

PASSION & PURPOSE

THE CFO NEWSLETTER
FALL 2026



Rural Missouri's Future Workforce Goes to School

MORE INSIDE

CFO'S NEW STRATEGIC PLAN

STUDENTS TELL THEIR STORY

MEET RURAL EDUCATION LEADERS

Districts provide pathways to employment, hands-on experience



A MESSAGE FROM WINTER

As a wife, daughter and especially as a mother of two, I spend a lot of time thinking about the future. This does not make me unique, I know. As humans, we evolved to be constantly scanning the horizon for opportunities, threats or the weather ahead. My areas of concern and focus may change day to day, but my hope is always the same: that everyone thrives.

As it turns out, our team at the Community Foundation of the Ozarks thinks about the future a lot as well. In this case, we're thinking about the opportunity we have to make a meaningful impact on the communities we serve.

Earlier this summer, our Board of Directors approved a new strategic plan that will guide our work through 2031. While strategic plans often live behind the scenes, I want to share a bit about what this one represents because it reflects an important evolution for the CFO and our region.

For many years, the CFO has been recognized as one of the nation's most active community foundations, consistently ranking among the top organizations in the country in terms of charitable transactions processed. That accomplishment reflects the trust our donors, fundholders, nonprofit partners and affiliates have placed in us. It is a trust we never take for granted.

At the same time, a 2023 assessment conducted with an outside consultant and input from our board challenged us to think bigger. The question was not whether we could continue providing excellent philanthropic services. We absolutely can. The question was how we could leverage those services, relationships and resources to create even greater impact.

In other words, how do we move from being highly transactional to increasingly transformational?

That challenge inspired the strategic planning work that followed. In partnership with Habitat Communication and Culture, our staff



and board developed a roadmap that focuses not only on what we do, but how we do it — and the change that emerges from that work.

By 2031, we envision a CFO that is helping drive meaningful change across the region, supporting a dynamic affiliate network, operating with greater clarity and efficiency, leveraging our facilities as strategic assets, and serving as a recognized leader within place-based philanthropy.

Those goals begin with the work already underway. Over the next year, we are focused on strengthening our team, refining our operational systems, clarifying how we define and measure impact, supporting success across our affiliate network and continuing progress on our new headquarters.

And none of this happens alone.

I am deeply grateful to the donors, nonprofits, affiliates and partners who make this work possible every day. I am also thankful for our talented staff, who continue to lead with professionalism, adaptability and purpose as we embrace meaningful change. Strategic plans may provide direction, but only a group of people with a clear vision for a better future can make our communities truly thrive.

Winter Kinne is president and CEO of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks.

CFO UPDATES

NEW LEGACY SOCIETY MEMBERS

- Brad and Cara Erwin, Springfield
- Dr. Carol A. Taylor, Springfield

The Legacy Society recognizes donors who make a planned gift to a fund held by the CFO or its affiliate foundations. For more info, visit cfozarks.org/legacy.

AFFILIATE LEADERSHIP UPDATES



Hickory County Community Wellness Foundation

Outgoing: Gary Edwards

Incoming: Dawn Vader

UPCOMING EVENTS

Affiliate Town Halls

- Joplin — Oct. 19, 11:30 a.m.
- Cabool — Oct. 27, 11:30 a.m.
- Nevada — Nov. 4, 11:30 a.m.
- Open to all affiliate board members to learn about the Affiliate Playbook
- Find full event info and more at cfozarks.org/playbook

National Philanthropy Day in Springfield, featuring the Humanitarian of the Year presentation

- Nov. 17, 11 a.m.
- DoubleTree Hotel, Springfield
- Presented with the Missouri Ozark Region Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals
- The 2026 Humanitarian of the Year will be announced in late October; for tickets and more info, go to cfozarks.org/npd



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION of the OZARKS

Passion & Purpose is a quarterly publication of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, a public charitable foundation representing the region of Missouri south of the Missouri River. For more information, call 417-864-6199, email cfo@cfozarks.org or visit cfozarks.org.

