



Director's Message

As we move through spring, leaving a cold, icy, snowy, windy winter behind, I'm amazed at how active our programs have been! This month's newsletter highlights the strong momentum across our programs, partnerships, and communities. From conference leadership to hands-on student experiences, our teams continue to show what it means to serve rural students with purpose and care.

Students have been exploring new opportunities from YES Scholars touring engineering programs across the state to Robbinsville High School's first ACT Week. In Avery County, adviser Fitz Fitzgerald is helping students build community through service, and our L.E.A.D Scholars are nearing the completion of their yearlong leadership journey as they work toward the NCCEP Youth Leadership Summit.

We're also celebrating major student achievements, including two Freedom High School seniors earning full-cost scholarships to App State, an inspiring reminder of the impact of programs like GEAR UP and Advise NC.

Our educator-focused initiatives continue to grow as GREAT STEM teachers earn new micro-credentials, the Learning in the Professions team presents research nationally, and eight new micro-credentials are now available through Digital Promise. Across our On Ramp partnerships, students are connecting with local workforce leaders, preparing for summer programs, and the Upward Bound team is planning for another meaningful Summer Academy. The GEAR UP Higher Education Network also gathered to strengthen support for students from middle school through their first year of college.

We are proud of our colleagues as well! Nancy Mangum and Theresa Gibson led sessions at NCTIES, and Corinne Smith was elected to the NCCEP Board of Directors. As we look ahead, several grant proposals are under review, and we are pleased to share that we have been awarded an international college access research opportunity in Taiwan. This is an exciting step that reflects the growing reach and relevance of our work. The mission of ORP continues, and we are far from finished. We remain grateful for the opportunity to work alongside so many dedicated partners, and we thank you for all you do to lift students and strengthen our communities!

- **Jim Beeler**,
Executive Director- Office of Rural Promise

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Employee Spotlights

Let's get to know **Brittany Brady**, GEAR UP Academic Innovation Specialist!

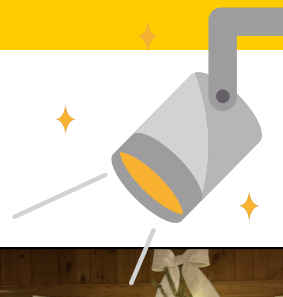
How long have you worked with ORP? *I started with ORP in August of 2023.*

What's your favorite book/movie/album/song? Pick one and explain why. *I'm an avid reader and have my emotional support Kindle with me everywhere I go. I cannot pick a favorite book, but my favorite series is the Throne of Glass series by Sarah J. Maas because the main female character moves from a mindset of survival and suppression to healing, acceptance, and power.*

What would your perfect/ideal day look like? *My ideal day is sleeping late, binge-reading with all the snacks, tons of snuggles from my three daughters, going out to dinner so I don't have to do the cleanup, and an early bedtime!*

What fictional place would you like to visit? *Terrasan...duh! ❤️*

What's something you'd like to do that you've never done? *If I could do anything, it would be to rent a large RV and go on a cross-country road trip with my family, visiting all the quirky monuments and National Parks.*



Brittany and her 3 daughters.

Let's get to know **Ginger Powell**, ORP Program Support Specialist!

How long have you worked with ORP? *One year and a few months now.*

What's your favorite book/movie/album/song? Pick one and explain why. *My favorite book is Redeeming Love - Lots of grace and understanding is extended in this love story.*

What would your perfect/ideal day look like? *Blue skies, sunshine and hike to the Moses Cone Fire Tower or a sunny day on the beach.*

What fictional place would you like to visit? *No idea, I'm too practical.*

What's something you'd like to do that you've never done? *Start a small business...?*



Ginger and her family

APPSTATE NC Rural Education Collaborative

NCTIES Conference

Nancy Mangum and Theresa Gibson led two sessions during the NCTIES Conference this month. Representing the NC Rural Education Collaborative, their leadership presentations focused on how to provide productive feedback and ways to effectively use AI. Read more about their sessions below:

Balancing Care and Candor: Do you find yourself having the same conversations over and over with no change? Are you struggling with giving good feedback to your teachers? Great leaders know that feedback isn't just a task—it's a game-changer. During this interactive session, you'll dive into Radical Candor and learn how to deliver feedback that inspires trust and sparks growth.

