

Welcome to *Venture Upward's* Virtual Home Education Conference 2026



Join us to be inspired by great speakers,
connect with the home education community, and leave
energized for your home-educating journey.



Tuesday, July 28 – Thursday, July 30, 2026

Welcome to Venture Upward's Fourth Annual Virtual Home Education Conference! Thank you for taking time away from the busy rhythms of home education to learn, grow, and be encouraged.

Your commitment to your children and their education is something worth celebrating.

At Venture Upward, we believe no homeschool family should walk this journey alone. We aren't just an organization that serves homeschool families. We are home-educating families ourselves, so we understand both the challenges and the incredible rewards.

Our hope is that this conference equips you with practical tools, fresh ideas, and renewed confidence for the year ahead. More importantly, we hope you leave knowing you're part of a community that believes in you, supports you, and is cheering you on every step of the way.

Thank you for allowing Venture Upward to be part of your homeschooling journey. We're honored to learn alongside you and celebrate all you're doing for your family.

Courtney Schloss

Vice President of
Program Development

Conference LINKS

Google Meet joining info

1—Video call link: <https://meet.google.com/ewi-wvqm-vxx>

• *This is a LIVE Link* •

2—SCAN this QR code



3—Dial: (US) +1-478-412-6327 • PIN:696 091 312#



Tuesday, July 28 – Thursday, July 30, 2026

Conference Session Times

Session One

11 am CDT • 10 am MDT • 9 am MST • 9 am PDT • 6 am HST

Breakout Session (TUES & WED)

12 pm CDT • 11 am MDT • 10 am MST • 9 am PDT • 7 am HST

Session Two

1 pm CDT • 12 pm MDT • 11 am MST • 11 am PDT • 8 am HST

Breakout Session (THUR)

2 pm CDT • 1 pm MDT • 12 pm MST • 11 am PDT • 9 am HST

Session Three

3 pm CDT • 2 pm MDT • 1 pm MST • 1 pm PDT • 10 am HST



Breakout Session: Varied times each day



Conference Session Format: 45-50 minute talks

Prize Drawing • 10-15 minute Q&A

Conference Schedule

Tues, July 28

Session One

- Shannon Bowles–Helping Your Child Read with Confidence: A Guide to Decodable Texts

BREAKOUT Session

- Michelle Smithson–From Stuck to Story: No More Blank Pages

Session Two

- Cara Medico–Beyond Crafts: Raising Creators Through Meaningful Art Education

Session Three–*KEYNOTE Speaker*

- Carrie De Francisco–Let’s Get Loopy: Simple Solutions for Morning Time

Wed, July 29

Session One

- Jessica Breuer–How to be the CEO of Your Home: Leading Your Family with purpose while Working and Homeschooling

BREAKOUT Session

- Carrie De Francisco–Am I Doing Enough: 9 Questions to Ask for Simple and Balanced Home Education

Session Two

- Alarice Winans–Building Confident Decision-Makers in a Complex World

Session Three

- Marie MacPherson–Reading the Classics: How Age-Old Stories Teach

Thur, July 30

Session One

- Caroline Bay–Mental Health and Homeschooling

Session Two

- Jessi Donnelly–Motivation that Sticks: Helping your Student Engage, Follow Through, and Take Ownership

BREAKOUT Session

- Michelle Smithson–Canva & Homeschool: Creating a Digital Fluency Tracker

Session Three

- Home Education Parent Panel–Caroline Bay, Beth Burrus, Whitney Schiffler, Rebecca Clark-Benavides

Meet Our Speakers

Tuesday, July 28 • Session One



Shannon Bowles

**Title: *Helping Your Child Read with Confidence:
A Guide to Decodable Texts***

Speaker Bio

Shannon is an educator, literacy advocate, and education consultant dedicated to advancing literacy and learning for all students. She holds degrees from BYU and Lamar University and is TESOL certified. With experience as an ESL and foundational literacy teacher, she now partners with schools nationwide through professional learning, coaching, and implementation support. Shannon specializes in structured literacy, educational technology, and translating research into practical classroom strategies. Her collaborative approach helps educators and leaders create meaningful, lasting improvements in student learning.

