

Office of Rural Promise



Director's Message

As I write this in December 2025, I can't help but contrast this year with last year. Things are much different from a year ago when we were struggling with the impact of Hurricane Helene. While there is much still to be done, our region has demonstrated great resilience, in part because of the compassion shown by residents to each other and from those outside the region. It has been my honor to serve on the Governor's Advisory Committee for Western NC Recovery, and the work put in by so many toward recovery has been nothing short of incredible.

We've had a strong start to this school year here at the Office of Rural Promise. Looking across this newsletter, you'll find lots of announcements, beginnings, and continuing work, such as the second LEAD cohort of students leaders, the return of Family STEM Design Nights, a new cohort of teacher leaders for RTLN, a partnership with the Society for Science, remote learning professional learning that is a direct response to the challenges presented by Helene, new micro-credentials authoring, breakfasts that bring together high school juniors with representatives from local employers, Advise NC reaching across the state, Upward Bound Saturday Academies, and much more.

Our team remains excited about and thankful for our opportunities to work with students, educators, and parents in so many communities across the region, and we wish you a happy holiday season!

- Jim Beeler,
Executive Director- Office of Rural Promise

Newsletter Highlights

Office of Rural Promise

- Director's Message
- Official Announcement
- What is the Rural Ed Collaborative
- Employee Spotlight

GEAR UP

- WNC Research Fellows Program
- RTLN West Names New Cohort
- Introducing LEAD Cohort II
- Family Design Nights

Upward Bound

- Saturday Academies
- New Tableau Map

YES

- University of Richmond Visit
- Pennsylvania Field Trip
- After-School Celebration

Advise NC

- Advise NC Listening Tour
- "Counting Down" to College

Learning in the Professions

- ETL in Greece
- New Opportunities Underway
- Remote Learning Workshop
- Innovation Cohort

On Ramp

- Workforce Breakfasts



APPSTATE

Office of Rural Promise

Official Announcement: Office of Rural Promise Joins Office of Research & Innovation

Building on its 126-year history as a rural-serving institution, Appalachian State University has launched the Office of Rural Promise (ORP) — a unit formed to foster regional connections and support growing programs that empower students and educators at North Carolina schools. ORP is one of several App State units that strategically support the university's research and innovation enterprise. Read more of the Appalachian Today article [here](#).

App State's Office of Rural Promise fortifies student and teacher success in North Carolina

By University Communications

Posted Dec. 8, 2025 at 2:50 p.m.



BOONE, N.C. — Building on its 126-year history as a rural-serving institution, Appalachian State University has launched the [Office of Rural Promise](#) (ORP) — a unit formed to foster regional connections and support growing programs that empower students and educators at North Carolina schools. ORP is one of several App State units that strategically support the university's research and innovation enterprise.

Leveraging new and existing grant-supported programs, the Office of Rural Promise builds strategic partnerships to solve big challenges in rural communities; designs and implements



Students in App State's GEAR UP LEAD (Leadership, Empowerment, Advocacy, Development, Accountability) program.

"The work of the Office of Rural Promise is driven by deeply rooted partnerships in our schools and communities. We are excited about our potential to strategically support and amplify the already incredible impact of these programs."

— Dr. Christine Hendren, App State vice chancellor of research and innovation

"Our new home in App State's Office of Rural Promise allows us to

What is the NC Rural Education Collaborative?

One of the new program areas that make up the Office of Rural Promise includes the NC Rural Education Collaborative. *EdNC* recently published an article about the program, the impact it has on the region, and how leaders can tackle the challenges that rural communities face. Read the article [here](#).

News Perspectives Español **EdNC** Newsletters ▾ Donate Merch

What is the NC Rural Education Collaborative?

 Mebane Rash November 20, 2025

REUBLISH THIS STORY

Feature K-12 Rural





Subscribe to the Rural Education Collaborative Newsletter

Employee Spotlight

Let's get to know **Janet Johnson**, Finance and Compliance Manager for Empowering Teacher Learning!