Production: Aaron Scott, Kaitlyn McConnell, Matthew Stewart and Matt Lemmon

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF THE OZARKS

CFNS

ACCREDITED
FOUNDATION

Creating Pathways & Pipelines

SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROVIDE BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR RURAL STUDENTS & COMMUNITIES



PHOTO BY KAITLYN MCCONNELL

As the heart of rural communities, school districts set a cadence for much that flows through rural Missouri and beyond.

You see it at ballgames and community gatherings, showcases of support for “our” people and shared values. There’s economic value, as schools, especially in small communities, often serve as one of the largest employers around. But their presence is about even more than those collective community signposts.

“I want people to know that rural schools are the lifeblood of not only

the community, but the state and the nation,” says Dr. Amy Padgett, superintendent of the Bakersfield School District in Ozark County. “This issue of rural education is way bigger than rural education. It is the backbone of our society.”

Among those shared versions of local love is a fact — a target — all these schools share: Preparing students for their futures. That’s through skill development, college prep, exploration of ideas, or connections with a trade.

“Our public schools are working

day in and day out to make sure that students are ready to go out into the workforce,” says Dr. Josh Cotter, director of Southern Missouri Technical Institute in West Plains, a former public school teacher and a board member of the CFO. “I don’t know a single school that we work with that says, ‘I don’t care what happens once they get out of my doors.’”

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOMEGROWN TALENT

The bottom line: Missouri’s public schools create pipelines and

Southern Missouri Technical Institute provides hands-on experience to nursing students. The technical school draws students from 13 school districts, which fund tuition and transportation to its campus in West Plains.

Funding uncertainties challenge school districts across Missouri

Missouri’s public schools are at a crossroads of change as the state grapples with teacher shortages, focus on alternative educational options, local funding shifts and adjustments to a formula that helps fund districts’ operation. Those questions exist alongside the fundamental goal of public schools: to improve life, both now and in the future.

“The bottom line of education has to be quality programs where kids are prepared to fulfill their goals,” says Dr. Karla Eslinger, a former educator who retired as Missouri’s Commissioner of Education earlier this year. “You don’t want to give somebody an inadequate experience just because they live in a ZIP code that’s very rural. I think it’s our responsibility as a state to ensure that no matter where a kid lives, they have access to high-quality programs.”

Generally speaking, funding for Missouri public schools comes from federal, state and local dollars, an equation that means every district’s budget is unique. To help ensure districts have funding to operate, Missouri has

used a formula — largely unchanged since 2005 — to determine the state funding each district receives.

It’s now under review: A task force, appointed by Gov. Mike Kehoe, has been given the responsibility of modernizing the formula. Among other focuses, they are asked to consider the equality of all students, sustainability, incentives and support for non-traditional public school options.

The task force’s feedback is due by December. After that, up to three recommendations will go to the governor, who in turn will pass recommendations to legislators. That uncertainty is a shared concern among Missouri educators, Eslinger says.

“The major concern is the unknown because they don’t know what the new funding formula is going to actually be,” Eslinger says. “Once that task force even finishes their work, it’s handed to the legislators, and the legislators can do whatever they want to with these suggested formulas.”

That question is alongside a need for teachers. According to Saint Louis University’s PRiME Center, which provides evidence on education research and policy for Missouri students, the state’s teacher turnover is more than twice the national average.

That loss is particularly relevant early in teachers’ careers; the center notes that just six in 10 teachers remain in Missouri public education through their sixth year. “It’s also especially high among teachers of color, and teachers in urban, rural and disproportionately low-income school environments,” the center notes.

That turnover also has real educational implications, too, as high turnover is linked to declines in student outcomes. Such factors make this a challenging moment for schools, particularly as public education has become increasingly politicized.

“It’s not supposed to be a political volleyball (but) public education is a very easy target — very easy,” Eslinger says. “And so people use it.”

