

Appalachian

STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Rural Promise



Director's Message

As I read this summer's newsletter updates, I'm reminded of just how much energy, creativity, and commitment flows through the Office of Rural Promise. While many places on campus slow their pace during this season, ORP remains full speed ahead. Every team has been hard at work this summer, and the collective impact is easy to see.

We're welcoming new colleagues, celebrating meaningful milestones, and expanding initiatives that strengthen opportunities for rural students and educators. The arrival of new leadership within the Rural Health Transformation Project (RHTP) marks an exciting step in our growing efforts to support regional workforce and education pathways. At the same time, our programs have been deeply engaged in summer learning whether through academic enrichment, college exploration, hands-on career experiences, or statewide convenings that bring educators together to share ideas and build capacity.

What stands out most in this newsletter is the sense of momentum. Our students are stepping into leadership roles, our educators are innovating, our advisers are preparing for a new school year, and our partners are working alongside us to build stronger pathways for rural learners. It's clear that ORP is not just growing, we're evolving in ways that deepen our impact and strengthen the communities we serve.

Thank you for everything you do. I'm proud of this work and proud to be in it with you!

- Jim Beeler,
Executive Director- Office of Rural Promise

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Employee Spotlights

Let's get to know **Clayton Craft**, Senior Accountant for GEAR UP & On Ramp Appalachia!

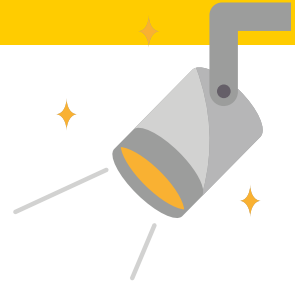
How long have you worked with ORP? *I started in December of 2020.*

What's your favorite book/movie/album/song? Pick one and explain why. *Billy Strings- Not only is he one of the best guitarists of all time, but to hear his humble beginnings and how he started with nothing and through hard work and dedication has become one of the greatest musical artist today. There is nothing like the energy and love you feel from attending a live Billy Strings show. He is also bringing old school bluegrass music back to the mainstream and making it popular again.*

What would your perfect/ideal day look like? *A lazy weekend spent with my wife and dogs. Doing a little fishing, working in the garden, making a trip down to Valle Crucis Community Park, and finishing the day with a sunset view from our porch.*

What fictional place would you like to visit? *Jurassic Park- I think it would be really cool to see the actual size of dinosaurs first hand. I would just hope to not get eaten.*

What's something you'd like to do that you've never done? *Travel to Europe or Southeast Asia.*



Clayton relaxing in nature

Let's get to know **Savannah Cunningham**, ORP Contracts Coordinator!

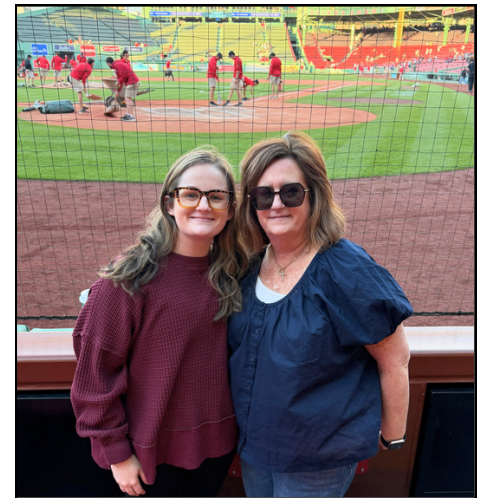
How long have you worked with ORP? *I've worked with ORP for just over 2 years.*

What's your favorite book/movie/album/song? Pick one and explain why. *One of my favorite books is The Hunt for Red October by Tom Clancy because it introduced me to favorite book series. The Jack Ryan series is a fictional mystery-action series that incorporates many historically accurate details and as a history nerd, it's been a very fun series to read.*

What would your perfect/ideal day look like? *My perfect day would be a day spent at Lake Crescent in Washington state with a good book and good friends.*

What fictional place would you like to visit? *If I could visit a fictional place, I'd want to visit Genovia from The Princess Diaries.*

What's something you'd like to do that you've never done? *I would love to go to Italy one day! It's the top spot on my bucket list!*



Savannah and her mom at Fenway Park

Latest Feature Stories



What is Advise NC? Learn about the network ensuring every NC student 'has someone to help them find a next step'

July 15, 2026

READ MORE



Empower EDU: A Success Story of Practice, Convening, and a grant Culmination

June 25, 2026

READ MORE



Summer Sneak Peek

June 19, 2026

Summer programming is already in full swing at

READ MORE



Have an idea for a news story?