Mixtape Leadership: AI Tools for Rocking Your School - Leadership is like mixing the ultimate 80's mixtape—lots of pieces, all needing attention. AI can help you hit play on efficiency, streamlining tasks and uncovering insights so you can focus on growing teachers and students. During this hands-on session you will experience the totally awesome power of AI as you explore new tools and we share ideas for using tools and leave you rocking out your leadership tasks and feeling rad!



Corinne Smith Elected to Board of Directors for NCCEP

Corinne Smith, director of Appalachian GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) and deputy director of the Office of Rural Promise, has been elected to serve a three-year term on the NCCEP (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships) Board of Directors as Partnership Constituent Director. NCCEP is the national association for GEAR UP and works to support the mission of programs around the country.

As the only GEAR UP partnership grant board member, Corinne was elected by her peers to help shape the future of NCCEP while amplifying the mission of GEAR UP nationwide. Joining a group of 11 highly distinguished national education leaders, Corinne expressed her deep gratitude for the opportunity and is excited to serve GEAR UP in this new capacity.

“I’m honored to have the trust of the national GEAR UP community to serve on the board—especially at such a critical time when we must demonstrate excellence, prove our impact, and mobilize together. I look forward to uplifting the voices from across the GEAR UP community to advance NCCEP’s mission – a mission I am deeply committed to – in ways that keep students first and strengthen our collective efforts,” said Smith. Read the full article [here](#).



Corinne Smith (left) pictured with NCCEP President, Alex Chough (right) at 2025 NCCEP Annual Conference

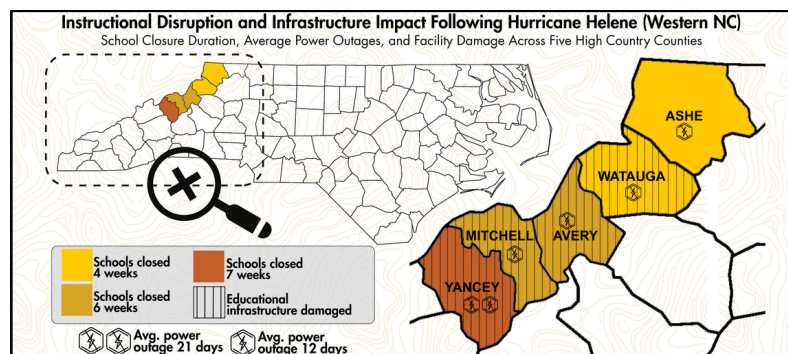
Echoes from the Mountains: Strengthening Student Resilience Post-Helene

Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina in September 2024, prompting the launch of the Western North Carolina Research for Recovery and Resilience (WNC R3) initiative. WNC R3 connects expertise across environmental, health, infrastructure, cultural, and socioeconomic sectors to support both immediate recovery and long-term resilience. The WNC Resilience Projects highlight how this work is moving forward in partnership with communities across the region.

One of these efforts, **Echoes from the Mountains**, addresses the often unseen impact of the storm on students. In Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey counties, schools were closed for weeks, and prolonged power outages disrupted learning and stability. Research shows that adversity—especially for students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—can significantly hinder academic success and well-being.

Echoes responds by equipping 40 middle-grades ELA teachers with an evidence-based, arts-focused professional development program that strengthens their own resilience and prepares them to lead healing-centered writing practices in their classrooms. This approach helps students process trauma, rebuild belonging, and regain confidence.

The project underscores a core WNC R3 principle: recovery isn’t complete when buildings reopen, but when students are ready to thrive again. This work was made possible through funding from the NC General Assembly via the NC Collaboratory.