—by Kaitlyn McConnell



opportunities to prepare students to earn a living after school ends. It's also part of a state-wide priority.

"It is a cornerstone of the 'American Dream,'" says Dr. Karla Eslinger, a former educator who retired as Missouri's Commissioner of Education in 2026. She points to the World War II era when some countries chose not to prioritize education.

"But in the United States, we decided to come together and help each other and make sure everybody had the same opportunities. There's a difference. You have communism and socialism and fascism, but you don't have that here. And the reason is because we take care of each other, and the first thing you do is make sure everybody has a fair playing field."

According to the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development's 2025 annual report, 65% of jobs in Missouri by 2032 will require education and training beyond a high school diploma — a list that includes apprenticeships, certificates, associate degrees and professional education.

That objective includes two goals: That 60% of working-age Missourians ages 25 to 64 will earn a postsecondary degree or credential, and a 70% participation rate in the labor force to support Missouri's economic growth.



PHOTO BY KAITLYN MCCONNELL

High school students from districts around West Plains study auto mechanics technology, one of the programs offered by Southern Missouri Technical Institute.

"As of the most recent data, 52.2% of working-age adults had earned a credential, and 63.1% were actively participating in the labor force," the report notes. "These updated figures reflect incremental progress toward Missouri's long-term goals and underscore the continued need to expand access to education and training opportunities across all regions and populations."

Local school districts are working to meet that moment. At Everton R-III, a district northwest of Springfield with about 170 total students, that work includes homegrown apprenticeship programs focused on education, maintenance and healthcare.

"We do a lot of our apprenticeships on campus," says Dr. Will Darter, superintendent of the Dade County district. "So the minute that

they graduate, they have a skill, but also they have been working, and they've been earning money as a young person with experiences."

Everton is also gearing up for the creation of a new school farm, a reflection of local desire to help students earn industry-recognized credentials in areas like livestock valuation, dairy cattle, soils and small gas engines.

"All of that just opens up doors for our students," says J.T. Asher, the school's ag teacher, of the work and credentials. "I've had students that use this same curriculum and those certifications to leverage jobs and become successful in those different areas."

About 135 miles southeast of Everton, that work is also seen at Bakersfield, a community of about 185 people in Ozark County. Through passed-down connections, boiler-making has

Philanthropy opens opportunities for rural students, schools

Philanthropy plays a valuable role in advancing rural education. While it can't be considered part of school districts' core revenue, charitable funding — from scholarships to grants — has a crucial place in advancing opportunities in the classroom and supporting students' futures, particularly in a time of flux for funding.

"Many small schools struggle with per-pupil funding models, economies of scale, and challenging tax bases, and are having to make hard choices with already challenging budgets and potential unfilled or underfilled roles," says Taylor McCabe-Juhnke, executive director of the Rural Schools Collaborative, a CFO agency partner that works to build sustainable rural communities through a focus on place, teachers and philanthropy.

From her perspective, philanthropy — and greater community conversations — are part of forging a productive future for rural districts.

"We need to rethink rural school challenges; these are not siloed to K-12, but are instead an opportunity for community-wide solutions," McCabe-Juhnke continues. "Nonprofits,

higher-ed, philanthropy and definitely individuals have a great opportunity to wrap around and champion their local schools, from volunteering time, giving resources, or building creative partnerships."

The CFO has long had a commitment to this work. An example is its Rural School Partnership, an effort that began in 2009 to encourage rural school districts to establish school foundations. Today, about 100 districts and foundations have partnered with the CFO to raise private dollars for needs and special projects not covered through public funding. That commitment is also seen through the Ozarks Teacher Corps, a program that supports future educators with funds for their college education and professional development if they commit to teaching in a rural district for at least three years after graduation.

Grant funding, of course, is a big part of this work. In partnership with the CFO, the Louis L. and Julia Dorothy Coover Charitable Foundation grants annually to support needs in districts across central and southern Missouri. In May, 24 rural school districts and school

foundations received \$98,000 to "amplify local voices, showcase student success and strengthen community connections." Supported projects ranged from books and supplies for a literacy program that engages students, families and staff, to the creation of a mural that highlights growing up in rural America.

