

Victoria Schaefer (Moderator)



Victoria A. Schaefer, PhD, leads SRI's REL Appalachia with a passion for the region, a commitment to improving the lives of its people, and a strong sense of place and how history shapes the context in which schooling occurs. Schaefer offers over twenty years of experience in education, including nearly five years leading training, coaching, and technical support activities for REL Appalachia. Having lived experience as both a classroom teacher and a researcher, Schaefer brings first-hand knowledge of the importance of bringing evidence-based practices to the region's highest-priority needs. Her grassroots perspective of the day-to-day life of educators and students drives a commitment for creating relevant and useful materials based on solid research; that same grassroots experience informs her passion for applied research, knowing personally why finding ways to improve teaching and learning matters. Schaefer centers the needs of educators and students as she engages across the region. She has deep experience in college and career readiness, trauma-sensitive practices, rural education, and data-driven decision making. Schaefer holds a Ph.D. in Education Psychology, Measurement, and Evaluation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thomas Farmer



Tom Farmer is a professor and chair in the Department of Foundations of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has extensive experience conducting partnership research to address the needs of students in diverse rural communities. Farmer grew up in a rural community in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia. He served as principal investigator and director of the National Research Center on Rural Education Support, the first rural R & D center funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. His research in rural education has included a focus on elementary, middle, and high schools with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minority youth in the South and Deep South, and education supports for middle level students in low-resource schools in the Appalachian, Midwest, Northern Plains, and Western regions of the United States. He was principal investigator (with Judith Meece) of the Rural High School Aspirations Study that examined the postsecondary preparation, supports, and goals of over 8,000 rural students across the United States.

Melissa Sadorf



Dr. Melissa Sadorf is the superintendent of the Stanfield Elementary School District in Arizona. In this rural district, she also serves as the business manager, federal grant programs director, and HR director. Prior to her work with Stanfield, Melissa was a teacher, literacy coach, assistant principal and principal. Melissa is the Executive Director of the Arizona Rural Schools Association, the Northern Arizona University Rural Resource Center, and the Arizona Affiliate of ASCD. She is also very involved in the National Rural Education Association where she is currently the President of the Executive Board. She facilitates monthly round tables for rural superintendents, has created a Rural Leaders Network that spans the country, and produces and hosts a podcast called “The Rural Scoop” that highlights best practices in rural school systems. She serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor for Northern Arizona University, teaching educational leadership and principal preparation courses. Melissa can be reached on Twitter at @dr_sadorf, LinkedIn at @velaeducationalconsultants, or through her website at www.velaconsultants.com.

Linda Friedrich



Linda Friedrich, PhD, is the Director of Literacy at WestEd and leads the agency’s Reading Apprenticeship team, which has a proven track record in improving disciplinary literacy in middle school, high school, and college. For nearly three decades, she has worked at the intersection of practice and research to engage teachers in collaboratively improving teaching and learning, with a strong focus on literacy. She is currently the director of two EIR mid-Phase grants: Accelerating Literacy through Positive Relationships and Productive Persistence, which serves rural North Carolina and Pennsylvania, and Reading Apprenticeship for Academic Literacy for All, which is just starting. Prior to joining WestEd, she was the National Writing Project’s Director of Research and Evaluation where she directed two Investing in Innovation grants that focused on improving writing instruction in rural communities across the country.

Darris Means



Dr. Darris R. Means is the Executive Director for Rural and Community-Based Education and an associate professor in the School of Education at University of Pittsburgh. He also serves on the Executive Committee for the National Rural Education Association, a leading voice for rural schools and communities nationwide. Darris has been engaged in research on rural education and STEM education for a decade. His current research focuses on two areas: (a) science learning, opportunities, and resources that support rural students and Black students in their science degree and career trajectories and (b) postsecondary education access and completion for rural students. Darris has published 37 single-authored and co-authored articles and book chapters on topics related to rural education; STEM education; and postsecondary education access, persistence, and completion for rural students, first-generation college students, students from low-income families, and Students of Color.