L.E.A.D Cohort Check-In

It's hard to believe that our current cohort of L.E.A.D Scholars are already about to graduate from the program! It's been amazing to see how these students have grown in their leadership skills since the Gather-Connect kick off event in December.

At December's event, students met with one another for the first time, participated in team-building activities, and helped assemble water filters for Boone nonprofit Wine to Water.

L.E.A.D Scholars participated in their second Gather-Connect event in February. Students met in Asheville at A-B Tech for a day of leadership activities and motivational speaking led by Joshua Perez and Jonathan Medina of Top School Speakers.

Now, students are working hard to earn credits for the opportunity to attend the NCCEP Youth Leadership Summit in July.

To learn more about the current L.E.A.D Cohort, click [here](#).



Snapshots from this semester's L.E.A.D events

RTLN West March Session

The current RTLN West cohort met in March in Asheville for the third of five face-to-face sessions. The event was led by Nancy Mangum and Theresa Gibson, two of the newest staff members to join ORP as co-directors of the NC Rural Education Collaborative. The cohort is currently in the middle of the year-long program centered around a four-strand learning arc designed to cultivate opportunity, equity, and leadership within rural schools. Through the Opportunity and Access strand, participants will explore what it means to ensure every student has equal pathways to success. The Student-Centered Approaches strand will empower teachers to implement resilience-based practices that build awareness, engagement, and belonging while honoring the assets students bring to the classroom. Within the Policy strand, educators will deepen their understanding of how laws, funding, and governance shape rural education by examining state and federal legislation, conducting policy analysis, and developing actionable advocacy plans. Finally, the Teacher Leadership strand will support participants in defining their spheres of influence, leading professional learning in their districts, and building a connected network of educators committed to advancing opportunity and access for all rural students across western NC.



Summer Academy Prep Underway

The planning for Upward Bound Summer Academy 2026 is well underway, and the UB team is looking forward to hosting scholars on the campus of Appalachian State University in just a few months.

Summer Dates:

June 14-26: Rising seniors summer program on campus

June 27- July 1: Class of 2026 graduate trip to Washington DC

July 5- July 24: Rising 10th & 11th grade summer program on campus

UB Seniors Reflect on the Program

Current Upward Bound seniors recently shared essays on *What Upward Bound Means to You*. Here are a few excerpts from their submissions:

“At first, it just felt like something new to try, but it ended up doing more for me than I expected. I got to travel and visit different colleges, which made everything feel more real instead of just something I thought about. Walking around campuses and seeing actual students there made me start thinking, maybe I could do this too.”

- Alexis Nuevo, Alleghany HS

“How has Upward Bound impacted me? It made me braver, bolder, smarter. It gave me direction while trying to find my passion. But more than anything, I made friends. Not just acquaintances, but the kind of people you want to grow for. And I think that will stay with me longer than anything else.”

- Hafize Bonilla, Alleghany HS

“As the time approaches for my graduation and last summer with UB, I’ve begun to grasp the fact that this was more than just a summer camp. It was an opportunity filled with endless possibilities that allowed me to learn more about myself and what I can accomplish by branching outside of my comfort zone. I’ve learned more about myself at camp, while prepping for my future, and for that, I thank everyone who pushed me to explore and try new things.”

- Keyleigh Arias, Alleghany HS

“During the duration of my time with UB, I have gone from not knowing what I’m going to do in the future to having multiple acceptance letters from universities and having the opportunity to get big scholarships. I would just like to say thank you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to grow into myself. Thank you for the friendships I hope will last forever and thank you for believing in me even when I didn’t believe in myself.”

- Ka'Maya Shelton, West Wilkes HS

“UB does really impact you, it really helped me become less scared of going into college because we got to experience a little of how it's going to be when we go to college. Also helping me with my college essay was really helpful... That college essay got me into 7 different schools which is amazing.”

