



# Early Childhood Advisory Council

## ECAC Members



### **Patricia E. Persell, Co-Chair**

*New York State Head Start Collaboration Office, Collaboration Director*  
<https://ccf.ny.gov/head-start/>

Patricia E. Persell is New York State Head Start Collaboration Director, working to ensure that Head Start is included in state programs and policies. She began her career as a nursery school teacher, worked as Education Coordinator for Albany County Head Start and then served as Director of the Bank Street Head Start in New York City. A longtime La Leche League Leader volunteer, she also serves on the Obesity Prevention in Child Care Partnership, a state level steering committee.



### **Dona Anderson, Co-Chair**

*NY Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, Executive Director*  
<https://www.earlychildhoodny.org/>

Dona Anderson is the Executive Director at the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, which is housed at the City University of New York within the Office of Academic Affairs. She leads the work of a dynamic, intelligent, and passionate team dedicated to building essential systems and services to ensure a highly effective early childhood workforce for New York in order to guarantee that all young children and their families have access to excellence. She is responsible for strategic planning, fund development, project growth, and all aspects of the successful management and leadership of the Institute and leads the organizational culture of inclusivity, diversity, teamwork, flexibility, responsiveness, and collaboration. Dona has presented at national conferences and co-authored a variety of public policy reports on the topics of child poverty, homelessness, early childhood, and trauma.



### **Melissa Alexander**

*NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, Employment and Income Support Programs*

Melissa Alexander has spent the last 13 years in the Division of Employment and Income Support Programs (EISP) at the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). Melissa has a background in administering employment-driven programs that support OTDA's mission to enhance the economic security of low-income individuals and families. She currently works in EISP's Temporary Assistance (TA) Bureau, and is primarily responsible for developing State policy, ensuring federal TANF compliance, and monitoring local public assistance programs. Melissa has a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, and a Bachelor's degree in Social Welfare from the College of Saint Rose.



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**Melodie Baker,**

*Just Equations, National Policy Director*

*Rockefeller Institute of Government, Early Childhood Fellow*

*Raising New York, Co-Chair*

Melodie Baker is the National Policy Director at Just Equations where she works to advance the role of math education in promoting equity through national partnerships and policy initiatives. Melodie is also the early childhood fellow for Rockefeller Institute of Government's partnership with New York States' First 1000 Days on Medicaid Initiative. A nationally recognized education leader and advocate, Baker has devoted her career to expanding opportunities for children and families. She has chaired various national, and state-wide initiatives, including the Coalition for Community Schools and Raising New York, and was recently tapped to serve on New York's *Reimagining Education Advisory Council* to devise strategies for re-opening schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to joining Just Equations in 2020, she was Director of Education for the United Way in Buffalo, New York. Melodie earned her Bachelor's in Public Relations from Buffalo State College, a Master's in Executive Leadership and Change from Daemen College and is finishing a PhD in Educational Psychology and Quantitative Methods at SUNY Buffalo.



**Evelyn Blanck**

*New York Center for Child Development, Associate Executive Director*

<http://www.nyccd.org>

Evelyn Blanck is the Associate Executive Director of the New York Center for Child Development and Program Director for the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Treatment Program. She is Co-President of the New York Zero to Three Network and Chair of the New York City Early Childhood Mental Health Strategic Work Group, an advisory committee to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Evelyn has focused much of her work on the integration of mental health in education, primary care and all child serving systems. She has a New York City mayoral appointment to the Community Services Board Subcommittee on Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.



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**Suzanne Bolling**

*NYS Education Department, Office of Special Education*

Suzanne is the New York State 619 Coordinator and Assistant Counsel with the New York State Education Department Office of Special Education. She currently oversees the Preschool Policy, Nondistrict, and Incident Management Units in their work to issue guidance, provide technical assistance, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and conduct quality assurance and compliance monitoring activities to ensure equal opportunities and positive results for students with disabilities across New York State.

