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Subject: ESU 9 Nine's Lines - Winter 2025 Newsletter
Date: January 6, 2025 at 10:20 AM
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Winter 2025 Newsletter



Nine's Lines Newsletter

From the Administrator

Drew Harris

Happy New Year!

This year ESU 9 is starting a new accreditation cycle. We enjoyed a glowing review during our last visit in March of 2022 but as educators know, the visit is not the finish line, but another 5-year lap around the track. The goal to improve goes on with a renewed focus on what's important now. That process includes collecting input from stakeholders such as school staff members, and board members, as well as analyzing current data. This fall we started that process by having a strategic planning session that included board members and staff from the steering committee. We also gathered input from staff at our November all-staff meeting. Information from our annual Summer Data Retreat, including survey data from our member schools, was reviewed in this process. The culmination of this has been the creation of a general plan for improvement, which we will refine into a specific goal in the year ahead. That improvement plan includes three key elements: Innovation, Continued Efficiencies, and Recruitment and Retention of Staff.

Innovation includes the creation of additional services to try to meet the needs of our member districts. This includes the need for assistance our schools have for addressing severe behavioral issues, as well as help to meet the state's new literacy goals. As special education laws and regulations become more complex, many schools are also looking for special education administrative support, a service that can potentially help districts avoid costly litigations.

In our last accreditation cycle, creating efficiencies was a major focus. Many systems utilizing new procedures and software were implemented. Many of these were in the area of human resources. However, all departments were tasked with documenting processes and procedures to ensure the effectiveness of continued operations. While we have made a good start, we need to continue down that path.

Finally, as the educator shortage continues to grow, the recruitment and retention of quality staff is more important now

than ever before. We must find ways to entice high-caliber new staff members as well as retain the excellent staff we have. While the excellent culture of ESU 9 is certainly an asset in this endeavor, there are many factors that impact that goal.

These goals represent an opportunity for ESU 9 to grow as an organization and, more importantly, to better serve the needs of our member schools and their students. We look forward to the challenges ahead.

For the last two years, ESU 9 has hosted a **Retirees Coffee** in December. 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. Recognizing how busy schedules are that time of year and the increased chance of inclement weather issues, we have moved that event to the spring. This year, that event will be held on March 28, 2025 at 10:00 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](#).

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



18+ Happenings

Jody Hitesman & Kevin Gerdes

We are excited to share some of the recent activities and collaborative efforts 18+ students and staff have been involved in here at ESU 9. These initiatives have been instrumental in supporting personal development, promoting socialization and enhancing our connection with the community.

Community and Recreational Activities: Our team has been actively participating in a range of community activities, including bowling, walking, and swimming at the local YMCA. These outings offer valuable opportunities for our students to develop new skills, interact with others, and engage in healthy, active lifestyles outside the classroom. They also help us strengthen our relationship with the community.

Decorating the Christmas Tree at Hastings Museum: In early December, our group had the privilege of decorating a Christmas tree at the Hastings Museum alongside Project SEARCH students. This festive activity allowed us to experience local culture firsthand, while fostering teamwork and creativity. It was a memorable occasion for everyone involved!

Supporting Local Families During the Holidays: As part of our ongoing commitment to serving families in the ESU 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. The students have also been busy taking cookie and merchandise orders which helps promote social, organizational and independent skills as well as team work.

Collaboration with Local School Districts: Our program continues to grow and evolve as we collaborate with local school districts. We have invited district representatives to visit our program for recruitment and socialization opportunities and our 18+ students have also participated in transition events alongside area school districts. This provides an excellent platform for students to practice socialization and professional skills, as well as to build connections that will serve them in their future careers.

Looking Ahead: These activities have not only supported our students' goals but have also helped foster stronger ties between our program and the greater community. We're excited about the continued growth of our partnerships and opportunities that lie ahead. We will also be participating in a transition event in January as well as touring businesses.

March.

If you have any questions or would like more information about our 18+ program, please don't hesitate to reach out. ' love to hear from you!

Thank you for your continued support!