-Marlene Alcaraz-Galan, Watauga HS



YES Staff Retreat in California

Carly and Susan traveled to Los Angeles to connect, plan, and enjoy in-person time with their YES colleagues from LA and New York City in March. For some staff members it was the first time meeting face-to-face.



YES team met in Los Angeles with other staff from around the country

Winter Break Fun

Four high school and eleven middle school YES Scholars hit the slopes of Hawks Nest in January to reunite before classes started back. It was a beautiful evening, and everyone had a fantastic time with no injuries.



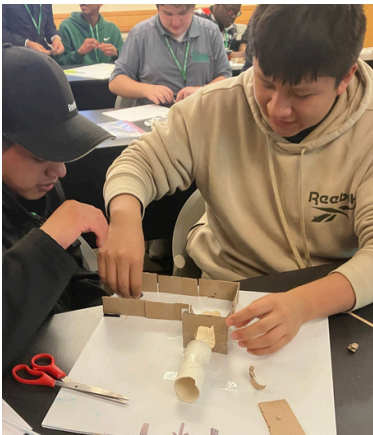
YES Students enjoy time together over the holiday break

Focused on Engineering

YES Scholars took six high school students from Ashe County High School and Ashe Early College on an overnight trip to visit several engineering colleges. After school on Thursday, February 26, the group traveled to UNC Chapel Hill for dinner with three YES Scholars who are current students. After dinner, they walked to the Well, where the college scholars shared their experiences transitioning from Ashe and Watauga Counties to campus life and how they are making the most of their time there. Yes—at least one scholar has spotted Bill Belichick on campus!

The trip was planned around [NC State's Bits and Bytes](#) program for high school students on Friday morning, February 27. The program began at 8:30 a.m. at the Hunt Library, where students could watch a [BookBot](#) retrieve a bin of books for staff. Students then rotated through two engineering challenges and participated in a valuable small-group Engineering Admissions session. The Egg Drop and Maze challenges highlighted different aspects of the Engineering Design Process and were both fun and engaging.

From Raleigh, they traveled to Durham for a tour of the university's Pratt School of Engineering, beginning at the Teer Engineering Building. Despite the drizzle, two current Duke students provided a thorough tour of the engineering student experience. As scholars moved between buildings, they discussed and compared what Duke and NC State offer, their admissions processes, and what college might look like for students from Ashe Early College. Scholars headed home for the weekend with plenty to consider!



Snapshots from the YES tour of engineering colleges

APPSTATE

Advise NC

Robbinsville HS ACT Week

Reagan Ditmore, Next Step Adviser at Robbinsville High School, recently organized their school's first ACT Week, a week of fun, team-based games and challenges to help juniors study for the upcoming ACT.

Students split up into teams and participated in games such as *human graph day*, where students read a scientific graph and then recreated the graph on the gym floor with their teammates. Another game had students compete in a math-based basketball game, where students solved math problems to be able to shoot free throws.

"The students really enjoyed participating in ACT Week," Reagan said. "Students said it was a fun way to review test questions."



Students engage in ACT Week activities at Robbinsville HS

Now Hiring Next Step Advisers

Advise NC at App State is currently hiring for multiple adviser positions in the following counties: Cleveland, Transylvania, Madison, and Graham. As members of a statewide movement, advisers will help students in these rural, under-served Appalachian communities realize their dreams of achieving their next steps.

To learn more or to share this job posting with interested candidates, click [here](#).



Next Step Adviser Builds Community Through Service

As the Next Step Adviser for Avery County, Fitz Fitzgerald helps Williams Academy students plan for life after high school—whether that means college, the military, or entering the workforce. But his role is unique: Williams Academy serves the residential students of Crossnore Communities for Children, one of North Carolina’s most respected foster care organizations, known for prioritizing students’ well-being and emotional growth.

