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Winter 2026 Newsletter



Nine's Lines Newsletter

From the Administrator

Drew Harris

Happy 2026!

The start of the second half of the 2025-26 school year is a good time to evaluate our progress, year to date. Going into this year, we had several new initiatives we were rolling out:

1. The Summit Behavioral Academy is a day-placement option for students with severe behavior issues in Grades 6-8. We currently have 5 students in the program. We are looking at expanding that to include students as young as kindergarten, as we are seeing challenging behaviors in much younger students these days.
2. Our ESU is in the thick of working on the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant. We have over 300 teachers in our region who will be going through Science of Reading training in the coming year. A share of our funding is going back to teachers in the form of stipends paid to cover their time outside of the workday, spent on this training.
3. We have increased the opportunities for professional learning in special education, especially in the areas of behavior management and transition. We have also increased our special education administration support, with districts contracting a total of 7 days of time in that area.
4. We have contracted with a private software company to develop improved service and mileage log software. We hope this will make the process more user friendly for staff and more time efficient for our finance staff. We hope to pilot this software in the second semester.

For next year, we are exploring the potential to provide shared instructors in the area of foreign languages. With the teacher shortage impacting districts' ability to find educators in this area, many schools have turned to virtual instruction. We feel a better solution might be districts sharing an instructor who could be onsite on a regular basis. The ESU is able to facilitate this instructional format in an effective and efficient manner.

For the last few years, ESU 9 has hosted a **Retirees' Coffee**. The event was created to recognize the important contributions our former employees have made in the success of the Unit, as well as an opportunity to stay in touch with former friends and colleagues. While that was originally held in December, recognizing how busy schedules are that time of year and the increased chance of inclement weather issues, we have moved the Retirees' Coffee to the spring. This year, that event will be held on Thursday, March 26, at 10 a.m. The event is open to all retirees and former employees of ESU 9.

Rule 84, which governs the operations of Service Units, requires the creation of an annual report each fall. The reports detail membership, services, and financial information. Here is a link to the [ESU 9 Annual Report Information](#) for the 2025 school year.

I wish you all a very rewarding and Happy New Year!

Supporting Local Families During the Holiday Season

Joe Haney

As part of our ongoing commitment to serving families in the ESU 9 area, 18+ students delivered Christmas presents to Head Start families. These efforts have been meaningful ways for us to support the families in our region during the holiday season and to give back to the community that supports us.



Tech Tip - Manage Gmail Subscriptions

Laura Ochsner

Do you receive a lot of unwanted emails and wish there was an easy way to unsubscribe to several senders at one time? Try using Gmail's **Manage Subscriptions** feature!

To use the Manage Subscriptions feature in Gmail, start by clicking on the "Subscriptions" tab located in the left-hand sidebar (often found under the "Categories" or "More" section). This tool automatically gathers all your recurring newsletters and promotional emails into one centralized dashboard. From here, you can review your active subscriptions and click the Unsubscribe button next to any sender you no longer wish to hear from. This allows you to clean up your inbox efficiently without having to open individual emails and hunt for tiny unsubscribe links at the bottom of the page.

Manage Gmail Subscriptions

- Click More - Manage Subscriptions
- Click unsubscribe to those you no longer want or need



Subscriptions			
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Mariano Resources	marianoresources.com	10-30 emails recently	Unsubscribe
Natalie Youniss	youniss@netstate.org	10-30 emails recently	Unsubscribe
OverDrive Blogs	overdrive@overdrive.com	10-30 emails recently	Unsubscribe
Tree Legacy	legacy@tree.org	10-30 emails recently	Unsubscribe
ActiveCampaign	product-updates@activecampaign.com	10 or fewer emails recently	Unsubscribe
Alana from Wayground	alana@team.quizizz.com	10 or fewer emails recently	Unsubscribe
American Heart Association	heart@heartmail.org	10 or fewer emails recently	Unsubscribe
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NPERS Contribution Rate Updates

Emily Burr

If you haven't already heard or noticed, your NPERS withholding rate changed for the first time in many years as of **2025**. This change is part of a new law, **LB645**, which created a contribution rate table that may adjust retirement withholding annually based on the NPERS actuarial valuation of the plan's assets. In simple terms, when the retirement plan is performing well, meaning it is growing and has enough projected assets to fully pay the benefits owed to current and future retirees, employees, schools, and the state all contribute less. When performance or funding declines, contribution rates may increase.

What Changed on July 1, 2025

For the first time in more than a decade, NPERS withholding changed. From September 2012 through June 2025, the employee contribution rate remained steady at 9.78 percent, with employers contributing 101 percent of that amount.