Prior to joining the Education Department, Suzanne worked for the New York State Assembly as Associate Counsel to the Assembly Education, Higher Education, and Libraries and Educational Technology Committees. Suzanne holds a Master of Public Administration from the State University at Albany and a Juris Doctor degree from Albany Law School.



**Darren J. Brown-Hall, Ed. D.**

*Williamsville Central School District, Superintendent*

Dr. Darren J. Brown-Hall was appointed Superintendent of the Williamsville Central School District effective July 1, 2021. Prior to that he served as the Chief of Staff for the Buffalo Public Schools. He has previously served as the Associate Superintendent for Human Resources, Principal of Buffalo Academy for Visual and Performing Arts and Community School #53. Dr. Brown-Hall has also served in the capacity of Assistant Principal at South Park high school and for a short period of time as Interim Superintendent for the Buffalo Public Schools. Dr. Brown-Hall began his career in education as a Mathematics teacher at Sweet Home High School.

Dr. Brown-Hall has over 25 years of experience in the field of Education and works every day to have a significant impact of the lives of students – realizing that every decision that is made at the senior executive level has an immediate effect on the school buildings and the continued increase in academic performance for all children.

Realizing his love for education and the impact that he had on students, Dr. Brown-Hall returned to the field of education after working for two years at HSBC Bank as an eBusiness analyst once he finished HSBC's management development program and working in London.

Dr. Brown-Hall received both a B.S. and M.S. degree in Mathematics Education from Buffalo State College, an M.B.A. from Canisius College with concentrations in Finance and Management Information Systems. Dr. Brown-Hall also completed his coursework for School and District level administrator certification at Canisius College, and received an advanced certificate in School Business and Human Resources management from the University at Buffalo (U.B.). Dr. Brown-Hall earned his Doctor of Education degree in Educational Administration from the University at Buffalo in 2018.



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Dr. Brown-Hall has served as an adjunct professor in the Educational Administration program at Canisius College, Buffalo State University and the University at Buffalo. Darren is an active member of several professional organizations including the Committee for the Identification and Development of Educational Leaders (CIDEL) and serves on several Boards including the Western New York Education Service Council. Darren is a faculty mentor in the New York State Superintendent's Development Program and has been awarded the Distinguished Alumni designation from Buffalo State University and the EOP Program. In 2024 Dr. Brown-Hall received the Education award at the 52<sup>nd</sup> annual Black Achievers Award.



**Bonnie Catlin, LCSW**

*New York State Office of Mental Health, Office of Prevention and Health Initiatives  
Director for Strategic Clinical Solutions*

Since her arrival at OMH, Bonnie has pioneered prevention efforts, first as the Director for Strategic Clinical Solutions within the Division for Integrated Community Services for Children & Families, and now in the newly created Office for Prevention and Health Initiatives (OPHI). Her leadership on child and family prevention, infant and early childhood mental health, integration with primary care, cross system collaboration, and school-community partnership has helped move the dial on the social emotional wellness of children and families and helped lay the groundwork for OPHI. She has a knowledge base and wealth of experience in children's mental health, early childhood services, and Systems of Care. Prior to her tenure at OMH, she worked for nearly 20 years in county government. Having served as an Intensive Case Manager, Children's Single Point of Access (SPOA) Coordinator, and the Clinical Director, she has a deep understanding of the children's service delivery system and insights into how to continue to improve it.



**Meredith Chimento**

*Early Care and Learning Council, Executive Director*

<http://www.earlycareandlearning.org>

Meredith Chimento is the Executive Director of the Early Care and Learning Council (ECLC). Meredith began her career as a Community Education Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic, followed by many years at the Capital District YMCA. Prior to ECLC Meredith worked for the United Way of the Greater Capital Region focusing on ways to change community conditions specific to basic needs, education, income and health.



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**Philip Cleary**

*North Syracuse Central School District, Special Education Teacher*

Phil Cleary represents New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). Phil is a career classroom teacher working at the North Syracuse Early Education Program (4410) in North Syracuse. Phil also serves as NYSUT's political action coordinator for education and social justice in Central New York.