We are always looking for new content to include on our [News & Features Page](#), and we welcome your input. Please share story ideas with Elyssee Gibson (gibsonse@appstate.edu), and we will work together to spread the news of your great work!

Rural Health Transformation Project Welcomes New Director

ORP is excited to welcome Katie Matthews as the new Regional Workforce and Education Partnerships Director for the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP).

A National Board-Certified Teacher, Katie entered the education field in 1997 as a classroom teacher in Wake County, later teaching in Richmond, VA and in Watauga County. She holds a BS in Elem. Ed. from UNC-CH and a Master of Arts in Education in Curriculum, Instruction and Supervision from UNC-W.



Katie Matthews joins RHTP as program director

During her career, Katie pioneered Science PALS, an innovative STEM initiative that links primary learners with intermediate and middle school peers for weekly scientific inquiries focused on cultivating the 4C's: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Her dedication to education has earned notable recognition, including the 2018 NC K-6 Presidential Award of Excellence in Math and Science Teaching and a 2015 Burroughs Wellcome Career Award in STEM Teaching. Most recently, Katie served as a New Teacher Support Coach with Appalachian State. In this role, she supported beginning teachers in the Northwest region, delivered professional development with partnering districts and NWRESA, and co-chaired the BT Summit, an annual conference for beginning teachers held at the Reich College of Education.

Katie and her husband, Jason are the proud parents of Hank and Mae and love spending time with their dogs, Molly and Dot. Time on the creek with family and friends, enjoying a great meal, and traveling to the town of Cape Charles, VA are things Katie always looks forward to doing in her spare time.

ORP is excited to serve as a partner for **RHTP**. Learn more about the Rural Health Transformation Project [here](#).

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STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of Rural Promise

WE'RE HIRING

Now Hiring for RHTP

We're growing our team at the Office of Rural Promise and are excited to announce two new roles within the Rural Health Transformation Project (RHTP):

- * **Regional K-12 & Youth Pathways Coordinator**
- * **Regional Postsecondary Pathways Coordinator**

Please share across your networks to help spread the word and connect these opportunities with leaders who care about rural communities!

Staff Excellence Award

Dr. James Beeler, Executive Director of ORP has received a 2026 Staff Excellence Award, one of the university's highest honors recognizing exceptional leadership, service, and impact.

Dr. Beeler was selected in the "Human Resources" category for his transformative contributions to App State's mission and his



Jim Beeler receives honor

leadership of the Office of Rural Promise, the university's largest department within the division of Research & Innovation. Under his direction, ORP has expanded its reach across 27 school districts in western North Carolina, strengthened regional partnerships, and advanced major initiatives supporting rural students, families, and educators.

Since joining App State, Dr. Beeler has led a portfolio of more than \$90 million in federal and private grant programs, including securing the university's largest single grant in history, a \$35 million GEAR UP award in 2024. Read [more](#) about this honor.





Academic Innovation Conference

From June 8 to 10, over 200 educators and partners gathered at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College for the 2026 GEAR UP Academic Innovation Conference. Guided by the theme "The Power of Educational Stories," attendees engaged in sessions ranging from ethical AI use to fostering college-bound mindsets and much more.

The inaugural Luminary Showcase celebrated district-level creativity, awarding significant funding for impactful initiatives:

- Swain County Schools (\$12,000 Trailblazer Award) for their middle-to-high school transition program.
- Alleghany County Schools (\$12,000 Greatest Impact Award) for their absenteeism initiative.
- Burke County Schools (\$12,000 Future Promise Award) for their social-emotional learning pathway project.
- Macon County Schools (\$8,000 People's Choice Award) for their mobile CTE program.

Innovation was further fueled by the AIM Grant PITCH Competition, which awarded over \$137,000 to educators across 21 schools.