Session Summary

Learning to read is a key milestone, and decodable texts can play an important role in helping children succeed. In this practical session, Shannon Bowles from Reading Horizons explains how decodable readers support phonics instruction, build reading fluency and comprehension, and strengthen literacy skills. Parents will learn how to choose appropriate texts and use simple strategies at home to support emerging and struggling readers. Gain valuable tools and insights to make reading instruction more effective, enjoyable, and confidence-building.



Michelle Smithson

Title: *From Stuck to Story: No More Blank Pages*

Speaker Bio

Michelle Smithson is a veteran educator with nearly 30 years of experience in elementary, early childhood, and online education. Michelle holds a master's degree in Educational Leadership and is passionate about helping students become confident, engaged learners. She currently serves as a Venture Upward Virtual Teacher with VIBE Online through Worthington School District (ISD 518), where she teaches and supports students and families across Minnesota.

Outside of education, Michelle is a wife and proud mother of two sons, ages 7 and 12, who inspire her commitment to helping all children succeed.

Session Summary

Many children struggle to start writing, not because they lack ideas, but because they do not know how to begin.

This breakout session introduces the Stuck to Story™ method, an approach using visual prompts to help students move from ideas to clear, confident writing.

Using the Discover It! Writing Workbook Series from Booma Learning Labs, parents support expository skills such as summarizing, explaining, and organizing thoughts.

Families will leave with practical strategies to reduce frustration, build confidence, and help children become more independent writers.



Cara Medico

Title: *Beyond Crafts: Raising Creators through Meaningful Art Education*

Speaker Bio

Dr. Cara Medico is a full-time elementary art teacher in central Florida with 25 years of experience. She holds a doctorate in Instructional Leadership, a master's in Art Education, a bachelor's in Painting and Art History, and National Board Certification in Early and Middle Childhood Art. Her mission is to expand access to quality art education. Through Kids Art Projects 101, she provides an open-and-go elementary art curriculum for homeschool families, helping educators confidently teach what, when, and why in visual arts while guiding students through art history, self-discovery, empathy, and creative expression.

Session Summary

Many homeschool parents want more than seasonal crafts and disconnected projects, but are unsure what meaningful art education looks like at home. This session explores how rich artistic experiences can become part of a well-rounded education. Participants will learn the differences between crafts, process art, and fine art, and how art builds observation, creativity, perseverance, and critical thinking. Practical ideas for integrating art history, technique, music, storytelling, and culture will be shared. Attendees will leave with examples and tools to create engaging, connected, and enriching art experiences across subjects at home.

Keynote Speaker



Carrie De Francisco

Title: *Let's Get Loopy: Simple Solutions for Morning Time*

Speaker Bio

Originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, Carrie now lives in Southern California with her husband, Mike, their two homeschool graduates, daughter-in-law, and their introverted dog, Jesse. With more than twenty years of homeschooling experience, she is passionate about encouraging families to create a simpler, more joyful learning journey. She is the host of the Coffee With Carrie Homeschool Podcast, author of *Just Breathe (and Take a Sip of Coffee): Homeschool Simply & Enjoyable*, and a sought-after speaker who equips moms to homeschool with confidence, grace, and joy. She also enjoys cooking, hiking, reading, and time with family.

Session Summary

Do you long for a homeschool day that begins with connection, purpose, and peace instead of chaos and overwhelm? In this keynote, homeschool veteran Carrie De Francisco introduces “Loop Scheduling” as a flexible approach to Morning Time. Learn how to build a simple routine that fits your family while incorporating read-alouds, memory work, arts, and enrichment without rigid schedules or unfinished plans. Discover strategies for teaching multiple ages together, reducing decision fatigue, and creating a life-giving rhythm that strengthens both learning and family connection.