Fitz quickly realized his work needed to go beyond traditional advising. Wanting students to feel connected to the wider community, he spent months brainstorming before partnering with Feeding Avery Families. He began bringing a group of eight students to volunteer, stocking shelves and packing food boxes. The impact was immediate. Students’ moods lifted, their confidence grew, and they recognized the deeper meaning of their work—helping feed their neighbors.

Volunteering soon became a highlight of their week. One student shared, “I genuinely had a good time and I really appreciate Mr. Fitz for taking us to do this.”

As his seniors prepare to leave Avery County, Fitz hopes they carry this lesson with them: wherever they go, find a community—and contribute to it. Read the full story [here](#).



Students volunteer with Feeding Avery Families

Burke County Best Friends Receive Full-Ride Scholarship

Two Freedom High School seniors, Jacorian Logan and Nathaniel Surratt, have earned four-year, full-cost Murray Family ACCESS Scholarships to attend Appalachian State University this fall. The lifelong best friends met jointly with Burke County’s Next Step Adviser, Anson Gagnier, to plan their post-graduation paths and discovered the ACCESS program, which supports Pell-eligible students and has already helped more than 400 App State students graduate debt-free.

Both students plan to pursue nursing and aim to earn their Bachelor of Science in Nursing degrees in 2030. Their interest in health care was sparked during a campus visit to App State’s health sciences building, organized by Burke County GEAR UP Coordinator Kim Logan. She describes the pair as academically gifted leaders with a genuine passion for helping others.

For Anson, helping students access life-changing opportunities like this scholarship is at the heart of his work, and seeing students’ futures open up continues to motivate him.



Freedom High School seniors served by GEAR UP and Advise NC receive Murray Family ACCESS Scholarship to Appalachian State

**SAVE
THE DATE**

**GEAR UP Academic
Innovation Conference**
June 9-10, 2026

▶ READ MORE

To learn more about publications & presentations by ORP staff members, visit our [Impact](#) webpage.



**Subscribe to the Rural Education
Collaborative Newsletter**

**SAVE
THE DATE**

ETL’s Empower EDU Conference:
June 16-17, 2026
Greensboro, NC

APPSTATE

Learning in the Professions

Empower EDU Conference

Registration is now open for the Empower EDU Conference in Greensboro, NC on June 16-17. This landmark gathering of K12 educators, school leaders, and researchers is the first event of its kind in North Carolina dedicated to scaling self-directed learning (SDL) and micro-credentials to transform classrooms and districts. Whether you are a classroom teacher, a district administrator, or a policy expert, this event offers a unique opportunity to immerse yourself in the ETL (Empower Teacher Learning) framework and gain practical tools that you can implement in the upcoming year. Learn more [here](#).

Conference Presentations

The Learning in the Professions team has been busy preparing and presenting their research at state, local, and national conferences and convenings. Here is a sampling of recent presentations:

International Society for Self-Directed Learning (ISSDL) Symposium | February 18-20 in Cocoa Beach, FL | Presenters: Rachel Shepherd, Sherry Paddie, Tyrel Winebarger | Title: Teachers as Navigators: Cultivating Self-Directed Learning in Post-Disaster Contexts Through the Innovation Cohort

2026 Digital Credentials Summit | February 17-20 in Philadelphia, PA | Presenter: Heather Childress | Title: Write Together: A Collaborative Model for Micro-credential Development

North Carolina Association for Research in Education (NCARE) | February 26-27 in Greensboro, NC | Presenters: Erin West & Rachel Shepherd | Title: Empowering Rural Schools Through Research-Practice Collaboration

(Upcoming) American Educational Research Association (AERA) | April 8-12 in Los Angeles, CA | Presenters: Tyrel Winebarger, Jason Snyder, Erin West, Rachel Shepherd | Title: Psychometric Evaluation of the Self-Directed Learning Instrument Among Rural Middle School Teachers

GREAT STEM Update

Our GREAT STEM educators are demonstrating exceptional commitment to professional growth, having already successfully earned 17 microcredentials this academic year! This impressive milestone highlights the dedication and expertise within our teaching community.

