



# **TNSPRA**

**2024 Conference**

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2024  
FRIDAY MARCH 1, 2024  
FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE**



**CINDY WARNER, APR**

Cindy Warner, APR has been leading Shelby County School District's PR in Birmingham, AL since 2002, with over 30 years in media, non-profit, and educational PR. She's held multiple terms as president of ALSPRA, is NSPRA's Southeast VP, and contributes as a board liaison and APR Study Course facilitator. Her work has earned her NSPRA's Gold Medallion and Golden Achievement awards, among other accolades including Communicator of the Year from ALSPRA.



**SHAYLA CANNADY**

Shayla Cannady serves as the Chief Communications Officer for Chiefs for Change, bringing extensive experience in leading strategic communication efforts to promote educational initiatives. Her prior role as Chief Communications Officer for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools involved developing communication strategies to support the district's community, acting as a key public relations advisor. Before this, she was the Assistant Director of Public Relations for Orange County Public Schools in Florida, contributing to impactful PR campaigns and community engagement.



**JUANITA TRAUGHBER, APR**

Juanita Traughber is a seasoned public relations expert and former journalist, now serving as the communications director at the University School of Nashville. Leading a team of four, she oversees the school's branding, produces various publications, manages marketing and advertising, handles media relations, and advises on crisis preparedness and response. Additionally, Traughber contributes to the PRSA Southeast District Board as treasurer and was the president of the PRSA Nashville chapter in 2022.



**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2024**

*Public Safety Center, 304 Beasley Court, Franklin, TN*

**7:45-8:30 Doors open, Panera Coffee and Breakfast sponsored by Finalsite**

**8:15-8:30 Welcome, TNSPRA Leadership, Finalsite, ParentSquare, and K12 Insight**

**8:30-9:00 Kickstart Laughs & Networking, with Maury County Schools Superintendent Lisa Ventura**



Get ready for a blend of humor and insight as we break the ice with Maury County Schools Superintendent Lisa Ventura, President Jack Cobb, President-elect Collin Brooks, and VP Kate Crowder as they set the stage for an empowering day. Jack and Collin will then guide us through some TNSPRA business, introduce our sponsors, and final opening remarks.

**9:00-10:00 The Role of Comms in the Rhythm of U2, Cindy Warner, APR, NSPRA Southwest Regional Vice President**

Enjoy this engaging and unique session from our regional representative, where the iconic music of U2 serves as a backdrop for exploring essential aspects of the school PR professional's role. Drawing inspiration from the band's timeless lyrics, delve into the world of leadership, ethics, crisis communications, media relations, and much more.

**10:00-10:15 Break**

**10:15-11:15 Benchmarks of a Communications Professional, Shayla Cannady, APR, Sponsored by ParentSquare**

This workshop is focused on honing your communication skills and leading your school communication efforts to victory. Explore innovative strategies, anticipate challenges, and learn how to leverage standard campaigns to elevate your school's communication game. Discover the winning characteristics needed to lead your team and secure your future success as a school PR pro.

**11:15-12:15 When the News is Your Enemy, Juanita Traughber, MBA, APR, and Jessica Bliss**

In the era of exaggerated truths and fake news, the spread of information can quickly get out of control. Two recovering journalists offer their top 5 tips for accurately sharing your school's actions and policies while combating disinformation and misinformation. Their strategy covers handling and overcoming the internal rumor mill and media wildfire with specific tactics based on their experiences as former media members and now public relations professionals at Nashville independent schools.

**12:15-1:00 Lunch Break**

**Sponsored by Peachjar and Loop Messaging**



**1:00-2:30 TNSPRA, TOSS, and Tell: Amplifying Voices in Education, Dr. Gary Lilly**

In this session led by TOSS Executive Director Dr. Gary Lilly, we will delve into the Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents' crucial role and offerings, grasp the legislative nuances impacting Tennessee's education, and reveal effective strategies for school communicators to assist superintendents. Additionally, we will discuss an upcoming collaborative initiative between TOSS and TNSPRA aimed at launching a statewide, affirmative public education campaign. This session offers an opportunity for us to learn about forthcoming legislative developments and to join forces with school superintendents in crafting a positive educational narrative throughout Tennessee.