- **How long have you worked with CAP?** I started at CAP in July 2021.
- **What's your favorite book/movie/album/song? Pick one and explain why.**
My favorite movie is *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It's a reminder to me that even though things may be hard for a long time, God still has a plan for good working in my life.
- **What would your perfect/ideal day look like?** My perfect day would be watching the sunrise on a mountain top with my daughters. Then cooking breakfast for them and spending the day hiking.
- **What fictional place would you like to visit?** I would love to visit Narnia.
- **What's something you'd like to do that you've never done?** I would love to visit the fairy trails of Ireland.



Janet and her family.





New Partnership between Appalachian GEAR UP and the Society for Science

The Western North Carolina Research Fellows Program, a partnership between Appalachian GEAR UP and the Society for Science, was launched on Wednesday, November 19, 2025 to expand student-led research opportunities for middle school students in rural western North Carolina. This year-long fellowship includes educators from ten districts seeking to strengthen instruction through inquiry and experimental design. The program provides professional learning experiences, resources, stipends, and mini-grants to Fellows, along with access to the Science News Learning Program. Led by Ambassador Allyson McFalls and two Lead Fellows, the program aims to build a self-sustaining rural STEM research ecosystem. You can read more about this new partnership [here](#).



The first cohort of Western North Carolina Research Fellows pose for a photo at the Nov. 19 kickoff event.

Family Design Nights Are Back!

GEAR UP Family Design Nights kicked off their North Carolina-themed series on October 28 with the Lighthouse Beacon activity. Sixty individuals gathered in their respective districts with their families and followed along virtually on Zoom with instruction provided by Academic Innovation Specialist, Brittany Brady.

The second of these events took place on December 2, and instructed families to use math and geometry to design and paint barn quilts. Other activities planned include the textile mill automation machine night on February 17, and the BBQ sauce development night on March 24.

Second RTLN West Cohort Launches

The North Carolina Public School Forum in collaboration with Leading EDge Learning and the Appalachian State GEAR UP Partnership, announced the second cohort of the Rural Leaders Teacher Network West (RTLN West) for the 2025–2026 school year in October. RTLN West is a signature initiative created to elevate and empower teachers in rural communities, developing them as change agents who can lead from within their schools and communities.

This intensive, year-long, cohort-based professional learning experience brings together diverse teacher leaders from Western North Carolina's mountain and foothill regions. Rooted in collective care and community-based leadership, the program focuses on opportunity, access, teacher leadership, student-centered approaches, and education policy. The 2025–2026 cohort will explore a four-strand learning arc, including the Policy strand, which involves examining state and federal legislation and developing actionable advocacy plans. The partnership with Appalachian State GEAR UP helps connect teacher leadership to broader goals of postsecondary access and success across the seventeen Western NC counties served. The initiative aims to cultivate teacher-leaders who are exceptional practitioners and equipped to advocate and innovate. You can read more about the Rural Teacher Leadership Network [here](#).



Snapshots from the RTLN West kickoff event.

Announcing LEAD Cohort II

The inaugural LEAD Gather-Connect Kick-Off Event, held at Appalachian State University, achieved incredible success. The event celebrated the 2025–2026 LEAD Scholars, providing an unforgettable day of connection, learning, and inspiration as the new cohort began their leadership journeys together. The organizational team met the scholars in person, observing the strength, talent, and potential of this group through meaningful activities and thoughtful conversations.

A major highlight was the former LEAD Scholars Panel, where past participants shared powerful insights, encouragement, and real experiences from their leadership journeys. Doc Hendley, founder and President of Wine to Water, also presented, moving and inspiring attendees with a focus on service, leadership, and global impact. This presentation set a powerful tone for the year ahead. An incredible year of leadership, growth, and discovery lies ahead for this outstanding cohort. You can find the list of Cohort II scholars [here](#).