Based on the 2024 actuarial report showing the plan at 99.91 percent funded, the 2025–26 contribution rates became:

- Employee:** 8.00 percent
- Employer:** 8.08 percent

New Rate Coming July 1, 2026

NPERS recently announced that the retirement plan is now fully funded at 100 percent or above. Because of this strong financial status, contribution rates will decrease again on July 1, 2026:

- **Employee:** 7.25 percent
- **Employer:** 7.32 percent

LB645 Rate Table

The table below shows the full range of possible contribution rates under LB645. Annual rates depend entirely on the plan's funded status:

Funded Status	Employee	Employer	State
100% or above	7.25%	7.32%	0.0%
Between 98% and less than 100%	8.00%	8.08%	0.7%
Between 96% and less than 98%	8.75%	8.84%	0.7%
Less than 96%	9.75%	9.85%	2.0%

How This Affects Your Paycheck

A lower NPERS contribution rate means you may have a little more money in your take-home pay, which is always good news. It is important to understand, though, how pre-tax contributions work.

NPERS contributions are taken out **before** federal and state income taxes are calculated. When your NPERS withholding goes down, a smaller portion of your paycheck qualifies for this pre-tax benefit. As a result, that amount of money is counted as taxable income. Once taxes are applied, the extra money you receive may be smaller than you expect. You still come out ahead, but the increase in your net pay will likely be a bit smaller than the full difference in NPERS withholding.

Instructional Coaching: Supporting Continuous Improvement Across Member Schools

LaRaesha Kugel, Katie Soto, Shalee Lindsey & Kayla Perry

Instructional coaching is one of the key services provided by our Professional Learning Team to support continuous improvement across member schools. This school year, Katie, LaRaesha, Kayla, and Shalee have each played an active role in delivering instructional coaching to educators throughout the region.

Katie has primarily focused on supporting math instruction, working with teachers in Lawrence-Nelson, Hampton, Santee Creek, Harvard, Kenesaw, and Red Cloud. Teachers consistently report that the coaching experience is both meaningful and highly effective.

One teacher shared the following feedback on the Instructional Coaching Evaluation and Feedback Form:

"I really appreciate the time you took to spend in my class and help me address the needs of my students. I have been working to implement all the strategies you have given me and am pleased with the results. I wish you could continue coming throughout the year to support me further. I value your input and know you are here to help me and my students. Thank you!"

LaRaesha has supported teachers with a focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) through strong Tier 1 instructional

LaRaesha has supported teachers with a focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) through strong Tier 1 instruction. She has worked with Blue Hill, Hastings High School, Kenesaw, Lawrence-Nelson, and Superior. Teachers appreciate receiving individualized support, ideas, and resources.

Teachers shared the following feedback on the Mid-Year Instructional Coaching Evaluation & Feedback form:

"It helped me to think through how I am accommodating my EL students and how that can also help everyone in the classroom!"

"She provided me with some awesome ideas and brainstorming along with visuals that may be helpful with my students."

By intentionally focusing on UDL to enhance Tier 1 instruction, teachers are finding they can better meet the needs of students.

Adding two more coaches to our team has allowed us to expand and personalize the coaching experiences we offer schools.

Shalee has provided coaching focused on secondary ELA, supporting both Hampton and Sandy Creek. Teachers have expressed gratitude for the collaboration and resource sharing.

Kayla has been working with elementary teachers at Sandy Creek to strengthen their reading instruction. Feedback has been very positive from both teachers and administrators.

As we continue to grow this service, we are finding that teachers appreciate the individualized support focused on evidence-based instructional practices.



Who Gave Them A License? (a reminder to read the fine print)

Gary Needham

I never dreamed I would have to focus so much on legal and policy issues when getting a technology-related degree in 1996. For those who can't remember that far back, the Internet was pretty comparable to the "Wild West" back then. There were few firewalls to fence in roaming users. Data was still stored on the computers; only things you wanted to be protected.

were put in "the cloud."

As ESUs, we hosted our own email and web servers and didn't worry that much about what hackers would find if they could somehow discover our servers. I had a great time downloading and installing new software to try out on our servers and could hardly believe I was getting paid to do it!

How times have changed, and all in one career! Now, most data is stored in the cloud, we not only have accounts on these servers, but also two-factor authentication. Firewalls are installed everywhere and must be kept up to date as the first line of defense in the network.

Additionally, I've become the person that actually reads the license agreements before clicking "Agree and Continue." Some of that small print turns out to be pretty important. It's important to know if the account you are logged into has FERPA compliance, security, and data privacy baked in before you record a meeting, generate an AI summary, or upload student information. As a general rule, online data is considered safer if it is an education-specific account than with a personal account, and in a paid account over a free account. (As the saying goes, if something is free, the product is the data.)

New technologies are still fun to explore. The online world has made it easy to try out new tools and apps that help with your job. As you expand beyond exploration and into deeper use, check with the administration or technology staff about the license and make sure your data will also be safe there.

Talking to Students About AI: A Practical, Age-Appropriate Approach

By ChatGPT for Teachers with intro by Gary Needham

I've had an incredibly challenging few months. Not all of my work has been done well. As humans, we don't always perform at 100% even at full effort. I've needed help, and for most of that work, I relied on the team. In the case of this article, I chose to try out technology to help, as this is my first foray into AI for communication. (Yes, really!) Despite apparent hypocrisy regarding the topic, I give credit where it is due and hope you appreciate the perspective offered.