**2:30-3:00 Utilizing Mass Comms for more than Announcements, TNSPRA's Ryan Sutton, Sponsored by Loop**

Ryan Sutton, the Communications and PR Coordinator for Anderson County Schools, will be presenting best practices to increase community engagement and reachability. In particular, the different ways he's been able to increase his audience for PR-related activities such as broadcasts, news stories, and ball games.

**3:00-4:00 AI Magic in Education: The Customer Service Revolution, Joe Douglas, Sponsored by K12 Insight**

Immerse yourself in the future of customer service — join K12 Insight to hear about the power of generative AI! Learn how they're revolutionizing customer service delivery in school districts across Tennessee and the country with streamlined communications, automated workflows, and an always-on, AI-powered chatbot. Stay until the end for an exclusive opportunity to interact directly with the technology, asking challenging questions on a sandbox account to experience firsthand the innovation reshaping K-12 communication dynamics.

**5:00-7:00 TNSPRA Mixer at the Franklin Mercantile Deli  
Sponsored by K12 Insight**



Join us at the Franklin Mercantile Deli for an evening of connection and camaraderie! This year's Annual TNSPRA Mixer sponsored by K12 Insight, is a perfect setting to unwind and mingle with fellow communications professionals in a relaxed atmosphere. Light hors d'oeuvres and drinks will be served in the charming downtown Franklin locale. 100 4th Avenue North, Downtown Franklin, TN 37064



**JESSICA BLISS**

Jessica Bliss is an acclaimed journalist and communications expert, currently serving as the Director of Marketing and Communications at Harpeth Hall, a prestigious all-girls school in Nashville. With a storied 18-year career at The Tennessean and USA Today Network, her work has garnered numerous awards, reflecting her impact on local and national news. At Harpeth Hall, Jessica plays a pivotal role in strategic communications and branding, amplifying the school's vision and the achievements of its community.



**DR. GARY LILLY, TOSS**

Dr. Gary Lilly, with a 30-year distinguished career in education, has been named the Executive Director of TOSS, effective January 1, 2024. His journey in education began as a teacher in Bristol Tennessee City Schools, advancing through roles as technology director, principal, and superintendent, before leading Collierville Schools in West Tennessee for nearly five years. Dr. Lilly's academic background includes a bachelor's degree from Emory & Henry College and advanced degrees from East Tennessee State University. His leadership experience is further highlighted by his tenure on the TOSS board, where he served as Past President and Secretary.



**RYAN SUTTON**

Since 2018, Ryan has directed communications and public relations for Anderson County Schools in the Knoxville Area, managing all aspects of the school system's communications, including social media, public relations, mass communications, crisis/safety communication, and media relations, and serves as the district website administrator and marketing head. Additionally, he administers Anderson County Television (ACTV), producing various programs.



**MELISSA MCCONNELL**

Melissa McConnell plays a key role in NSPRA, focusing on strategic development for major professional development programs and enhancing member engagement. Retiring in June 2022 from Belton School District #124 in Missouri, her diverse career journey began as an elementary library media specialist in 1997, evolving through roles as an educational technology specialist and eventually the district's communications specialist.



**LISA SAUNDERS**

Lisa Saunders is a seasoned educator turned District Outreach & Account Specialist at TeacherLists. With experience as an instructional coach, she's adept at delivering impactful professional development courses to a wide variety of audiences. Lisa's passion lies in leveraging technology to enhance classroom experiences and streamline educational processes. She's dedicated to empowering educators and driving positive change within school districts. She resides in sunny South Florida with her husband and son and loves the outdoors.



**DR. JILL JOHNSON**

Dr. Jill Johnson, with over 30 years in education, is a renowned thought leader specializing in integrating social media into educational settings. At Class Intercom, she has leveraged her background as a high school assistant principal to develop student-led social media programs, enhancing student engagement and participation in storytelling. Her work focuses on the importance of social media in education, preparing students for the professional world. Dr. Jill's dynamic sessions offer practical insights, drawing from her extensive experience and successful implementations across schools, to empower educators and students alike.



**FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2024**

*Public Safety Center, 304 Beasley Court, Franklin, TN*

**7:45-8:30 Doors open, Chick-fil-A Coffee and Breakfast sponsored by Finalsite**

**8:15-8:30 Welcome, TNSPRA Leadership, Finalsite, ParentSquare, and K12 Insight**

**8:30-9:30 Digital Detox, Melissa McConnell, NSPRA Manager of Professional Development and Member Engagement**

"Digital Detox" doesn't have to mean completely staying away from technology, especially when using technology plays a significant role in #SchoolPR! However, preserving our mental bandwidth merits attention and action. Melissa McConnell will share tips, tactics, and even strategies to use on phones and laptops so we can all carve out space to be present with family and friends, stay informed as needed for your career, and recognize when we have reached our own limits.


**9:30-10:30 The Family Mindset, Hayley Forhan, Sponsored by Teacher Lists**

TeacherLists will discuss changing trends in family expectations around back to school—including when and how parents are shopping, communication tips, what information is considered most valuable, common mistakes to avoid, and best practices.

**10:30-10:45 Break**

**10:45-11:45 Building a Team of Social Media Content Creators, Dr. Jill Johnson, Sponsored by Class Intercom**

Would you like help in telling your school's story? Do you sometimes wish you could clone yourself and be in two places at once? This session will empower you to do this by creating and sustaining a social media team. From recruitment to retainment, learn how to select, train, and inspire the students and adults in your district to take ownership of telling their school's story. Walk away with some great tips for motivating others to create content for someone other than themselves!



**11:45-12:00**

Special Awards Presentation with Williamson County Schools Superintendent Jason Golden to present the Tennessee Communicator of the Year

**12:00-12:45 Lunch Break**  
**Sponsored by Teacherlists and Class Intercom**



**12:45-1:45 Chat's the Way (I Like it): What's Next in AI, Kate**

**Crowder**

Discover how the latest ChatGPT iteration isn't just a hat trick — it's a time-reclaiming tool, gifting you hours back in your busy day. Master the art of prompt engineering to co-create original works. Plus, get a front-row seat to a showcase of ChatGPT 4.0's latest, and most interesting use cases. And for the chat-savvy among you, delve into innovative ways you can leverage AI as a personal and professional coaching tool. It's time to get chatty with AI and unlock a world of creative possibilities! I'll also provide you access to all my slide decks to share AI presentations tailored for educators and administrators in your district.

**1:45-2:45 Strategies for K-12 Staff Recruitment, Chad Arnold, Kevin Stevenson, Sponsored by Finalsite**

Join us for an insightful session that delves into the dynamic landscape of staff recruitment in K-12 schools. As the demand for qualified educators and support staff continues to grow, districts are faced with the challenge of attracting top talent. Our session will explore innovative strategies and solutions to address this pressing need. Key Highlights: Understanding the evolving landscape of K-12 school staff recruitment. Exploring creative approaches to attract and retain high-caliber educators. Leveraging technology and digital platforms for efficient recruitment processes. Building effective partnerships with educational institutions to identify and nurture talent. Showcasing successful case studies of districts that have excelled in staff recruitment. Discussing the role of professional development and growth opportunities in retaining top-tier staff. "Bringing the Best to the Best" aims to equip education leaders with the tools and insights needed to overcome staffing challenges and ensure that K-12 schools continue to thrive. Join us to be a part of this crucial conversation shaping the future of education staffing.

2:45-3:00 Wrap-up, & Prizes  
with Jack Cobb, Brooke Davis, Collin Brooks

PLEASE THANK OUR SPONSORS



**KATE CROWDER**

Kate Crowder, with eighteen years at the Germantown Municipal School District in Tennessee, was named a 2024 NSPRA Front Runner for the Southeast Region. As Communications Supervisor, she leads a team focused on staff development, community partnerships, and district storytelling. Beyond her local impact, Kate has presented to SPRAs across the region NC, SC, AL, OK, and KS, and is preparing for an upcoming TOSS meeting. Kate is a TNSPRA past-president and loves to collaborate with her Tennessee peers.



**CHAD ARNOLD**

Chad Arnold based in Nashville, TN joined Finalsite in 2022 after working at Blackboard since 2020, supporting sales and client success teams. Chad focuses on helping K-12 districts improve and rethink their communications and community engagement strategies. For the last 15+ years, Chad has worked with public sector organizations to leverage technology to improve operations and deliver high-quality constituent and community services.