Super Stats:

- In fall 2025, GEAR UP hosted multiple Mountaineer Expeditions on the campus of Appalachian State University. Over 1,500 students attended these campus visits during the semester!
- The GEAR UP Guarantee, which launched with the high school graduating class of 2020, has produced promising results!
 - GEAR UP Guarantee students (Cohort 1) had a 1.3% higher 4-year graduation rate vs overall Appalachian 4-year graduation rate (55.7% vs 57.0%).
 - GEAR UP Guarantee students (cohort 2) graduated within 3 years at a rate of 13.2% higher than Appalachian overall (22.9% vs 9.7%).

(To the right) A new interactive map features enrollment data from every UB graduate from the past decade and isn't exclusive to North Carolina. It includes schools from as far away as California and Texas.



LEAD students pose for a photo with Wine to Water founder & President, Doc Hendley.

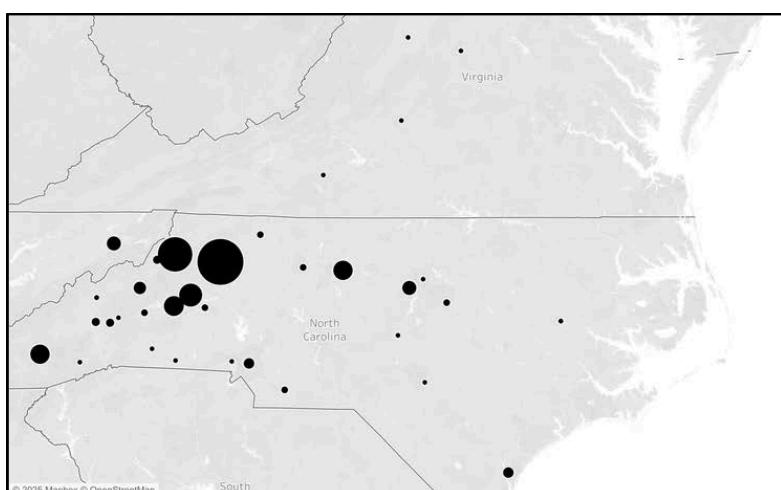


UB Saturday Academies Bring Learning to Life

This fall semester, Upward Bound hosted three Saturday Academies bringing together students from all seven UB partner schools on App State's campus. Students participated in a variety of engaging workshops, including interactive math, outdoor art, hands-on science, life skills development, and guided support with FAFSA and RDS completion. Students shared that these experiences helped them feel more motivated and better prepared for their next steps in school. Upward Bound staff and instructors are proud of the dedication, curiosity, and growth demonstrated by students throughout the semester.

Postsecondary Enrollment Map

A new Upward Bound resource is available: A map indicating where scholars have attended college over the last decade. This new interactive map includes data from 2014–2024 and will be updated as new data becomes available. You can access the map [here](#).





University of Richmond Trip

On October 3, seven 7th grade YES students travelled to Virginia for a tour of the University of Richmond. Students explored the university's natural history museum, ancient Egypt and mummy exhibit, as well as the virtual reality lab. Students also explored the Visual Arts Center of Richmond and received a personal tour of the Eleanor Anderson exhibit.



YES Students spent two days in Richmond, VA, exploring the University of Richmond and the Visual Arts Center.



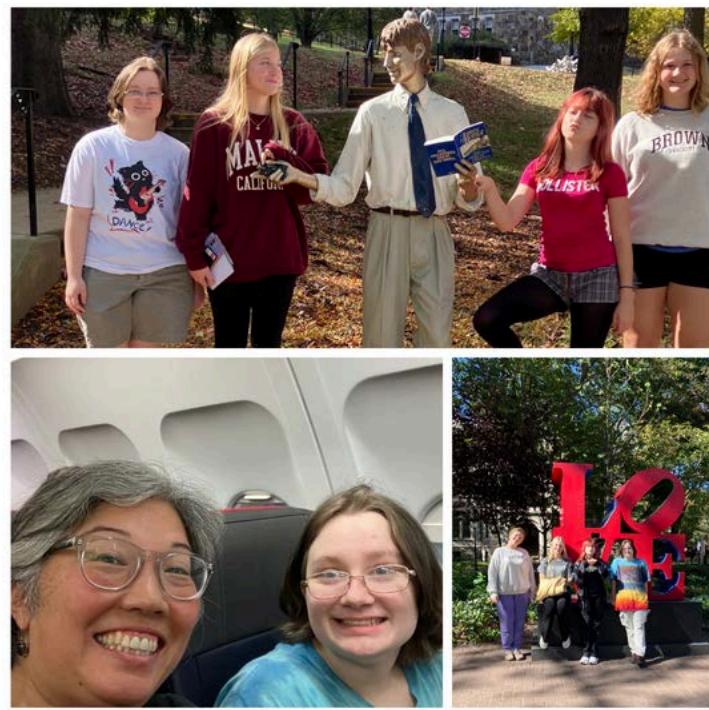
YES Students explore the Catawba Science Center to celebrate the end of the fall semester after-school program.

