

Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding: Member Bios

Jesse Ruiz was named Deputy Governor for Education in January 2019. Ruiz came to the Governor's Office after over 20 years as a corporate lawyer at the firm Drinker, Biddle, and Reath, where he focused on mergers and acquisitions. Throughout his law career, Ruiz also served in many public service roles including Chair of the Illinois State Board of Education, President of the Chicago Park District, and interim CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Ruiz is also the current President of the Chicago Bar Association. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and his JD from the University of Chicago Law School.

Andy Manar represents the 48th Senate district encompassing parts of Sangamon, Christian, Macoupin, Madison, Macon, and Montgomery counties. He was a driving force behind the passage of the K-12 Evidence-Based Funding Formula (EBF). Prior to his tenure in the General Assembly, Manar served as Mayor of Bunker Hill and Chairman of the Macoupin County Board. He received his Bachelor of History from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where he also received his teaching license.

Barbara Flynn Currie holds the record for the longest serving woman in the Illinois General Assembly, with 40 years of experience, including over 20 years as Majority Leader. She also helped steer the state's EBF efforts and is known for her tireless advocacy on many progressive issues in Illinois. She received her bachelor's degree and Master of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

George Davis began working for the City of Rockford's Head Start program in 1993, serving in various leadership capacities including as the city's Executive Director of Human Services earlier this year. He is a member of the Illinois Early Learning Council's (ELC) Executive Committee and the co-chair of the ELC's Access Committee. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Illinois Wesleyan University.

Aaron Ortiz was elected to serve Illinois' 1st house district in 2019. Before becoming a legislator, he worked as a teacher and guidance counselor at Back of the Yards High School in Chicago. He sits on the High Education Appropriations Committee. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Urban Planning from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Bela Moté is the CEO of the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, which is also hosting the meeting. She has over 15 years of experience working in the field of early childcare service provision and policy making in Illinois, having previously worked at the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago and the Ounce of Prevention Fund. She earned her Master's in Education from the Erikson Institute.

Carmen Ayala is the first female and first person of color to serve as the ISBE Superintendent. Prior to her appointment, Ayala worked as an educator in Chicago, Aurora, Plainfield, and Carpentersville before leading the Berwyn North School district. She has over 30 years of experience in education. She received her Ph.D. from Loyola University, her MBA from Dominican University, and her undergraduate degree from Mundelein College.

Cathy Mannen is the Illinois Federation of Teachers Professional Issues Director, a role she has held since transitioning from her previous position as President of the Champaign Federation of Teachers in 2016. Mannen has worked in various roles as an educator since 1998 working mainly with elementary school students. She received her Bachelor of Music from Millikin University, a Master of Science in Education from Eastern Illinois University, and her Master of Education with a General Administrative Endorsement from the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign.

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Craig Esko is Senior Vice President of Community Relations at PNC Bank, where he oversees community engagement, philanthropy, and sponsorship civic initiatives. Prior to joining PNC in 2008, Esko also worked at Discover, LaSalle Bank, and National City Bank. He serves on the board of Metropolitan Family Services, one of the largest social service providers in Chicago. Mr. Esko received his Bachelor of Science in marketing from Northern Illinois University.

Christina Hachikian is the founder of the Rustandy Center for Social Innovation, a social impact hub based out of the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. She has served on various boards related to early childhood workforce and governance, including the Chicago Early Childhood Workforce Committee convened by Mayor Emmanuel in 2018. Prior to founding Rustandy, Hachikian served as the Vice President and Head of Investor Relations and Corporate Development at Cole Taylor Bank. She holds an MBA from Booth and her AB from the University of Chicago.

Christopher Belt represents the 57th Senate District, located in the Southwestern region of Illinois in St. Clair and Madison counties, where he has spent his entire life. Belt served as a corrections officer for St. Clair County for 18 years. Throughout this time Belt dedicated his energies towards creating positive role models for youth in his community, founding the Difference Makers Professional Organization in 2003 and publishing a children's book called "The Adventures of Nate the Gnat" about responsible decision making. Belt also served as President of the Cahokia Unit District 187 school board. He earned his Bachelor of History from Illinois State University, a Master of Public Administration from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and a Master of Professional Counseling from Lindenwood-Belleville.