Individual excellence was also a highlight. Ashlee Zachary (Transylvania County) was named the 2026 GEAR UP Innovator of the Year, winning a prize package that includes a 2027 Global Teacher Fellowship to Argentina. Jonathan Greene (Ashe County) was named Runner-Up. Additionally, Dreydon Conley (Graham County) was recognized as the first GEAR UP Student Leader of the Year.

L.E.A.D. Scholars Shine at NCCEP Youth Leadership Summit

The top eight L.E.A.D. Scholars proudly represented Appalachian GEAR UP at the NCCEP Youth Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. Throughout the conference, the scholars demonstrated exceptional leadership, professionalism, and a genuine commitment to making a difference in their schools and communities.

The summit provided students with the opportunity to participate in leadership development sessions, connect with peers from across the country, and explore our nation's capital. A special highlight was meeting U.S. Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina where scholars had the opportunity to advocate for educational opportunities and policy changes that impact students across the state and nation.

Scholars also had the honor of presenting to conference attendees about the L.E.A.D. Student Coalition Program, sharing their personal leadership journeys, the impact the program has had on their lives, and how L.E.A.D. is empowering rural students to become leaders and advocates in their communities. They represented GEAR UP with confidence, professionalism, and passion doing an amazing job during their presentation. We look forward to seeing how they continue to inspire positive change in their schools and communities!



L.E.A.D. Scholars attend NCCEP Youth Leadership Summit

**SAVE
THE DATE**

**GEAR UP Academic
Innovation Conference
June 14-15, 2027**

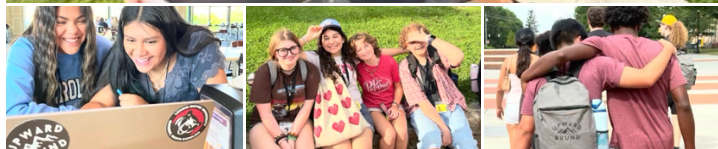


Summer Academy

The Upward Bound Summer Academy was back again this year for one of their best summers yet! This 6-week residential mock college experience lets students live in dorms, eat at the dining hall, and be mentored by current college students.

During the day, students participated in classes, art exploration, and cultural experiences, as well as outdoor adventures like hiking, kayaking, and climbing. Students also travelled to tour several college campuses, such as Lenoir-Rhyne, UNC Greensboro and Wilmington, and ECU.

For rising 12th graders, the Summer Academy offered "Common App Boot Camp," where students completed college applications, resumes, and first drafts of their college essays. Graduating seniors who participated in Upward Bound's Summer Bridge Program celebrated their achievements with a week-long trip to Washington, D.C.



UB students engage in events throughout the summer during annual Summer Academy

ORP Social Media Round Up



From outdoor adventures and hands-on learning to statewide road trips and national conference travel, ORP programs have been showcasing a vibrant season of summer engagement across social media. Our teams highlight how students, educators, and partners are exploring new places, building skills, and representing rural NC with pride. Enjoy a few featured posts below!





Summer Highlights

YES Appalachia has had a busy and exciting summer spending time with middle and high school students!

Tuesdays have been dedicated to test prep and a book club for both middle and high school scholars. Middle school students were exposed to the Independent Schools Entrance Exam (ISEE), while high school students looked at the four components of the ACT. Middle school students read *The Wednesday Wars* by Gary D. Schmidt. High school scholars read a selection of essays from *This I Believe* before writing and recording their own essays. A highlight on Tuesdays has been the optional soccer clinic that our App State Sociology intern, Luke, organized and facilitated.

On Thursdays, YES staff took students to visit various schools. Middle school focused on high school options which included NCSSM, Christ School, and Salem Academy.

High School toured Washington & Lee University, ETSU, Wingate, and Lees-McRae. Students also briefly walked on the campus of UNC- Charlotte.

An in-house day camp for rising 7th and 8th grade scholars in July was full of hands-on learning and new experiences. Scholars stretched their thinking with logic puzzles, higher-level math, and portrait drawing, challenging both their analytical and creative abilities. They also learned the fundamentals of debate and explored the concept of positive deviance through activities led by Luke. Mr. Kunz returned to teach engaging classes in video editing and 3-D printing. YES wrapped up the week with a memorable 3-hour kayaking adventure with RiverGirl in Todd, NC.