Artificial intelligence is already part of students' world, whether it's visible in school tools or used outside the classroom. Rather than focusing on specific rules or platforms, a practical approach is to frame AI as a **tool that can support learning—but not replace thinking**. Just as with calculators, spellcheck, or search engines, the key message for students is that learning still requires their own effort, understanding, and voice.

Across grade levels, conversations can focus on **how students think and explain their work**, not on whether a particular tool was used. Teachers can encourage transparency by asking simple questions such as: *"What parts did you do yourself?"*, *"How did you decide what to keep or change?"*, or *"What did this help you understand better?"* These questions work in any classroom and shift the focus away from "gotcha" policing toward reflection and learning.

Age-appropriate messaging matters. With younger students, the conversation might be as simple as, *"Some tools can give answers, but learning happens when you do the thinking."* With older students, teachers can discuss the difference between using tools for support versus submitting work they don't fully understand. A consistent expectation across all levels is that students should be able to **explain, revise, and defend** their work.

Teachers and administrators don't need to be AI experts to have these conversations. Keeping expectations centered on thinking, honesty, and understanding helps students build skills that will matter regardless of future tools or policies—keeping learning at the center of technology use.

Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD)

Grant

LaRaesha Kugel

During the 2024–25 school year, Nebraska Education Commissioner Brian Maher identified literacy as a primary state priority, establishing a clear and measurable goal: 75% of Nebraska's third-grade students will be proficient readers by 2030. To support this outcome, the Nebraska Department of Education emphasized the use of evidence-based literacy practices grounded in the Science of Reading, including expectations that educators supporting students in grades K–5 receive targeted training.

In anticipation of this statewide focus, the ESU 9 Professional Learning Team began preparing last spring by organizing a comprehensive process to pursue the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) Grant. This opportunity offers districts a critical pathway to secure funding, professional learning, and instructional support aligned with Nebraska's literacy priorities—and to collectively strengthen literacy instruction across the region.

That preparation culminated in a major milestone on Friday, August 8, when the Nebraska State Board of Education officially approved ESU 9's award of the CLSD Grant. The grant supports a consortium of 14 of the 15 school districts in the ESU 9 service area, placing the application in the highest eligible tier. Collectively, this work will impact more than 8,000 students and provide \$440,000 annually for five years, with the first two years of funding already guaranteed.

While some awardees focused on select grade spans, ESU 9's grant addresses the full literacy continuum—from birth through grade 12—ensuring every learner benefits from strengthened, evidence-based literacy instruction.

As the lead agency for the consortium, ESU 9 coordinates professional learning and technical assistance; supports the implementation of high-quality instructional materials; aligns efforts with Nebraska's literacy priorities; and measures impact across districts. Districts bring this work to life in classrooms through direct participation and implementation.

Since the award, ESU 9 has actively supported consortium districts by expanding access to high-quality professional learning. This includes supporting district teams in sending educators to the NeMTSS Summit in October 2025 and contracting with two evidence-based literacy professional learning providers—The New Teacher Project (TNP) and Lexia—to offer regional training options for educators in grades PK–12.

Six districts selected TNP, while eight districts selected Lexia. Educators participating in this work are eligible for stipend for out-of-contract training time, and districts are supported with substitute costs to ensure teachers can attend in-person professional learning sessions (Lexia LETRS courses only). Through these combined efforts, nearly 300 educators across the ESU 9 region will receive high-quality literacy training during the current school year.

Together, this investment provides more resources, more training, and more targeted support, ensuring that every learner—from our youngest readers to graduating seniors—leaves school prepared for success in college, career, and life.

Upcoming Events

- Co-Teaching Cohort Zoom - January 7, 2026
- LETRS Cohort A Day 2 - January 8, 2026
- LETRS Cohort B Day 2 - January 9, 2026
- FPS #3 - January 14, 2026
- Empowering Leaders - January 15, 2026
- Cybersecurity Self Assessment Workshop - January 21, 2026
- Social Studies Cadre - January 21, 2026
- LETRS Early Childhood Day 1 - January 27, 2026
- D-TIPS Workday - January 29, 2026
- Early Childhood Training - January 30, 2026

- Elementary Quiz Bowl - February 3, 2026
- High School Quiz Bowl - February 4, 2026
- Junior High Quiz Bowl - February 5, 2026
- Math Cadre - February 11, 2026
- Psychological First Aid in Schools - February 12, 2026
- Music Cadre with Dr. Monte Selby - February 16, 2026
- IDEA Academy - March 3, 2026
- LETRS Cohort A Day 3 - March 16, 2026
- LETRS Cohort B Day 3 - March 17, 2026
- Elementary Chess Tournament (Grades 3-5) - March 23, 2026
- Middle School Chess Tournament (Grades 6-8) - March 24, 2026
- Empowering Leaders Zoom Session - April 1, 2026
- Art Cadre - Looking Closely - April 8, 2026
- CPI Training - April 16, 2026
- State Quiz Bowl - April 20, 2026
- Invention Convention - April 21, 2026
- LETRS Early Childhood Day 2 - April 24, 2026
- LETRS Cohort A Day 4 - May 14, 2026
- LETRS Cohort B Day 4 - May 15, 2026

Register online at: <https://connect.esu9.org/>.



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