That philanthropic support also translates through actions by people whose connections — with a community or a cause — lead them to give back. Scholarships are a key example: The CFO distributes more than \$1.7 million each year for college, graduate and technical education. Many of those scholarships are created by donors with a desire to make a long-term impact on the lives of people in their communities.

"The CFO's scholarship program exists because of the hundreds of donors who choose to invest in students," says Beth Hersh, the CFO's director of scholarships. "Their generosity creates life changing opportunities and makes a direct, measurable impact on students' ability to pursue higher education and reach their goals."

—by Kaitlyn McConnell

become a desired career path for local students, prompting the school to start its own welding-trades program.

For those seeking training in other industries, Bakersfield is one of 13 south-central high schools that buses students to SoMoTech in West Plains — five days a week, even though Bakersfield is a four-day school — to earn certifications prior to graduation.

“Our kids that take our vocational courses, they’re very committed to school,” says Stephanie Guffey, Bakersfield’s high school principal. “They’re willing to go beyond what the rest of our student body does, and willingly take it, just to be able to set themselves up for career success.”

Across Missouri, technical education is seeing an increase. According to the 2025 MDHEWD report, enrollment in public community and technical colleges grew 2.9% between 2020 and 2024, with 4.3% growth from ’23 to ’24.

That opportunity for career and technical education is a win for students, particularly in rural areas with high levels of poverty, says Cotter.

“Our area is particularly impoverished — I mean, that’s the kindest word I can use,” he says. “(Career and technical education), in my opinion, is the fastest way out of that.”

That “grow-your-own” ethos is at the heart of SoMoTech, which began in 1970 when locals saw a need for nurses. In response, they passed a levy to fund the creation of the institute. Today, much of its work is partnering with local high schools to get students ready to hit the ground running after graduation through certifications and “stackable” credentials. In SoMoTech’s case, schools pay the students’ expenses — kept as low as possible, but still about \$2,100 a year per student — and transportation costs.

“They are ready to go to work when they’re done,” Cotter says, giving an example of the school’s welding program: “A high school student comes through here for two years and could theoretically get a job ... for \$30 an hour.”

Rural districts also connect students with focuses like science and technology. In Bakersfield, a biomedical class for high school students features a new “Anatomage” table, allowing students to

virtually see layers of body systems. The class, as well as one in the Clearwater School District in Piedmont, are delivered as part of “Project Lead the Way,” a curriculum that focuses on linking students to “career-connected learning experiences,” as PLTW’s website notes.

“We want ways to help prepare our students who are underserved and impoverished to be able to have some experience, or have a step up,” says Jessica Polk Sentell, a board member for the Clearwater School Foundation. “Maybe they don’t think they’re qualified, or maybe they’ve never seen anybody in their family do that. (We’re) trying to provide some of those types of opportunities.”

“It lets them think, ‘Maybe I can do this. Maybe this is a possibility for me,’ and I think that’s really, really important for students.”

HOW DOES THIS WORK HAPPEN?

These efforts and many others take more than can-do attitude.

They cost money — a factor that has become increasingly challenging as districts are faced with questions about funding. The issue runs from the creation of new statewide formulas to local questions, such as Senate Bill 3, which limited property tax increases in some counties and circumstances across Missouri.

Grant funding can help. The PLTW curriculum at Clearwater was made possible by a \$23,350 grant from the CFO and the Louis L. and Julia Dorothy Coover Charitable Foundation. That Anatomage table now at Bakersfield? It cost \$125,000 and arrived over the summer thanks to grant funding.

But as those districts know, funding doesn’t always work out. Both districts lost other grants they had been awarded, either through rescission or an unexpected inability to make the required match due to other cuts.