**KEVIN STEPHENSON**

Kevin Stephenson based in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, joined Finalsite in 2021 after an impressive 26-year career in public education, including roles as CTO, Communications Director, and School Safety Coordinator. With certifications across Microsoft and Google tools, Kevin's expertise and extensive board experience make him a valuable asset in leveraging technology for educational excellence.



# TNSPRA

## Executive Council



### **Jack Cobb, President**

Jack joined Maury County Public Schools at the beginning of 2020 and has been a member of TNSPRA since that time. Jack worked in corporate communications for Saturn/GM from 1999 to 2016. Jack is a one-person communications department for 23 schools and over 13,000 students. His indirect team includes web and social media admins at each school.

### **Collin Brooks, President-Elect**

Collin joined Johnson City Schools at the beginning of the 2017 school year and has been a member of TNSPRA since that time. After being nominated by his coworkers, Collin was selected to NSPRA's 35 under 35 class in the 2022-2023 school year.



### **Brooke Davis, Secretary & Treasurer**

Brooke began working in the Williamson County School District in 2009. She moved to the District offices in 2022, joined TNSPRA in 2023, and was elected secretary and treasurer. Brooke is currently the Communications Manager, serving over 42,000 students and 52 schools.

### **Maria Greene, VP of Membership Development**

Maria Greene, Ed.S, serves as Communications and Special Projects Coordinator for Maryville City Schools. Maria is excited to connect with our newest TNSPRA members and find out how current members want to see TNSPRA develop in the future.



### **Kate Crowder, VP of Professional Development**

Kate joined Germantown Municipal School District in 2015 and has been a member of TNSPRA since that time. One of her proudest achievements is building her one-person communications team into a three-person team. Kate is a 2024 NSPRA Front Runner and extremely passionate about professional development.

### **Tyler Hill, Past-President**

Tyler joined Arlington Community Schools in 2018 and has been a member of TNSPRA since that time. He also served as TNSPRA President from 2020-2021 (partial year) and 2022-2023. Tyler was selected to NSPRA's 35 under 35 class in the 2020-2021 school year after being nominated by fellow TNSPRA colleagues.



### **James Evans, APR Advisor**

James serves as the Chief Communications Officer for Rutherford County Schools, the fourth largest school district in Tennessee with 51,000 students and 50 schools. He began working for RCS in 2004 after working as a print reporter and editor in Middle Tennessee. He joined TNSPRA for the collaboration opportunities with other like-minded professionals throughout Tennessee school districts. He has previously served as president of TNSPRA. James earned his Accreditation in Public Relations in 2017 and now serves as the TNSPRA APR advisor.



[www.tnspra.org](http://www.tnspra.org)

CONSIDER JOINING THE  
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE  
IN THE 2024-2025 SCHOOL YEAR

Are you ready to elevate your professional journey and make a significant impact on the educational communications community? The Tennessee School Public Relations Association (TNSPRA) is inviting passionate and dedicated members to volunteer for our Executive Council. This is a unique opportunity to shape the future of school communications in Tennessee and beyond. If you're interested in leveraging your skills and passion for the betterment of our professional community, we want to hear from you. Please reach out to Maria Greene at [maria.greene@maryville-schools.org](mailto:maria.greene@maryville-schools.org) to express your interest or to learn more about this rewarding opportunity.

PLEASE THANK OUR SPONSORS



The Tennessee School Public Relations Association is proud to present Williamson County Schools Executive Director of Communications Carol Birdsong with the 2023-24 School Communicator of the Year Award.

With 27 years of experience under her belt, Birdsong is widely known and respected for her leadership and knowledge in the area of school communications. Having witnessed many changes to public education over the years, Birdsong says it is gratifying to see the importance that is being placed on school PR across the state.

"When I started in WCS two-plus decades ago, there were only a handful of full-time school communicators across Tennessee, and the membership in our state organization reflected that small number," said Birdsong. "We now have school communicators across the state, in districts large and small, and I'm so pleased that superintendents, school boards and county commissions recognize the importance of keeping parents and the community informed in an effort to support student achievement. That's why we do what we do."



**2024 TN Communicator of the Year**