After School Celebration

On November 15, YES students travelled to the Catawba Science Center to celebrate the end of their after-school program for the semester. Students participated in a special exhibit called the Mindbender Mansion. This exhibit was an escape room with four stations: the parlor, the kitchen, the map room, and the library. Each station had three puzzles to solve. After completing all four stations, students received a certificate of completion.

Pennsylvania Field Trip

In October, Program Director Susan Saule travelled with four YES students to Pennsylvania for campus visits to Bucknell University, University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie Mellon University, and Lehigh University. This was two students' first time flying. Students also experienced Wegmans, had Boba, and rode the Duquesne Incline in Pittsburgh.



Snapshots from the October Pennsylvania trip.

APPSTATE

Advise NC

Advise NC Listening Tour

Advise NC at Appalachian State University kicked off a statewide listening tour on October 28, hosting the first of three sessions to gather essential feedback on the program's new state-based model. The goal is to collect input from educators, partner organizations, and community members regarding how best to implement the new approach.

The event featured prominent guests, including MC Belk Pilon from the John M. Belk Endowment and former North Carolina State Senator, Deanna Ballard. Appalachian State University's Vice Chancellor of Research and Innovation, Dr. Christine Hendren, provided opening remarks, highlighting the new framework's potential to leverage the university's research enterprise to improve futures for high school students.

Next Step Advisers were central to the discussions, with Ashe County's adviser, Lorena Calvillo, detailing her daily duties and projects. Fellow advisers guided conversations at every table. Following the sessions in the piedmont (November 19) and coastal regions (December 3), Advise NC will use the compiled stakeholder feedback to enhance and tailor the new model to best meet the unique needs of NC students and communities.



The Advise NC at App State team pose for a photo at the Oct. 28 listening tour.

ACHS "Counts Down" to College

Ashe County High School successfully held its "Countdown to College Week" on October 14, an event planned and organized by Advise NC Next Step Adviser, Lorena Calvillo. Lorena structured the evening around a Q&A panel that brought together current college students, parents, ACHS staff, and admissions representatives from institutions including Appalachian State University and Lenoir Rhyne University.

ACHS principal Dustin Farmer used the panel to stress the critical importance of utilizing school resources, specifically directing students to "go see Miss Lorena." He highlighted that she, as well as GEAR UP Coordinator Hope Gambill, is deeply knowledgeable and ready to help guide students through the college application process. Following the Q&A, Lorena organized several practical breakout sessions focused on essential topics like navigating financial aid, completing the FAFSA, and how to find and apply for scholarships. The most popular breakout session of the night was the scholarship presentation, led by ACHS Student Services Receptionist Molly Porter. This session explained the different types of scholarships, application timing, and best practices for searching and applying for scholarships.



Snapshots from the "Countdown to College Week" family night.

APPSTATE

Learning in the Professions

ETL In Greece

Earlier this year, Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL) returned to Athens College, a historic K-12 private school in Greece, for a second year of successful professional development (PD). ETL Project Director Dr. Rachel Shepherd and Leading EDge Learning Co-founder Nancy Mangum led workshops for 33 highly engaged teachers.