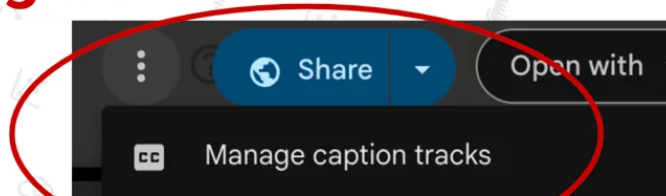
Tech Tip - Generate Captions for Videos Saved in Google Drive

Laura Ochsner

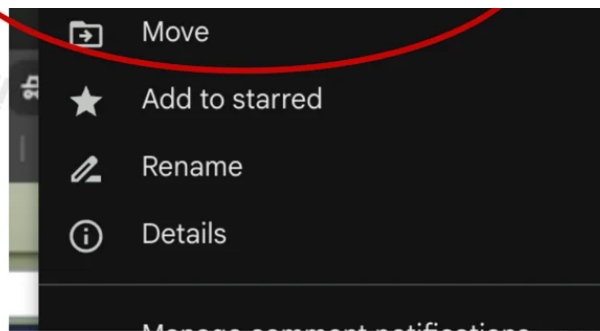
Captions for videos saved in Google Drive are now available! If you have been saving all your videos to YouTube in order to automatically generate captions, you can now do this for any video saved in Google Drive! Click the three dots in the top right and then choose Manage Caption Tracks. This will open your video in a new tab where the language will be automatically detected. Next, when your video starts to play, click CC and your captions will play automatically!

Automatically Generate Captions for videos in Google Drive

No longer need to upload videos to YouTube to turn on captions. Any video



Captions. Any video saved in Drive now has the closed captions option



Instructional Coaching

LaRaesha Kugel & Katie Soto



Katie Soto



Instructional coaching is a valuable service that ESU 9 is proud to offer to support our schools. This school year, Dr. Katie Soto, a member of our professional learning team, is working with seven schools through contracted instructional coaching services. Katie is partnering with Hampton, Harvard, Kenesaw, Lawrence-Nelson, Red Cloud, Sandy Creek, and Silver Lake to provide tailored support for educators and school initiatives.

- Instructional coaching is highly individualized to meet the unique needs of schools and teachers. Katie has focused on a variety of areas this semester, including:
- Supporting the adoption and implementation of new math curricula.
- Guiding the implementation of MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) processes for elementary math.
- Assisting new teachers as they transition into their roles.

Instructional coaching takes many forms depending on the requests of school leaders and teachers. Some examples include:

- Observing classrooms and providing constructive feedback.
- Co-teaching or modeling lessons in classrooms.
- Collaboratively planning instructional strategies with teachers.
- Analyzing student assessment data to inform decision-making.
- Sharing valuable resources and tools.

This semester, Katie has also introduced innovative AI tools to help teachers streamline tasks such as curriculum alignment. Additionally, Katie has expanded her coaching offerings to include CliftonStrengths coaching. As a newly certified Gallup CliftonStrengths coach, she integrates strengths-based strategies into instructional coaching. This allows teachers who have completed the strengths assessment to leverage their unique talents in their instructional practices.

Katie is excited about the progress made so far and looks forward to another impactful semester of instructional coaching. If your district has not yet utilized ESU 9's instructional coaching services and would like to learn more, please reach out!

LaRaesha Kugel



As part of our ongoing commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments, LaRaesha Kugel, a member of ESU 9's professional learning team, is proud to share updates on the instructional coaching initiatives across our region. Through the regional PEaK grant, LaRaesha has developed a tiered framework of support, informed by district-completed needs assessments. This strategic approach ensures that each PEaK consortium district receives tailored inclusion coaching opportunities—ranging from a minimum of two sessions to as many as four days of dedicated coaching in some districts. These efforts are rooted in a state-wide initiative to promote inclusion and ensure that all students can access grade-level content.

Beyond the PEaK-funded coaching sessions, several districts, including Adams Central, Blue Hill, Hampton, Harvard, Kenesaw, and Sandy Creek, have invested in additional coaching services. This increased engagement underscores the growing recognition



of the value of professional development in enhancing classroom practices. The progress and growth observed in our districts reflect a collective commitment to educational excellence.

Drawing on her expertise in tiered supports, LaRaesha has focused on empowering teachers to meet diverse classroom needs effectively. Building on the success of last year's Inclusion Series, she has guided educators in deepening their understanding of tiered supports, co-teaching strategies, and inclusive practices through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These coaching sessions have equipped teachers with actionable strategies to create more equitable and supportive learning environments.

As we transition into the second semester, LaRaesha is eager to continue collaborating with regional schools to sustain and expand these impactful practices. Together, we are making meaningful strides toward creating inclusive classrooms where every student can thrive.

Project SEARCH Happenings at Mary Lanning Healthcare

Amy Vetter

The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a unique, business-led, one-year school-to-work initiative held entirely at Mary Lanning Healthcare. Through total workplace immersion, students seamlessly blend classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training during worksite rotations.

