

2026 IDEA Leadership Preconference

Designed for Arizona's special education leaders, the IDEA Leadership Preconference is your opportunity to collaborate, learn, and lead alongside peers who are shaping the future of special education across the state.



Schedule of Events

Location: Vaquero ABC

12:00–1:00 p.m.

Registration and Lunch

1:00–1:15 p.m.

Welcome

1:15–2:30 p.m.

Leading AI in Special Education: Legal, Ethical, and System-Level Decisions for Responsible Implementation

2:30–2:45 p.m.

Break with Snacks and Drinks

2:45–4:00 p.m.

A Leadership Lens—Director Perspectives on Policy, Practice, and Progress

4:00–4:15 p.m.

Break

4:15–5:15 p.m.

Connecting Leaders: A Networking Reception & Roundtable Experience



2026 IDEA Leadership Preconference: Premier Speaker and Session Description

James D. Basham, Ph. D

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.



Leading AI in Special Education: Legal, Ethical, and System-Level Decisions for Responsible Implementation

Artificial intelligence influences special education practice across school systems, often faster than policies, procedures, and leadership guidance can keep up. Educators are using AI to support planning, documentation, communication, and intervention design, while families are increasingly using AI to generate complaints, requests, and formal correspondence. As a result, special education leaders face a pressing challenge: how to respond proactively, responsibly, and legally in a rapidly changing landscape.

This interactive leadership session examines the legal, ethical, privacy, and security implications of AI use in special education systems. Participants will explore how AI may support efficiency and problem-solving, the risks posed by misuse or over-reliance, and what leaders should consider when developing policies, procedures, and implementation expectations for their schools or districts. The session emphasizes practical decision-making, helping leaders distinguish between productive uses of AI and uses that may compromise professional judgment, student privacy, procedural integrity, or trust with families. Participants will leave better prepared to guide staff, communicate with stakeholders, and build local systems that support safe and effective AI use in special education.



2026 IDEA Leadership Preconference:

Session Descriptions

A Leadership Lens—Director Perspectives on Policy, Practice, and Progress

Alissa Krantz, Director of Special Education, Glendale Union High School District

Melissa McCusker, Director of Student Support Services, Deer Valley Unified School District

Corey Montaño, Director of Exceptional Student Services, Dysart Unified School District

Maria Rosetti, Director of Special Education, Horizon Honors Schools

This preconference panel discussion is designed for special education leaders navigating increasingly complex legal, instructional, and relational demands. Panelists will explore critical and emerging topics shaped by participant input and perspectives. Grounded in current legal expectations and the practical realities of leadership, participants will engage in structured dialogue, applied problem-solving, and reflective practice alongside experienced directors and thought leaders.

This immersive learning experience is designed to foster meaningful collaboration, spark innovative practices, and strengthen leadership capacity. Participants will leave with actionable strategies, new perspectives, and a stronger professional network—equipping them to lead with clarity, confidence, and a forward-thinking vision for sustainable systems of support.

Connecting Leaders: A Networking Reception & Roundtable Experience

Join peers who are shaping the future of special education in Arizona for an evening of connection, conversation, and collaboration. This networking reception and roundtable session brings together leaders from districts and regions across the state to exchange ideas, discuss shared challenges, and explore effective strategies that support strong programs and positive student outcomes. Designed for both new and veteran leaders, this collaborative space encourages relationship-building, candid dialogue, and practical learning you can take back to your district.

Special Thanks to:

Maura Ingle, Tina Kauffmann, Alissa Krantz, Jeffrey Meeks, Corey Montaño, Heidi Sinkovic, and Vicki Trujillo.