Finding sustainable, reliable solutions that school districts can count on is part of how this work endures. And, at the end of the school day, the benefit to the student is also a benefit to the state.

“So many of our kids are very good at hard work,” says Guffey, Bakersfield’s principal. “What I think keeps our infrastructure together and our country together, it is the people who have that work ethic in rural America.”

—by Kaitlyn McConnell



“A high school student comes through here for two years and *could* theoretically get a job ... for \$30 an hour.”

DR. JOSH COTTER
DIRECTOR, SOUTHERN
MISSOURI TECHNICAL
INSTITUTE

New CFO podcast explores vital role of rural schools

With about 260 people on the payroll, Dallas County R-1 is the largest employer in the county. The district serves about 1,500 students in Buffalo, the county seat with roughly 3,500 residents.

Those numbers are the starting point for the first episode of “Our School, Our Heart,” a podcast from the Community Foundation of the Ozarks that examines the vital role public schools play in small towns across rural Missouri.

“One of the things that I think we see over time in smaller rural communities is that the school district is what keeps that community alive,” says Dr. Laura O’Quinn, superintendent of Dallas County R-1. “If at any point that school district declines or consolidates or goes away, the community does as well. Because if our school district is thriving, our community is thriving.”

What makes Buffalo worth a closer look is how deliberately its school has stepped outside its own walls. Sue Dyle, a retired educator who serves on the Dallas County Community Foundation board, points to Growth in the Rural Ozarks, a CFO initiative that brought the district to the same table as the city, local industry and civic groups.

“It’s really easy for schools to be siloed, because they don’t really need the outside engagement,” Dyle says. “What our school system chose to do was not that.”

That partnership shows up most visibly at the Dallas County Technical Center, where students train in welding, health sciences, auto technology and criminology alongside local employers. For Hollie Elliott, who works in economic development for Dallas County and serves on the CFO board, the goal has shifted.

“We’ve done a really good job of showing them pathways outside of the community,” Elliott says. “But now we’re trying to show them there’s a loop back in. You can start a business here. You can have a family here.”

—by Matthew Stewart

To listen, go to cfozarks.org/podcast or search “Community Foundation of the Ozarks” on all major podcast platforms.



Cabool R-IV students make their ‘Bark’

AFTER LOCAL PAPER CLOSES, STUDENT-LED MAGAZINE TELLS SCHOOL’S STORY

Schools, especially in small towns, don’t simply exist — they are a key part of local life. In Cabool, that reality extends to keeping neighbors connected via *The Bark*, a student-led publication that’s printed and mailed to most homes within the district.

“You can go to the gas station and pick one up in town, but if it arrives at your house, that’s even more convenient for folks,” says Dr. Nathan Christeson, Cabool R-IV School District’s director of communications, an alum of the district and leader of the *Bark* project. He says the project has been a good way of keeping the school and community connected, and engaging students in that process.

“Pretty much from start to finish, this is kind of (the students’) task and kind of their baby,” he says.

The Bark — a full-color, glossy magazine named in line with the school’s bulldog mascot — came to be a few years ago after the local newspaper closed. For decades, the paper had been a connection point between the Texas County-based district and the wider area.

“Once (the newspaper) went away, if folks weren’t on Facebook, they were just kind of disconnected from the school,” Christeson says. “We were trying to figure out, ‘How could we continue to tell our story? How can we continue to tell the good things that are happening at Cabool?’”

They first began an email newsletter, but that didn’t feel the same in terms of audience and reach. Christeson pitched the idea of print — and was given the green light as long as he got grants to cover it. One of them was from the CFO and the Louis L. and Julia Dorothy Coover Charitable Foundation, which granted \$5,000 in May as part of the Coover/RSP Celebrate Rural Grants.

Today, students go through a selection process to be in the class where they produce the biannual magazine, which covers stories from siblings’ beekeeping hobby to the school’s



PROVIDED BY CABOOL R-IV

Addison Dotson, a senior at Cabool High School, works on a story in *The Bark*. The student magazine is supported by a recent Coover/RSP Celebrate Rural grant.