The Project SEARCH students have been keeping busy this semester with exciting opportunities and accomplishments.

Internships in Full Swing

- Students successfully completed their **first internships** and are now several weeks into their **second internships**, gaining valuable hands-on experience.

Leadership and Community Engagement

- During Leadership Week, students volunteered at **Catholic Social Services**, where they packed sack lunches for those in need.
- Collaborating with the **18+ program**, students helped decorate a festive tree for the **Hastings Museum's Festival of Trees**.

Special Highlights

- One student participated in an **in-person culinary class** at CCC-Hastings, learning valuable new skills in the kitchen.

Transition Events & Recruitment

- Students have been actively participating in **ESU 9 transition events** this year.
- The program has been working hard to recruit students from area school districts, offering tours for **administration, teachers, students, and families** to showcase the opportunities Project SEARCH provides.

Looking Ahead

- **Tours:** Project SEARCH tours will continue into the new year.
- **Application Night:** Mark your calendars! Application Night is scheduled for **Tuesday, February 18th, at 6:00 PM**.
- **Application Deadline:** Applications are due by **Wednesday, February 28th**.

Stay tuned for more updates as we continue to prepare our students for meaningful employment opportunities! If you are interested in learning more about Project SEARCH or scheduling a tour, don't hesitate to reach out to Amy Vetter at avetter@marylanninghealthcare.com.

Interested in learning more about Project SEAT or scheduling a tour, don't hesitate to reach out to Amy Vetter at amy.vetter@esu9.us or 402.834.1538.



Maximizing Your Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) Benefits with Educators Health Alliance (EHA)



Emily Burr

Navigating health insurance can be complicated. The Educators Health Alliance (EHA) offers Blue Cross Blue Shield Nebraska (BCBSNE) plans designed to meet the needs of educators. With a bit of planning and knowledge, you can get the most of your coverage.

Start by understanding key insurance terms. Your **deductible** is the amount you pay out-of-pocket for healthcare services before insurance begins covering a portion of costs. A **co-pay** is a fixed fee you pay for services, like a \$30 doctor's visit. Once you meet your deductible, **coinsurance** applies, meaning you share a percentage of costs with your insurer (e.g., 20%). Your **out-of-pocket maximum** is the most you'll pay in a year for covered expenses; after reaching it, insurance covers 100% of eligible costs.

The EHA plan year runs from September 1 to August 31, while deductibles and out-of-pocket maximums **reset on January 1**, in line with the calendar year. Since the plan year and deductible year do not align, it's important to keep this in mind when planning major medical expenses or appointments.

Staying in-network is one of the easiest ways to save money. Use the [NebraskaBlue.com provider search tool](#) to locate providers and facilities that offer services at the lowest cost.

Telehealth is another valuable resource for accessing care conveniently. For more information on telehealth services, visit [NebraskaBlue's telehealth page](#). If you previously used the Amwell app to access telehealth services, please note that the app is no longer available.

Mental health resources are a significant feature of many plans. In-network therapy or counseling sessions may be

mental health resources are a significant feature of many plans. In-network therapy or counseling sessions may be covered at 100% depending on your plan. The high-deductible plans often require you pay out of pocket until the deductible is met. Check your specific coverage using EHA's [plan documents](#).

For easy access to your benefits, download the **MyEHA app**. This tool allows you to view your digital ID card, check details, and track wellness program participation. Additionally, creating an account at [MyNebraskaBlue](#) lets you monitor your deductible, out-of-pocket maximum, and Explanation of Benefits (EOBs). These EOBs are especially useful for submitting receipts if you have a Flexible Spending Account (FSA).

By taking advantage of these tools and understanding how your plan works, you can maximize the value of your EHA/BCBS benefits. For more information, reach out to your school's HR or benefits coordinator.

The AI Ecosystem and Background

Gary Needham

You can't even turn around without hearing the term AI as it relates to technology products these days. But no one talks about why. What's the difference between AI today and how it relates to science fiction from the previous millennium? What should be our approach to AI with our students?

The Evolution of AI

Artificial Intelligence, or AI, has commonly been thought of as the ability for a technology product to make decisions in place of a human. Technology-based decision-making technology has been around for a long time. The gas pump at shutoff, setting your debit card to allow (or not allow) overdrafts of your account, and the student information system automatically assigning letter grades and GPA calculations are decisions that have been programmed into technology systems.