The rigorous training focused on ETL's model, needs-assessments, self-directed learning plans, and a deep dive into micro-credentials—covering how to find, complete, and fund them. Athens College President Dr. Spiro Pollalis, confirmed his school's commitment to offering teachers the best possible PD opportunities. Dr. Shepherd noted that the participating educators, who spanned all grade levels, were "like sponges" and highly interested, observing a commonality in educational challenges faced by teachers in both Greece and the US. ETL is now utilizing the insights gathered during this exchange to conduct a case study, with plans for an upcoming publication to promote their impactful work. To read more, click [here](#).

New Micro-Credentials

The ETL PRIME (Professionals Refining Instructional Inventories through Microcredential Expertise) cohort, supported by Heather Childress from the ETL team, is nearing the publication of seven new, highly anticipated micro-credentials. This project is the result of a strong partnership with seven dedicated teachers who developed the content. These valuable professional learning resources are scheduled for publication on Digital Promise this spring.

The content of these micro-credentials directly addresses extensive feedback received over the past four years from ETL and GREAT STEM participants. Educators requested more focused credentials, specifically in STEM and content areas. As a result, the new offerings focus on high-demand subjects, including math, science, Exceptional Children, and outdoor learning. By utilizing teacher feedback as the foundation for the credentials, the training is guaranteed to align with current educational needs.



Snapshots from Greece.

Remote Learning Workshop

On November 19, the Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL) team, in collaboration with Think, Do, Thrive, successfully hosted a crucial remote learning workshop on App State's campus.

The event brought together educators from Watauga, Ashe, and Avery counties to refine their skills in next-generation remote instruction. Participants were taught best practices for remotely teaching students across all grade levels, from kindergarten through high school. A central goal of the workshop was to empower teachers to think creatively about what effective remote learning can look like. Furthermore, the sessions encouraged attendees to break away from ineffective strategies that became commonplace during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. This initiative is supported by the work of Dr. Jessie Peterson of the ETL team and ensures that local educators are prepared to deliver high-quality instruction during any necessary remote learning days.



Participants in the Remote Learning Workshop pose for a photo at Appalachian State University.

SAVE
THE DATE

*ETL's Empower EDU Conference:
June 16-17, 2026 | Greensboro, NC*

ETL Innovation Cohort

On October 9th, the Innovation Cohort, led by Holly Weaver, met at App State for a day of collaboration and hands-on learning focused on student self-directed learning (SDL). Participants explored practical strategies for supporting students in SDL, shared innovative classroom practices, and strengthened their capacity to lead peers.



Students at ACHS interact with workforce breakfast guests. GEAR UP staff was also present at the event.



Workforce Breakfasts

On Ramp Appalachia was busy this quarter hosting several of its hallmark junior workforce breakfasts across western North Carolina schools. These events are crucial for high school juniors who plan to enter the workforce immediately after graduation, providing them with a casual setting to chat with local professionals about various careers over breakfast.

The Ashe County High School Workforce Breakfast took place on November 14. Students had the opportunity to meet with representatives from local companies and businesses, including GE Aerospace, Ashe County Social Services, Ashe Memorial Hospital, and Krause Family Arborist, among numerous others. These breakfasts are a fantastic way to introduce graduating students to potential career pathways right here in our community.

READ MORE

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

Latest Feature Stories



A Month in Review: November

Dec 4, 2025

November was another busy month for the Office of Rural Promise!

[Front page](#)



Appalachian GEAR UP and the Society for Science Launch the Western North Carolina Research Fellows Program

Dec 1, 2025

Appalachian GEAR UP Partnership, housed within the Office of Rural

[READ MORE](#)

[READ MORE](#)

[READ MORE](#)



What is the NC Rural Education Collaborative?

Nov 21, 2025

The NC Rural Education Collaborative is the new state affiliate of the

[Front page](#), Rural Education Collaborative

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 from your program with Elysee Gibson (gibsonse@appstate.edu), and we will work together to spread the news of your great work!