**Pedro Cordero**

*Goddard Riverside Community Center, Director of Child Development Services*

<http://www.goddard.org>

Pedro Cordero is currently the Systems Specialist for the Region II Office of Head Start-- Training and Technical Assistance Network. His career in early education spans 40 years in multiple positions: Classroom Teacher, Child Development Services Program Director, Operations and Policy work with the Mayor's Office for Children and Families and the NYC Administration for Children Services. In addition, he has served as a Federal Monitor of Head Start grantees and Adjunct Instructor at the City University of New York, Dept of Early Education. With the ECAC, he is the Co-Chair of the Strong Families subcommittee.



**Stephanie David, JD, MPH, IMH-E<sup>®</sup>**

*Common Ground Health, Director of Early Childhood Policy*

Stephanie David is the Director of Early Childhood Policy at Common Ground Health in Rochester, NY, and co-director of its Healthi Kids initiative. With over 15 years of experience in health policy and public health law, she provides expertise and guidance on policy and systems-change opportunities for advancing whole child health in Rochester and the Finger Lakes region.

Since joining the Healthi Kids team in 2018, Stephanie has led the development of its early childhood work, with a particular focus on infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). She is a board member and officer of the New York State Association for Infant Mental Health and holds an Endorsement in infant mental health as an Infant Family Associate. She also co-chaired the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health's Policy and Systems Development Workgroup from 2022-2024 and was a primary contributing author to its 2023 report on addressing preschool suspension and expulsion through an IECMH-informed lens. In 2024 she was appointed by Governor Kathy Hochul to New York State's Early Childhood Advisory Council and is a member of its policy committee.



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Originally from Batavia, NY, Stephanie earned her law degree from the Washington and Lee School of Law, her master's degree in public health from George Washington University, and her bachelor's degree in biology from Cornell University.



**Kelly Dodd**

*2-1-1 New York Inc., Chief Operating Officer*

*United Way of New York State, Vice President*

Kelly Dodd is the Chief Operating Officer of 211 NY Inc. and Vice President of the United Way of New York State. With 211 NY Inc, Kelly provides system leadership to the regional 211 leads and community information and referral agencies that provide 211 services 24/7/365 to all New Yorkers with the goals of increased awareness, system efficiency and resiliency, and increased utilization of 211 to provide equity of access to services and support available in the state. Kelly has been working in the field of information and referral since 2007 when she was hired as a member of the team that launched with 211 in WNY.

She graduated from SUNY Onondaga Community College with an associate's degree in Humanities, SUNY University at Buffalo with a bachelor's degree in Linguistics, and is completing a master's degree in Public Administration at SUNY Buffalo State University.

Kelly is active in the WNY community serving on the boards of the WNY Coalition for the Homeless, New York State Alliance of Information & Referral Systems Inc., Erie County Disaster Preparedness Advisory Board, and City of Buffalo Living Wage Commissioner.



**Andre Eaton LMSW, MDIV.**

*The Parent-Child Home Program, New York State Regional Director*

<http://www.parent-child.org>

Andre Eaton coordinates program expansion, program support, staff development, and additional training for all New York ParentChild+ sites. He assists program partner sites coordinate with New York State and City Departments to ensure that all Program children and families are connected with the appropriate next educational steps and services. Andre works on developing new public and private funding streams, fostering relationships with new local partner agencies and state and local policy makers, and enhancing partnerships with business and other literacy and early childhood programs. Andre was selected in 2017 to be a member of the NYS Family Engagement Coalition Steering Committee, serving on the Support/Best Practices subcommittee He serves as a member of the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) and is the co-chair of the race equity committee for the ECAC, a board member of the NY State Association of Infant Mental



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Health, a board member of the Early Care and Learning Council and a board member for the Childhood Education International Organization.

Before coming to ParentChild+, he was the Southeastern Regional Director for Jumpstart for Young Children, Inc. and previously was the Executive Director of Covenant House Georgia. Andre has a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology/African & African American Studies from Brandeis University, a Master of Social Work from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Master of Divinity Degree from Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University. He is a New York State Licensed Social Worker and holds a Student Supervisor Certificate from Fordham University.