The difference between that technology and what we are seeing today is that the AI technology is interacting in modern language and not computer syntax, which also allows more freedom to decide what to tell (and not tell) the user relative to the computations it is doing on the back end. Today's AI tools are "**generative**" in nature, meaning that they can create their own content and have some freedom to make decisions independent of the user. In limited form, even those technologies have existed for some time. Our web filters, for instance, might block display of some content not based on the words but based on the color and shape of the images on the page. That is not something a human review process can handle, but rather an AI technology.

The underlying technology behind what AI feeds is still driven by mathematical scoring. Assumptions are fed into the system that provide baselines, and the highest scoring possibility ("answer") is what is produced. People who are up in arms with AI as a threat to their work have even experimented with poisoning the AI system assumptions. Search for "nightshade AI" to find out how they do this with image creation systems. It demonstrates that feeding information to a system with the wrong labels is enough to permanently create corrupted results.

In the meantime, there are also methods of creating smaller AI models that are incredibly accurate and helpful for decision making. Taking a blank AI system and feeding a very limited data set into it can prove very helpful. For example, an AI system that is only provided with known valid medical research and drug information can be a powerful tool for research at hospitals.

Science fiction such as *War Games*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, George Orwell's *1984* book, and even *WALL-E* warn that AI has potential to making decisions that value mission or self-preservation over human life. Whether it is a benefit to society or avoiding new technologies (i.e., the Amish), society around us has decided to "play the game" despite the *War Games* warning. We are now in a world that will likely have AI around it permanently in the same way cell phones and Internet connectivity were new to us 30 years ago.

Elon Musk, in recent interviews about his new "grok" AI system, discusses interactions with friends in silicon valley. Many of them consider AI something that will eventually surpass humans. He vehemently disagrees and has been called a

or them consider AI something that will eventually surpass humans. He vehemently disagrees and has been called a "speciesist"—someone who is pro-human (as compared to non-living but supposedly smarter things) related to AI discussions. It is important to have voices such as Musk's in the AI development world to recognize the value truly all beings should always have compared to good technologies.

Perspective on AI Today

We should recognize that most of us are utilizing AI tools regularly already. If you give voice commands to your phone or car navigation system tell you which roads to take, or clicked "enable" on the relevant prompt from Snapchat anytime in the last 18 months (yes, Snapchat will help your students do homework), you have utilized the ecosystem.

Each of the new AI tools that are out there have their own pitfalls and benefits. The free tools are free for a reason; they will use entered data to train the system. The tools that cost something could be doing the same thing; always check user agreements, especially before using them for work. Apple claims that the AI associated with the operating system that came out this year is private and stays on the device. Microsoft Copilot does not make that claim, and has struggled with privacy and security of their new "Recall" option. Google will sell you access to Gemini as an AI tool integrated into the workflows of your school account.

Whether you are an early adopter, "majority" user, or laggard in the technology adoption scale, it's important to understand where AI could be heading and how we already use AI today. We are now teaching the first generation who will have always had generative AI tools available. They will use it differently than we do, but they also need our life experience help them know how to approach and think about new technologies they will interact with for the rest of their lives.

Upcoming Events

- Future Problem Solving #3 - January 15, 2025
- Transition Student Day - January 15, 2025
- Social Studies Cadre - January 17, 2025
- SLP Cadre - January 21, 2025
- Digital Media Teacher Cadre - January 23, 2025
- Cybersecurity Self Assessment Workshop - January 29, 2025
- Empowering Leaders Series - January 30, 2025
- Early Childhood Training - January 31, 2025
- Elementary Quiz Bowl - February 4, 2025
- High School Quiz Bowl - February 5, 2025
- Junior High Quiz Bowl - February 6, 2025
- Music Cadre: Making Key Changes - February 10, 2025
- SPED Teacher Cadre - February 11, 2025
- ILCD-TIPS Workday - March 5, 2025
- Youth Mental Health First Aid Trainings - March 11, 2025
- Athletic Director's Cadre - March 19, 2025
- CPI Training - April 1, 2025
- Chess Tournament - April 1, 2025
- Art Cadre - Watercolor Mixed Media: Painting, Drawing, Collaging & Stitching - April 9, 2025
- Rule 52/480 NAC 1 Training - April 10, 2025
- Team Self-Assessment Training - April 10, 2025
- SLP Cadre - April 15, 2025
- Invention Convention - April 29, 2025
- State Quiz Bowl - April 30, 2025

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



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