Dr. Nathan Christeson, Cabool R-IV’s director of communications, shows off past issues of *The Bark*. Filling a gap left after the local newspaper closed, the student-led magazine connects the school district to the broader community.

PHOTO BY KAITLYN MCCONNELL

sports success and FFA’s trip to a national convention.

“They are the boots on the ground,” Christeson says of the students, who he refers to as interns in the school’s communications department. “They know all those little, small stories. As the communications director, people just expect me to know everything, (but) I don’t know if I don’t know. And so sometimes, in those situations, a really cool story will

come up and it’s like, ‘Oh, I had no idea.’”

Ultimately, it’s about creating a sense of connection, building pride in what a small school can do, and finding purpose, which has led at least one student to pursue communications professionally.

“I think a lot of kids have that school pride; they want to tell the positive things that are happening,” Christeson says, noting that it’s in contrast to a stigma that a small school can be limiting. Not true, he says, pointing out the fact that the district has been Family, Community and Career Leaders of America national champions twice in recent years.

“Just because we are small doesn’t mean we can’t do really big things and really cool things,” he says. “I think a lot of our students have seen the product that we’ve put out and they’re like, ‘Hey, I want to be a part of that’ — of sharing the good news that’s happening with their peers.”

—by Kaitlyn McConnell

2026 COOVER/RSP CELEBRATE RURAL GRANTS

In addition to Cabool R-IV, 23 school districts and school foundations received Coover/RSP Celebrate Rural Grants to amplify local voices, showcase student success and strengthen community connections. Find a full list of recipients at cfozarks.org/cooverrsp26.

PASSION *for* PROGRESS

Three leaders moving the needle in their communities through the power of philanthropy

STORIES BY KAITLYN MCCONNELL

Nicole McCain

KINDERGARTEN TEACHER · WAYNESVILLE R-VI

Nicole McCain has taught kindergartners for three years, but in her heart, she's been a teacher her entire life. The Waynesville native grew up in the Pulaski County community and had great role models as a kid, she says — but it was more than that. As she puts it: “I know that teaching is what I was made to do and it is not just a career for me, but a huge blessing!”

She answered that call in high school by working at a local daycare. In college, McCain was a member of Ozarks Teacher Corps, a CFO program that provides scholarships and training to future teachers who commit to teaching in a rural district for three years.

“I had a huge sense of security and support through the team that absolutely carried me to the finish line of my degree,” McCain says of the Teacher Corps. “I got to experience amazing workshops with other vested, retired and experienced educators and take their advice and practices with me into the classroom.”

McCain has already paid that experience forward as a member of the Rural Schools Collaborative's Emergent Educators Advisory Council. The cohort, comprising nine rural educators early in their careers, advises the RSC.

Though early into her career, her experience with the advisory council and the relationships she's built are shaping her personal mission: making a difference for people.

“It is hard when kids struggle outside of school, whether it be rough home lives or the literal unknowns they go through,” McCain says, but notes a key factor is her ability to care for them consistently. “So many things are outside of my control as an educator, but the kids I teach are my priority. I know that the opportunity I have with them is to be the consistency and love they all need.

“Every child is spectacular and so, so amazing in their own way and it makes my heart soar!”



Will Darter

SUPERINTENDENT · EVERTON R-III

Will Darter chose to champion rural education.

The superintendent of the Everton R-III School District began his career in an urban setting before coming to rural Dade County with about 170 students and, at the time, declining enrollment.

One of the first changes he made: a fresh coat of paint.

“We had about 135 folks that came onto our campus — all stakeholders from every area of our community — and we painted these walls of the hallway,” says Darter.

That work — which also involved refreshed learning spaces and a new strategic plan — was part of a commitment and an affirmation: Everton kids deserve a great experience. And, since Darter's arrival more than three years ago, enrollment has increased.

