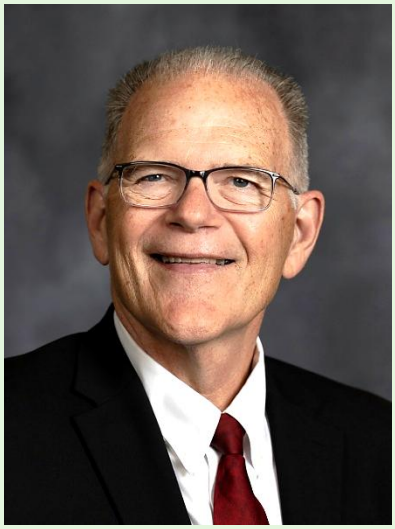
SOUTHWEST WEST CENTRAL SERVICE COOPERATIVE
SWWC
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SWWC's AESA Fellowship

Cliff Carmody became Executive Director of SWWC Service Cooperative in 2007 after previously serving as Deputy Executive Director. That year, he introduced the AESA Fellowship to strengthen connections among SWWC, its member school districts, and the broader educational service agency community.

Nearly two decades later, the fellowship continues to give superintendents in southwest and west central Minnesota a distinctive opportunity to develop their leadership, expand their professional networks, and bring new ideas back to the region. Its structure also offers a model that other educational service agencies may want to consider.

For Carmody, the fellowship reflects SWWC's commitment to collaboration and investing in member leadership.



One of the greatest strengths of SWWC is our cooperative membership model and the partnership we share with the school districts we serve. The AESA Superintendent Fellowship is more than a professional development opportunity; it is an investment in the leadership of our member districts and in the future of our region. Through this fellowship, superintendents gain a deeper understanding of how educational service agencies work across the nation, explore innovative practices being implemented in other states, and strengthen their understanding of the unique value that service agencies bring to public education. Participants return with new perspectives, stronger professional networks, and a greater appreciation for how SWWC supports districts through shared services, collaborative solutions, and regional leadership. Ultimately, the fellowship helps ensure our member districts remain active partners in shaping and maximizing the value of the services SWWC provides.

Cliff Carmody
Executive Director, SWWC

Bringing the National ESA Perspective Home

The concept behind the fellowship is simple: each year, SWWC provides an opportunity for one superintendent from its membership to attend the Association of Educational Service Agencies Annual Conference alongside SWWC board members and staff.

The fellowship is about more than simply attending another professional conference. It gives a local superintendent a national view of the educational service agency network and an opportunity to learn how ESAs across the country are organized, managed, and operated.

By attending the conference with SWWC leadership, the fellow also has an opportunity to engage in conversations about what they are learning and consider how ideas from other states might translate to southwest and west central Minnesota.

Investing in a Member Leader

SWWC makes a significant investment in the selected fellow by covering conference registration, lodging, and travel expenses. The fellowship is open to superintendents who have demonstrated leadership within their districts and are actively involved in SWWC programs or advisory committees. The applicant's school board must also formally support the application and provide the superintendent with the time necessary to participate.

That structure is intentional. The fellowship recognizes that professional learning is most valuable when it extends beyond the individual who attends.

The Fellowship Doesn't End at the Conference

One of the distinguishing features of SWWC's approach is what happens after the AESA Annual Conference.

Following the conference, the fellow is encouraged to stay engaged with SWWC in an advisory capacity, offering their perspective on trends, ideas, and approaches they saw from educational service agencies across the country. That insight provides a valuable member voice as SWWC considers opportunities, programs, and services to meet the evolving needs of schools in the region.

This member insight has helped SWWC identify emerging needs, refine existing offerings, and explore new programs and services with regional relevance. By connecting national practices with local district priorities, the fellowship can serve as an early catalyst for thoughtful service growth rather than growth for its own sake. In this way, the fellowship

supports SWWC's ability to expand its impact while keeping program and service development grounded in member voice and demonstrated need. This has been demonstrated by significant growth in SWWC programs and services for nearly 20 years.

The fellowship creates a two-way learning opportunity. The superintendent gains valuable professional connections and exposure to innovative practices, while SWWC benefits from having a member leader who can help connect those ideas and experiences to the needs of schools in southwest and west central Minnesota.

A Model Other ESAs Can Adapt

The AESA Fellowship does not require a complicated structure. At SWWC, it begins with an application that asks superintendents to describe their involvement with SWWC, their interest in the fellowship, and a reflection on how partnering with SWWC has benefited them and/or their school district. The approach is straightforward and can be adapted to fit the resources, membership, and priorities of individual educational service agencies.

But the potential impact reaches well beyond the application and conference itself. For other educational service agencies, a similar fellowship could serve several purposes at once. It could invest in the professional growth of a member leader, introduce local administrators to the national ESA network, strengthen relationships between ESA leadership and member districts, deepen understanding of the role and value of educational service agencies, and bring new ideas and perspectives back to the organization.

Perhaps most importantly, the fellowship creates an opportunity for a superintendent to experience firsthand that their local ESA is part of something much larger, a nationwide community of organizations facing similar challenges, developing innovative solutions, and working collaboratively to strengthen education.

Tim Godfrey, superintendent of Red Rock Central Schools and a 2025 AESA Fellow, reflected on the value of the experience.



Attending the 2025 AESA conference was an incredibly rewarding experience, highlighted by exceptional presentations from Ben Rudrud and Kim Bearden. Between these inspiring presentations and the valuable opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from across the nation, the conference provided both innovative ideas and renewed momentum to bring back to our ongoing work.

Tim Godfrey
Superintendent, Red Rock Central Schools

For nearly two decades, SWWC's AESA Fellowship has demonstrated how a relatively simple investment in one member leader each year can strengthen relationships, encourage collaboration, and connect local education leaders to a national network. For ESAs seeking new ways to engage their members and bring national perspectives into their work, the fellowship offers a practical model worth considering.

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About SWWC Service Cooperative

SWWC Service Cooperative is a regional educational service agency based in Marshall, Minnesota, serving the 18 counties of southwest and west central Minnesota.

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