education (OIPE) at UMSL to expand and enhance college programming for students with intellectual disabilities.

Dr. Hannah Brenner Nieto

Hannah B. Nieto received her Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and is now an assistant professor of special education and special education program director at North Central College in Naperville, IL (a suburb of Chicago). Previously, Hannah was a high school special education teacher in Chicago Public Schools focused on providing high-quality transition experiences for students with extensive support needs.



Hannah’s research is centered on promoting effective and inclusive community-based work experiences for students with extensive support needs that contribute to positive employment outcomes. She is particularly interested in paraprofessionals’ growing role in job coaching and how school districts can train and supervise paraprofessionals to effectively prepare students for competitive, integrated employment.



Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Dr. James Basham

James D. Basham, Ph. D., is a Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Kansas. His research is focused on developing future-ready learning environments that are beneficial and meaningful for all learners, especially those with disabilities.

His research focuses on how the design and innovative technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), impact human progress. He has received and managed over \$30 million in externally funded research and technical assistance projects, including the Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning (CIDDL). He is well published, has given hundreds of talks, and serves on various national and international boards for journals, companies, and educational organizations.



Dr. Jocelyn Washburn

Jocelyn Washburn, Ph.D., is a Co-Director of the KU Center for Research on Learning, Assistant Research Professor, and Director of Professional Development. She provides leadership to the international network of Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) Professional Developers.

Her research focuses on adolescent literacy, evidence-based practices, professional learning models, and educator collaboration. Dr. Washburn has been a special education teacher, instructional coach, district literacy coordinator, and regional technical assistance coordinator. Her career has been dedicated to the use of evidence-based, inclusive practices to support students with and without disabilities with an emphasis on adolescent literacy.



Kristen Perez-Rickels

Kristen Perez-Rickels is a Technical Assistance Specialist at the Center for Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE) and supports the National Center on Accessible Digital Educational Materials & Instruction (NCADEMI). Kristen holds a master’s degree in special education, a master’s degree in School Psychometry, and graduate certificates in Secondary Transition and Applied Behavior Analysis.

Kristen’s work includes the implementation of behavioral and academic interventions, identification of students with disabilities, and systems integration. Before joining TAESE, Kristen worked at the Oklahoma State Department of Education as the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) Project Director and Behavior Specialist.



Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Dr. Makenzie Allison

Dr. Makenzie Allison is an Assistant Research Professor at the University of Maryland Center for Transition and Career Innovation, where her work focuses on strengthening alignment across education, vocational rehabilitation, and community systems to improve employment and independent living outcomes for youth with disabilities.



With over 15 years of experience spanning direct service, independent living, and vocational rehabilitation, she brings both field-based expertise and a system-level perspective to her work. She contributes to national initiatives through the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C) and supports the implementation of systems change grants across states. Dr. Allison's research examines how leadership is experienced within public-sector organizations, particularly in relation to employee engagement and innovation. She is known for translating research and policy into practical, actionable strategies that support meaningful and sustainable change.

Dr. Terrance M Scott

Terrance M. Scott is a Professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville where he directs both the Center for Instructional and Behavioral Research in Schools and the Kentucky Reading Research Center.



Having received his PhD. in Special Education as the University of Oregon in 1994 (with an emphasis on emotional and behavioral disorders), Dr. Scott has over 100 publications, including five books, on a variety of issues in the areas of behavioral disorders and behavioral support systems. He is a frequent speaker, having conducted well over 1000 presentations and training activities and has been an invited speaker throughout the U.S. and numerous countries around the world. He is the recipient of national awards for research and leadership in the area of behavioral disorders and has career grant funding of over \$45 million. His research interests focus on school-wide prevention systems, the impact of effective instructional practices, managing student behavior, and scientific research in education.

Hot Topics

What's Trending in Special Education? Explore the key topics, strategies, and innovations shaping the future of support for students with disabilities.

- **Academic Achievement:** Literacy, Mathematics, and Science Instruction
- **AI & Assistive Technology:** AI & Digital Accessibility; Assistive Technology; AAC
- **Behavior Supports:** Proactive Behavior Strategies; Self-Regulation and Executive Functioning
- **Early Childhood:** Preschool Special Education Inclusion; Pyramid Model Practices
- **Family Partnerships:** Family Engagement; Collaborative IEP Planning
- **Inclusive Practices:** UDL & Co-Teaching; High-Leverage Practices (HLPs)
- **Secondary Transition Student Self-Advocacy & Independence:** Student Leadership; Self-Determination; Supported Decision-Making; Secondary Transition Planning
- **Systems and Leadership:** IDEA Compliance & Accountability; SPED Leadership; Data-Driven Decision Making
- **Secondary Transition & Employment:** School-to-Work Pathways; Career & Postsecondary Readiness



Stronger Systems, Better Outcomes—for Every Student

Exciting Spotlights

Secondary Transition Services Awards

Join ADE/ESS in recognizing a youth/young adult, a community member, and educators for their secondary transition contributions and successes.

★ Awards will be presented on the morning of Wednesday, August 19.

Student and Young Adult Art Exhibit

ADE/ESS is proud to display unique works of art created by talented Arizonan students (preschool through high school) and young adults (up to 22 years of age) during the 2026 IDEA Conference.

Featured art created by Sydney Schelper, age 19
“Winter Storm Falling”, Ironwood Ridge High School



Individualized Session Tracks

This year, we are excited to offer conference attendees three session tracks. If you are not sure which session to attend, our key can assist you!

Sessions marked with:

-  Saguaro are recommended for youth/young adults.
-  Pathway indicate a Pre-ETS session.
-  Adobe Home are recommended for parents and family members.
-  Desert Wildflower are recommended for Early Childhood Special Education professionals.
-  Compass are recommended for Special Education Directors.
-  Arizona Sun with Connected Rays indicate Inclusive by Design track.

Evening Events

Tuesday, August 18

Youth and Young Adult Event:
Glow Up Your Future

2:30–6:30 p.m. | Arizona Ballroom
Featuring: Musical Instrument Museum and
The Dueling Durkins Band

Parent and Family Event
4:00–6:30 p.m. | Vaquero G1-G2
Featuring: Sean Roy

Wednesday, August 19

Networking Reception and
Raffle Drawing

4:00–6:30 p.m. | Arizona Ballroom



Sean Roy

Sean Roy is the Chief Innovation and Training Officer for TransCen Inc. In this position he works to provide training and technical assistance to states, employment professionals, and schools, leading to improved success for individuals with disabilities who are transitioning from school into the workforce and life in the community.

Roy is an experienced curriculum developer, writer, trainer, and presenter, often being asked to speak to professionals and families about issues of employment, accessing postsecondary education, and promoting family involvement in employment and transition planning. Sean draws from previous experience as Co-Director of PACER’s National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, as well as being a sibling of an adult with autism.