Glowforge

Rising 8th - 12th grade YES Scholars were invited to participate in creating or designing their own projects using a Glowforge machine. Using Adobe Illustrator, scholars designed their creations and learned how to prepare files for the GlowForge by setting lines to cut, engrave, or score. Projects included acrylic night lights, wooden keychains, and wooden plaques. A huge thank you to Mr. Stefan Kunz of Ashe County Early College for hosting us in his Apple computer lab and creating video tutorials to help scholars learn Adobe Illustrator.



YES Students pose with their creations

Welcome, Lorena

YES is excited to welcome Lorena Calvillo to the YES Appalachia team as the College and Career Program Associate. She has served as an Advise NC Adviser in Ashe County for the last three years. Her experience in that role and being an Ashe County native and App State alumnus are both assets that YES values. Lorena will help YES 12th grade scholars apply to and navigate the college transition and will care for our scholars while in college and as they move into their careers.



Lorena Calvillo (far right) joins the YES Appalachia team with Susan Saule (middle) and Carly Stephens (left)



On Ramp Summer Fast Lanes

In Summer 2026, On Ramp worked with rising seniors and incoming enrolled first-year students. Summer Fast Lanes provided opportunities for rising seniors to learn more about the businesses in their local communities and the chance to pursue career pathways locally.

This summer, A-B Tech On Ramp Fast Lanes students explored a variety of career pathways through hands-on experiences both on and off campus. Highlights included attending A-B Tech's Career Exploration Fair, visiting the Veterinary Assisting program, and getting a behind-the-scenes look at the installation of a NASA-donated observatory at Madison Middle School. While observing the observatory being wired and assembled, students learned not only about astronomy and STEM, but also about the skilled construction and technical trades that make projects like this possible. The On Ramp Fast Lanes program continues to help students connect classroom learning with real-world careers while expanding their understanding of postsecondary education and workforce opportunities.

On Ramp rising seniors engaged in Summer Fast Lanes in Outdoor Recreation Management, Aviation, and Dental. Throughout these events, students had the opportunity to tour Appalachian State University, Lees McRae College, Mars Hill University, UNC Charlotte, UNC Chapel Hill, and High Point University. They heard from businesses like RiverGirl, GE Aerospace, the Wilkes Dental Clinic, and Brushy Mountain Dental about ways to get involved and employed in their own communities. Students engaged with WCC faculty and made lasting connections with peers, staff, and faculty.



On Ramp students visit RiverGirl in Ashe county to learn more about outdoor recreation management

On Ramp Summer Bridge Experiences

Partner institutions also offered Summer Bridge Experiences for students enrolling at the community college this Fall. Summer Bridge allowed students to take courses and meet campus partners at their future college in preparation for the fall.

The Summer Bridge students at WCC completed an online ACA course, toured the Wilkes and Ashe campuses of WCC, and met with support staff in Financial Aid, Academic Support, SAGE, Advising, and the Counseling Center. They participated in a resumé building workshop with NCWorks as well as sessions with their On Ramp Coordinators in email literacy and social media presence. Each student was paired with an industry tour (or two) in their chosen career field touring Ashe Memorial Hospital, App Health, Randy Marion Chevrolet, GE Aerospace, Carolina Timberworks, the Agricultural Extension Office, LifeStore Bank, and Joel Yates Dentistry.



On Ramp students engage in industry tours

APPSTATE

Learning in the Professions

Empower EDU Conference Recap

On June 16 and 17, over 200 educators, administrators, and educational partners gathered at the Proximity Hotel in Greensboro, N.C. for the Micro-Credential Summit and the inaugural Empower EDU conference. Hosted by ORP, this event served as the culmination of the ETL and GREAT STEM grants, providing a space for the Empowering Teacher Learning team as well as ETL teachers and InnoCo participants to share their findings and celebrate one another.

The gathering began Tuesday morning with the Micro-Credential Summit, facilitated by the ETL team. A major highlight was the discussion of five years of research, disseminated through two white papers: Teacher-Directed Professional Learning (TDPL): 2026 Reimagining Professional Development for Teachers and GREAT STEM: A Practical Professional Learning Model for Grades 9–12 Rural STEM Educators.