### **Kelly Escobar**

*Robin Hood Foundation, Early Childhood Managing Director*



### **Robert G. Frawley**

*Early Childhood Policy Consultant*

Bob Frawley's work has been directed at building effective systems of support and services for children and families. This has included working on a variety of research and policy initiatives, including projects addressing such issues as runaway and homeless youth, child abuse and neglect, juvenile justice, prevention programs, and services for children with developmental delays and disabilities. For the last 35 years, he has focused his efforts primarily on issues related to young children and their families. Bob has led many statewide early childhood initiatives. For the ECAC, he serves as a member of the Steering Committee and co-chairs the Finance and Data Development Work Groups. Outside of the ECAC, he supports the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance, which is a project of the Adirondack Community Foundation, and is a Board Member and Treasurer of NYS Association of Infant Mental Health and also a board member and Policy Committee Chair of Hunger Solutions NY.



### **Jane Fronheiser**

*New York State Education Department, Office of ESSA-Funded Programs, State Coordinator for McKinney-Vento*

Jane Fronheiser is the New York State McKinney-Vento Coordinator at the New York State Education Department (NYSED), Office of ESSA-Funded Programs, where she leads statewide efforts to ensure the educational stability, access, and success of students experiencing homelessness. In this role, she oversees implementation of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and New York State Education Law §3209, supporting school districts in meeting legal



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requirements and strengthening systems so that the more than 190,000 students identified as homeless in New York State can fully participate in and benefit from their education.

Jane has over 20 years of experience in education, including more than a decade in early childhood classrooms and over 10 years of service at NYSED. Prior to her current role, she served as an Associate in the NYSED Office of Early Learning, where she contributed to statewide policy development, program implementation, and cross-sector collaboration to advance high-quality early childhood education. During her tenure in the Office of Early Learning, she also created the Early Learning Video Series to support educators and families with accessible, high-quality resources aligned to best practices in early childhood development and instruction.

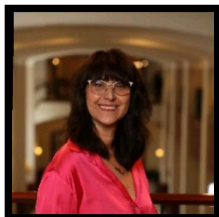
Her work is grounded in a strong commitment to educational equity, with particular expertise in removing barriers for vulnerable student populations, coordinating interagency partnerships, and providing technical assistance and guidance to school districts across New York State. Jane holds a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education from SUNY New Paltz and a Certificate of Advanced Study (CAS) in Educational Administration from The College of Saint Rose.



**Tara N. Gardner**

*Day Care Council of New York*

Tara N. Gardner is an executive leader with expertise in all facets of nonprofit management, operations, programming, and fundraising. Her work has consistently focused on leveling the playing field for those living in under-resourced NYC communities. Through her previous work at the New York City Mission Society, the Abyssinian Development Corporation, and The Fresh Air Fund, she has impacted the lives of thousands of NYC children and families. In her current role as the Executive Director of the Day Care Council of New York, she brings her experience to NYC's early childhood education and care sector. Because her dedication to children and families extends beyond the workplace, she serves on the following boards of directors: Ice Hockey In Harlem, Friends of St. Charles Borromeo School, and Delgracia Corp.



**Doctor Laura V. González-Murphy**

*NYS Department of State, Office of New Americans*

Doctor Laura V. González-Murphy, as of 2022 formally the Executive Director of the Office for New Americans (ONA) and previously Immigration Policy and Research at the NY State Department of State, serving as lead policy advisor on the State's response to federal immigration policies. In this capacity she has led the design and implementation of unique initiatives to ameliorate the human impact of the latest federal immigration policies and demographic flows, such as Governor Cuomo's Golden Door program which provides mental health