Jessica Breuer

Title: *How to be the CEO of Your Home: Leading Your Family with purpose while Working and Homeschooling*

Speaker Bio

Jessica Breuer is a homeschooling mother of eight and the CEO of Venture Upward. A Presidential Scholar and summa cum laude graduate in Honors Psychology, she later pursued doctoral studies in School Psychology before dedicating herself to raising and educating her family. Drawing from both her leadership experience and years of homeschooling, Jessica helps parents create thriving homes through intentional leadership, practical systems, and clear priorities. Her passion is encouraging families to lead with purpose, focus on what matters most, and build a culture of lifelong learning and success.

Session Summary

As working and homeschooling parents, we often feel pulled in a hundred directions by work deadlines, lesson plans, laundry piles, meals, appointments, activities, and the endless needs of our families. It's easy to spend our days reacting instead of leading. In this practical and encouraging session, Jessica Breuer shares how becoming the CEO of your own home can transform both your work and your homeschool. Learn practical strategies to establish priorities, manage your resources, build simple systems, and lead your family with confidence and purpose.



Carrie De Francisco

Title: *Am I Doing Enough: 9 Questions to Ask for Simple and Balanced Home Education*

Speaker Bio

Originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, I now live in Southern California with my husband Mike, two homeschool graduates, daughter-in-law, and our introverted dog, Jesse. After more than twenty years of homeschooling, I value laughter, simplicity, and quiet time with my Bible and a cup of coffee. I enjoy making homemade beignets, cooking, hiking, reading, and encouraging moms in their homeschool journey one step at a time. I host the Coffee With Carrie Homeschool Podcast, am author of *Just Breathe (and Take a Sip of Coffee)*, and speak at homeschool conferences.

Session Summary

As homeschool parents, it's easy to wonder if we're doing enough—if our children are learning what they need or if we're measuring up to others. In this encouraging and practical session, Carrie shares nine thoughtful questions to help evaluate your homeschool with clarity and confidence. Instead of adding more to your plate, these questions help you identify what's working, spot areas for growth, and build balance. Whether overwhelmed or uncertain, you'll leave with renewed confidence, practical next steps, and a clearer vision for your family's homeschool journey.



Alarice Winans

Title: *Building Confident Decision-Makers in a Complex World*

Speaker Bio

Alarice is a negotiation strategist and media buying leader with over 25 years of experience guiding high-stakes decisions across more than \$1 billion in media investments for brands like Target, CVS Pharmacy, and Ulta Beauty. She has helped organizations evaluate options, navigate trade-offs, and make confident decisions under pressure. Today, she applies these principles to families, equipping parents to teach children independent thinking, clear communication, and confidence in everyday choices. Her practical frameworks and approachable style turn complex ideas into simple, actionable tools parents can immediately use.

Session Summary

A practical framework for teaching kids to evaluate choices, understand trade-offs, and make decisions at every age. Research shows academic performance alone doesn't predict long-term success; skills like problem-solving, adaptability, and decision-making matter just as much. This session addresses the gap between what children learn and how they think in real life. Parents will gain practical tools to build confident, independent decision-makers.

Featured Framework: Define the Decision
Explore Options
Consider the Trade-Offs
Identify Emotions
Decide with Intention
Evaluate the Outcome



Marie MacPherson

Title: *Reading the Classics:
How Age-Old Stories Teach*

Speaker Bio

Mrs. Marie MacPherson holds a master's degree in the Great Books from Memoria College and a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education with a specialty in Communication and Language Arts, along with Classical Education certification. A homeschool mother with nearly two decades of experience, she has coordinated music camps, art enrichment courses, and speech teams. She is the author of several books, including *Teaching Children Chastity* and *Meditations on the Vocation of Motherhood*. She serves as a Teacher of Record in Wyoming for Venture Upward. The MacPherson family enjoys read-alouds, hiking, and cooking together.

Session Summary

Why read those dusty old books in a world of technology, STEM, and AI? Many parents wonder whether classic literature still belongs in their children's education. The answer is yes. Timeless stories continue to shape minds, build character, and cultivate wisdom in meaningful ways. In this session, Marie explores the enduring value of the classics and how they develop critical thinking, empathy, and moral discernment. She also shares practical strategies for teaching classic literature in your homeschool and making it accessible and engaging for students of all ages.