Donald DeWitte was the mayor of St. Charles for eight years before being elected to serve the 33rd Senate district in 2018. He has also served on the Regional Transit Authority as a representative for Kane County. DeWitte currently sits on the Senate Education Committee. He attended Elgin Community College and the University of Illinois Springfield.

Elliot Regenstein is a partner at Foresight Law + Policy and a member of the Illinois Early Learning Council. He is the chair of the Illinois Longitudinal Data System Governing Board and a co-chair of the ELC's Data, Research, and Evaluation Subcommittee. He has been involved with legal and policy issues related to Illinois public education since 2004 and served as the Director of Education Reform under Governor Blagojevich. Regenstein has published numerous articles on education policy and data usage. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University and his JD from the University of Michigan.

Evelyn Osorio is a Chicago native and a Child Care Field Coordinator for SEIU Healthcare. She has a dedicated track record of issue advocacy and volunteer work, especially regarding the rights of immigrants and non-native English speakers. She has worked with SEIU since 2013 and was formerly involved with the Immigrant Youth Justice League and Centro Autonomo. Osorio holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Grace Hou became the Secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services in 2019. She previously served as Assistant Secretary at DHS before becoming President of the Woods Fund, a Chicago non-profit dedicated to alleviating structural injustices. She earned her Bachelor of Science from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and her Master of Public Administration from the University of Illinois Springfield.

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Jodi Scott is the Superintendent of Regional Office of Education #33 encompassing Mercer, Knox, Warren, and Henderson counties, a role she assumed in 2007 after having joined the office in 2000 as a consultant for early childhood education. Scott was also a member of the Illinois School Funding Reform Commission, the entity responsible for the EBF. She received her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education and her Master's in early childhood from Western Illinois University.

Kristin Bernhard is the Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at the Ounce of Prevention Fund, where she leads teams focused on child care governance and funding in Illinois and nationwide. Bernhard oversaw Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning and served on the policy teams of two Georgia governors. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Georgia and her JD from the Georgia State University.

Lori Longueville is the director of John A. Logan College Child Care Resource & Referral, where she oversees the organization's goal of improving accessibility, affordability, and quality of child care and early education in southern Illinois. Prior to her work at John A. Logan College, Ms. Longueville worked as a 1st grade teacher and early childhood educator and administrator. She has been involved in early childhood advocacy and has staffed ad hoc committees and workgroups for both the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and the early Learning Council. Ms. Longueville holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Illinois Wesleyan University.

Nydia Burgo is an early childhood educator in North Shore School District 112 and a member of the Illinois Education Association. Nydia has been an educator for 35 years, of which 29 have been dedicated to early childhood education. She loves teaching this age group very much. She can see the sparks and the potential even at this early age. She speaks and writes both English and Spanish fluently. It has always been her passion to make a difference for everyone beginning at the early childhood level. She has been a life-long learner with the eye on making a significant difference in the education and lives of those who need it the most, the children and families who struggle to help their children succeed.

Patricia Chamberlain is the president of Chamberlain Educational Consulting Inc., an independent education consultancy. She also works for Paridad, a different education consultancy, that provides innovation and research-based practices to improve the educational experiences of language learners and their classmates. Prior to this, Ms. Chamberlain worked as an ESL/Bilingual teacher, public school principal, and instructor at the Erikson Institute. She has been involved in both the Early Learning Council and the Illinois State Board of Education as an Advisory Committee member. Ms. Chamberlain holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Illinois and a Master of Science degree from Northern Illinois University.