Innovation Cohort Event Recap

On March 12th, the ETL Innovation Cohort, a group of 37 innovative teacher leaders with experience in self-directed learning, gathered for their third and final face-to-face session at UNC Asheville. Since July, they have engaged in this blended program designed to support teachers in incorporating student self-directed learning into their classroom instruction. The program combines asynchronous micro-credentials with Navigator coaching to support teacher development, utilizing three face-to-face learning sessions focused on the 5-step self-directed learning process for students and developing their teacher leadership skills. The Innovation Cohort has provided an opportunity for educators across Western NC to collaborate with colleagues across the region to build a network of support to better serve all students.

Micro-Credentials Published

Learning in the Professions has eight new micro-credentials available publicly on the Digital Promise platform. Seven of these were developed by the ETL PRIME cohort, led by ETL Navigator Heather Childress. This group of former ETL and GREAT STEM participants submitted proposals for content-specific micro-credentials and were selected to write as part of the initial cohort. Topics range from outdoor learning to self-checking in math to trauma-informed practice and are available as part of the [ORP catalog](#) on Digital Promise.

The screenshot shows the Digital Promise interface. At the top, there are links for 'Terms of Use' and 'Help Center', and buttons for 'Explore' and 'Sign In or Sign Up'. A sidebar on the left contains navigation options: Overview, Details, Research & Resources, Submission & Evaluation, and Issuing Organization. The main content area displays the title 'Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn: Identifying and Supporting Students in a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom'. Below the title is a 'Free' label and an 'Apply' button. To the left of the 'Apply' button is a thumbnail for the 'Appalachian Office of Rural Promise' (ORP) logo. Below the thumbnail is a brief description: 'Educator identifies and supports students to create and promote a trauma-sensitive classroom.' At the bottom, there is a small logo for the 'Office of Rural Promise' and the text 'Supporting Students in a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom'.



On Ramp Workforce Breakfast

A-B Tech Community College held the On Ramp Junior Workforce Connections Breakfast on February 26th as part of a new initiative developed with Madison High School – “STEPS” (Strategic Transition and Exploration for Postsecondary Success). Through STEPS, A-B Tech staff, in collaboration with various partners, provided every Madison High School student with grade-level programming to support their next steps after graduation. The breakfast, hosted by A-B Tech Madison and beautifully prepared by local small business Highland Station, gave Madison High juniors the opportunity to engage directly with local workforce leaders, ask questions about their unique paths to success, and connect with opportunities and ideas beyond typical classroom and career fair offerings. This dynamic experience helps equip students to make positive and purposeful decisions about their future and to ultimately lead successful lives after high school.

On Ramp Summer Experience Planning Underway

In summer of 2026, rising juniors and rising seniors will be welcomed to the campuses of the four On Ramp community college partners for Summer Fast Lanes and Summer Bridge opportunities. Summer Fast Lanes are short experiential camps over two days showcasing work opportunities in the region available through pathways at the community college. Summer Bridge provides a transitional experience for graduating seniors in high school to be welcomed into the community college. Students will be taking a college level course, receive mentoring from workforce partners, and uncover the resources available to them as they begin their college journey.

On Ramp Coordinators at AB Tech, SCC, WPC, and WCC are diligently organizing and planning and are ready to welcome students as summer arrives.



Madison High School students attend workforce breakfast last month

Student-Ready Strategies Journey Workshop

On March 5th & 6th at the campus of UNC-Asheville, the GEAR UP Higher Education Network met with Student Ready Strategies. As a first-step in a multi-year journey, it was an excellent opportunity to connect with higher education professionals across the region and to start building out plans for the future. Over two days, participants explored the journey of GEAR UP students from middle school, through high school, and into the first year of college. They identified challenges students face and opportunities our institutions have to engage with them at every step along that journey. We look forward to meeting again in the fall.



Student-Ready Strategies meeting in March at UNCA