Tuesday afternoon, the focus shifted to the Empower EDU Conference which centered on learner agency, emerging technology, and micro-credentials. Wednesday featured a full day of over 25 peer-led breakout sessions. Topics ranged from behavior management and building relationships to "Backpack Books," a session dedicated to bringing literature to students regardless of budget constraints. Eight of these sessions specifically focused on self-directed learning, allowing ETL teachers to share the TDPL model in-depth with their peers. [Read more.](#)



ORP staff pose at Empower EDU photobooth during summer conference

APPSTATE

NC Rural Education Collaborative

ASCEND Summer Events

The NC Rural Education Collaborative hosted several ASCEND events over the summer including a kick-off event, virtual session, and statewide convening.

Aligning Schools' Capacity and Efficiency Network for Districts (ASCEND) brings district leadership together in a professional learning community with a specific focus on maximizing the use of funding built around collaboration, shared problem-solving, and practical application. Through regional cohort sessions, virtual deep dives, and role-specific peer learning, participants build financial fluency and strategic capacity alongside colleagues who understand the same realities they face every day. Face-to-face sessions are designed for Finance Officers and Superintendents to attend together, while deep dive, virtual sessions are topic-specific. Virtual Sessions allow for deeper dives into finance specific learning. Recommendations for the inclusion of additional roles based on the session topic are shared with participants prior to each deep dive session. Facilitators with deep knowledge of both national best practices and North Carolina's funding policies help bridge the gap between policy and practice, so leaders walk away with approaches that are grounded, relevant, and ready to use.



Panel at kick-off event: Dr. Mary Ann Wolf, CEO, Wolf Ed LLC; Mark Garrett, Superintendent, Henderson Co. Public Schools; Stephanie Treadway, Chief Business Officer, NCCAT; Dr. Terry Worrell, Exec. Dir., Northwest Regional Educational Service Alliance



Subscribe to the Rural Education Collaborative newsletter

REI Summer Learning Exchange

The Rural Education Institute and College of Education at ECU partnered with the NCREC to host 8 Eastern NC school districts for a one-day learning exchange. This exchange followed an international learning exchange where NC superintendents visited Wales with ECU professors for a learning exchange. The June Summit in Eastern NC brought together teams from the districts to share across district borders what they learned and implemented as a result of the international exchange.



Attendees pose at summer learning exchange event



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

APPSTATE Advise NC

Welcome, New Advisers

During the week of July 20, Next Step Advisers kicked off training at UNC-Wilmington with all 140 Next Step Advisers from across the state. Partners from NC colleges and universities, Strada, NCSEAA, CFNC, John M. Belk Endowment, NCDPI, AmeriCorps, and others engaged in workshops and sessions designed to prepare advisers for the coming school year. Advise NC at App State advisers will round out their training with a week of virtual sessions, followed by a week at the Valle Crucis Conference Center for adviser-led sessions. We're excited to introduce the awesome team of 2026-27 Next Step Advisers!

New advisers:

Sam McNeill, Ashe County High & Ashe Early College
Carly Godfrey, St. Stephens High School
Ashley Morris, Andrews & Hiwassee Dam High Schools
William Cable, Robbinsville High School
Jackson Burch, Hayesville High School
Freddy Kelley, Franklin High School
Reagan Petto, Madison High School
Molly Sue Smith, Swain County High School
Melody Oxendine, Brevard High School
Loralei Weber, Freedom High School
Dayanara Monroy-Luna, Wilkes Central High School

Returning advisers:

Morgan Healy, Alexander Central High School
Laura Tellez-Elias, Alleghany High School
John Fitzgerald, Avery High and Williams Academy
Molly Spruill, Erwin High School
Seth Trottier, North Henderson High School
Mallory Hoffman, Jackson County High & Jackson County Early College
Paige Georgeou, Mitchell High School
Lydia Bridges, R-S Central High School
Courtney Gragg, Watauga High School
Xavier Johnson, Mountain Heritage High School



AdviseNC at App State Advisers pose at summer training

**SAVE
THE DATE**

ACCESS Summit

(Advancing College Connections,
Engagement, & Student Support)

March 10, 2027 at CVCC

More details will be released in the coming months!