Phyllis Glink is the Executive Director of the Irving Harris Foundation. In her work with the Foundation she has led, developed and implemented its grantmaking and field leadership work in the areas of early childhood development and child and family welfare, reproductive health and justice, Jewish values, and social justice. Prior to joining the Irving Harris Foundation, Ms. Glink worked for the Chicago Community Trust focusing on grant making and program development in the areas of education and women and girls' issues. Ms. Glink is currently the co-chair of the Early Learning Council and has served on the Health transition team for the Rauner administration, the Pritzker Education Transition team, and the Lightfoot Education transition team. Ms. Glink holds a Bachelor of Art degree from the University of Michigan and a Master of Public Police degree from the University of Chicago.

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Rey Gonzalez is the president of El Valor, where he oversees the nonprofit's goal of supporting and enriching the lives of urban families through a variety of ways including early childhood education. Prior to his work at El Valor, Mr. Gonzalez was the Vice President for Legislative and Community Affairs at ComEd and vice president of Corporate Diversity for Exelon Corporation. Before joining Exelon in 2002, Rey served as vice president of Diversity for the McDonald's Corporation. Rey also worked for the Chicago Urban League where he placed more than 2,500 women and minorities in occupations that matched their skills. Rey received his Bachelor of Science degree from St. Joseph's College and his Master of Science degree from Northern Illinois University.

Robin Steans is President of Advance Illinois, an independent policy and advocacy organization with the goal helping build a healthy public education system that enables all students to achieve success in college, career and civic life. She is also Board Chair of the Steans Family Foundation, where she helps guide education and community development grant making in the North Lawndale community. Ms. Steans also served as a public school teacher early in her career. She served as a Trustee of the University of Chicago Medical Center. Ms. Steans received her undergraduate degree from Brown University, her Master of Education degree from Stanford University and her Juris Doctor degree from the University of Chicago.

Rochelle Golliday is the Executive Director of Cuddle Care, a network of four childcare centers. In addition to that, she is a Trainer and Professional Development Advisor for Gateways to Opportunity, a statewide professional development support system designed to provide guidance, encouragement, and recognition to individuals and programs serving children, youth, and families. Prior to her current work, Ms. Golliday has worked professor and instructor at both Chicago State University and South Suburban College. Ms. Golliday received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Roosevelt University and her Master of Adult Education and Master of Arts in Teaching degrees both from Roosevelt University.

Shauna Ejeh is the Senior Vice President for Programs at Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) where she oversees all of IAFC's program service department and works to ensure quality care and delivery of early childhood education and care services. Ms. Ejeh previously worked at Baby Talk Early Head Start and the Illinois head start State collaboration Office where she helped ensure and improve delivery of Head Start services to families. Additionally, Ms. Ejeh is currently a member of the Early Learning Council. Ms. Ejeh received both her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts from American University.

Thomas Bennett is a Republic member of the Illinois House of Representatives who represents the 106th district, which includes all or parts of Ford, Iroquois, Vermillion, Livingston, and Woodford counties. Prior to his election to the Illinois House of Representatives, he was Chairman of the Parkland College Board of Trustees. Additionally, Mr. Bennett worked at State Farm for 30 years and was a teacher at Melvin-Sibley High School. Mr. Bennett received Bachelor of Science degree from Eastern Illinois University, a Bachelor of Science degree from Illinois State University, a Master of Business Administration degree from Illinois State University, and an MBA from Nova Southeastern University.

Trish Rooney is the Executive Director of SPARK, an early childhood community collaboration in Aurora. She previously spent 16 years working to improve the quality of childcare programs in DuPage and Kane counties with the local Childcare Resource and Referral system. Rooney is a member of the Illinois Early Learning Council and is co-chair of the Community Systems Development subcommittee. She also serves on several public and non-profit boards in Aurora dedicated to improving education and early care.

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Will Davis has represented Chicago's south suburbs since 2003, where he serves as Chair of the House Healthcare and Healthcare Disparities committee and Vice Chair of the House Elementary and Secondary Appropriations Committee. He was a founding member of the Better Funding for Better Schools Coalition. Davis received his Bachelor of Arts from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and Master of Public Administration from Governors State University.