Caroline Bay

Title: *Mental Health and Homeschooling*

Speaker Bio

Caroline is a homeschool mom to her two daughters and was homeschooled herself, giving her insight from both sides of the experience. She holds a master's degree in Mental Health and is passionate about helping families create calmer, healthier learning environments. Drawing from her own mental health journey, she translates complex ideas about emotions, stress, and behavior into simple, practical tools parents can use at home. When she's not teaching or writing curriculum, she enjoys tacos, watching Jurassic Park, and training in karate at her local dojo.

Session Summary

Participants will gain insight into how their own experiences, stress patterns, and expectations can shape their interactions and teaching approaches at home. They will also explore how student responses and behaviors often reflect underlying emotional or developmental needs rather than simple misbehavior. This session encourages a more compassionate, reflective approach to homeschooling, helping parents recognize triggers, respond with greater patience, and create a more supportive learning environment where both parent and child can grow in understanding, connection, and emotional regulation.



Jessi Donnelly

Title: *Motivation that Sticks: Helping your Student Engage, Follow Through, and Take Ownership*

Speaker Bio

Jessi Donnelly is an educator with 10 years of experience teaching history, science, and civics in both traditional and online settings. She holds a master's degree in History and is passionate about helping students build the skills and confidence needed to become capable, independent adults. As an educator and mom of two, she brings a practical, family-centered perspective to learning, motivation, and student success. Jessi helps families create systems and habits that support growth while reducing stress and conflict at home. Outside of teaching, she enjoys baking sourdough, exploring the Oregon coast, tending houseplants, and reading.

Session Summary

This session focuses on practical, approachable strategies to help parents better connect with their teens, support motivation, and encourage greater ownership of learning. It will explore common sources of tension in the high school years and offer simple ways to reduce daily power struggles. Parents will learn how to shift from constant correction to collaboration, building trust and responsibility over time. The goal is to help families move away from frustration and burnout toward a more sustainable, respectful, and cooperative approach to learning that supports both academic progress and a healthier parent-teen relationship.



Michelle Smithson

**Title: *Canva & Homeschool:
Creating a Digital Fluency Tracker***

Speaker Bio

Michelle Smithson is a veteran educator with nearly 30 years of experience in elementary, early childhood, and online education. Michelle holds a master's degree in Educational Leadership and is passionate about helping students become confident, engaged learners. She currently serves as a Venture Upward Virtual Teacher with VIBE Online through Worthington School District (ISD 518), where she teaches and supports students and families across Minnesota.

Outside of education, Michelle is a wife and proud mother of two sons, ages 7 and 12, who inspire her commitment to helping all children succeed.

Session Summary

Tracking student progress doesn't require expensive software or complicated spreadsheets. In this practical, hands-on workshop, homeschool parents will learn how to create customized fluency trackers in Canva to monitor vocabulary, reading, and math. Participants will discover the key elements of effective progress tracking, explore simple Canva design tools, and create a reusable tracker tailored to their family's needs. Whether you're new to homeschooling or seeking a more organized system, you'll leave with practical tools to document growth, motivate learners, and simplify recordkeeping.

Home Education Parent Panel

Speakers: *Caroline Bay, Beth Burrus,
Whitney Schiffler, Jessica Donnelly
Rebecca Clark-Benavides*

Session Summary

Join a candid conversation with experienced homeschooling moms as they share the joys, challenges, and lessons they've learned along the way. From balancing academics and family life to navigating different learning styles, curriculum choices, socialization, and personal growth, this panel offers practical wisdom and encouragement for homeschool families at every stage. Attendees will have the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives, gain actionable tips, and ask questions in a supportive environment. Whether you're just beginning your homeschooling journey or looking for fresh inspiration, this discussion will provide valuable insights from moms who are living it every day.

**Thank you to all of our wonderful Sponsors
for their support!**



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*We want to extend a huge thank you to our speakers, sponsors,
and all those who had a hand in organizing this event!*

*“At Venture Upward,
we are here because of our families.
We are here to serve them,
not in just any way,
but in the best possible way.”*

Jon Funes

Founder of
Venture Upward



VentureUpward.org

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