“One of the big reasons that we put updating our school as one of (our highest priorities) wasn't because we were hoping to have a state-of-the-art cool school,” Darter says. “It was because people believe what they see, and as they saw us taking care of our kids, then they were like, ‘OK. This is important to the school to take care of kids. How can we get behind this?’”

Other focuses include supporting apprenticeships in education, healthcare and facility management; helping students earn industry-recognized credentials; and prioritizing new facilities like a school farm. Some of this is made possible by grants — which he uses artificial intelligence to find and apply for — but also by leaning into community and finding win-win partnerships, such as with local vendors.

“I think in rural education, we're like, ‘Oh, we don't have a lot of money,’ or the ‘scarcity’ mindset,” Darter says, acknowledging those realities. “But where we don't have those resources, we make up for in great partners. And if we can put the needs of our students first, it's amazing what we can all do for kids.”



Jessica Polk Sentell

BOARD MEMBER · CLEARWATER SCHOOL FOUNDATION, PIEDMONT

Rural Missouri and a public school education set the stage for Jessica Polk Sentell's journey to Washington — first through a national fellowship, then work at the Pentagon — and back home to teach high school.

“I had a really awesome career (in Washington); got to do mind-blowing, once-in-a-lifetime kind of things that were very, very cool,” she says. Despite that success, coming home to Piedmont was always part of the plan.

“We wanted to raise our kids here,” she says. “We wanted them to have that same rural experience.”

After moving back in 2012, Sentell began teaching government at Piedmont's Clearwater High School. The decision to return to her alma mater also continued a family legacy, as her mother and grandmother also taught at the Wayne County district.

“My family has been very connected to the district,” she says. “I care about public education and education in rural areas.”

Today, she works in the nonprofit sector but serves on the Clearwater School Foundation board, which has funded needs like new playground equipment, band instruments, visits from traveling performers and field trips to St. Louis. Sentell helps secure grants that expand educational needs and cultural opportunities in a community of about 1,900 people and a median household income of just over \$40,000.

“I was very fortunate that I had a family that cared very much about making sure I knew that there was a much bigger world out there,” she says. “Not a lot of people from here get that opportunity, and so we have just sort of made it our mission to enhance the educational experience here.”



WHO INSPIRES YOU? Send your suggestions of individuals moving the needle in your community to Kaitlyn McConnell, the CFO's writer in residence, at kmcconnell@cfozarks.org.



PROVIDED BY NIANGUA R-V SCHOOL DISTRICT

PARTING SHOT: Any business leader worth their salt knows one thing: You have to seize a good opportunity when you see it.

Earlier this year, Niangua's Future Business Leaders of America team punched their ticket to the FBLA's National Leadership Conference in San Antonio. One problem: they were short about \$10,000 for travel expenses.

Rather than deprive the 10 middle school and high school students from Niangua R-V School District the opportunity to compete at the highest level, the school made an appeal for community support. Local businesses answered the call to the tune of \$5,000.

To raise the rest, team sponsor Jennifer Callaway reached out to the CFO, where the Webster County school district is a member of the Rural Schools Partnership. Thanks to generous donors and a gift from the CFO President's Fund, Niangua's full team was able to attend the conference, see

historical sites like the Alamo (above) and return home with elite national honors. The Niangua Middle School and High School chapters were recognized as National Champions for their success throughout the 2025-26 school year.

"Getting the chance to represent my school and compete alongside some of my closest friends, and also many talented students from across the country, was something I'm truly grateful for," says senior Braisyn Bouvia. "It pushed me out of my comfort zone, helped me grow as a person, and made so many memories that I will forever cherish."

The CFO thanks the following donors for supporting this effort: Missouri College Access Network Fund; Jim and Janet Anderson Family Fund; Fogle Family Fund; Susan Lemmon/Lemmon Family Charitable Fund; Laurie Edmondson/Jewell Schweitzer Donor Advised Fund; Thomas and Kimberly Prater Family Fund; and Taylor McCabe-Juhnke/Rural Schools Collaborative.