assistance to immigrant families across New York and the Ramirez June Navigator, which focuses on empowering immigrant families with developmental disabilities support as they seek to access services they are entitled to. Prior to this position she served as Director of ONA, overseeing the operation of the Office's network of service providers across the state, a model of immigrant integration in the country, and the implementation of NaturalizeNY, the first public-private partnership of its kind, aimed at lifting the financial barrier to citizenship faced by New Yorkers. She has also served as consultant on immigration policy issues with the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Welcoming International and the Mexican Congress, etc. Prior to this position she was a Research Assistant Professor at Rockefeller College, SUNY at Albany, where she has taught a variety of courses on foreign policy, immigration, human rights, and immigration and Latin American politics. She is the recipient of several awards, such as: Empire Justice Center Leadership Award, Mexico's Foreign Ministry's Mexican American Leader, and in 2020 she was awarded Mexico's highest recognition granted to individuals who have dedicated their lives to improving the well-being of Mexicans and other Latinos outside its borders, the Othli Award. González-Murphy earned her PhD in comparative politics and in international relations from SUNY at Albany. She holds an MS in urban planning and environmental studies from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and a BS in political science from Elmira College, graduating *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa. book *Protecting Immigrant Rights in Mexico: Understanding the State–Civil Society Nexus*, was re-published by Routledge (June 2015). She is also the author of various papers and book chapters on immigration trends and policies, including New York's first public overview of its immigration policy.

- “New York State’s Immigration Policy: An Immigrant Policy Perspective.” Co-author of Chapter in Scott Fein’s *Immigration: Key To the Future*. New York State Bar Association, 2021.

### **Nathan Graber, MD**

*NYS Department of Health, Office of Health Insurance Programs*



### **Christina Guillén, MD**

*State University of New York Downstate Health Sciences Health Sciences University  
Assistant Professor, Pediatrics*

Dr. Christina Guillén is an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the State University of New York (SUNY) Downstate Health Sciences University. She serves as the Program Director for the Pediatric Residency Program and Director of the Pediatric Community Advocacy and Engagement Division.

Dr. Guillén is a general pediatrician who has dedicated her career to advocacy and the protection of children and youth. Early in her career she served as the Child Abuse Specialist for the University Hospital at Downstate and NYC H+H Kings County Hospital Center and worked closely with the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office.



Dr. Guillén is committed to graduate medical education, community advocacy, and addressing health disparities within Brooklyn and New York City. As the Director of the Pediatric Community Advocacy and Engagement Division she created a community advocacy elective and a health disparities curriculum for training physicians in the pediatric residency program and medical students. Dr. Guillén oversees community engagement projects within and outside of her institution. She collaborates with nonprofit organizations such as the Food Bank for New York City, community-based organizations that serve children and families, and New York City public schools. She serves as the GME Associate Designated Institutional Official for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. She works closely with the Office of Diversity, Education and Research at the College of Medicine.

Dr. Guillén attended SUNY Stony Brook University where she received a Bachelors of Science degree in Psychology and obtained a Masters of Sciences degree in Biology from CUNY City College. She received her medical degree from SUNY Downstate College of Medicine.

Dr. Guillén completed her pediatrics residency training and Chief Resident year at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University. After completing her training she joined the faculty in the Department of Pediatrics.



### **Simone Hawkins**

*Simone C. Hawkins, Deputy Chancellor of the Division of Early Childhood Education at New York City Public Schools*

Simone C. Hawkins oversees birth through 5 education. A New York City native, Ms. Hawkins previously worked as Chief Equity Officer and Deputy Commissioner for the Center for Health Equity and Community Wellness (CHECW) at the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Prior to that, Simone worked at Covenant House New York as the Chief Financial and Administrative Officer, where she managed the organization's operating budget of \$33 million and the operations for six local runaway homeless youth residences as well as their onsite Federally Qualified Health Center.

With many years as a profound partner in early childhood work, throughout the five boroughs, Ms. Hawkins has held previous roles in the Division of Early Childhood Education at New York City Public Schools as the Chief Executive of Operations, as well as Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Child Care for the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and Deputy Director of Budget and Operations at The Children's Aid Society, overseeing the operations of fourteen group day care centers and a variety of local, state, and federal budgets, contracts, and grants. She has also worked at the NYC Office of Management and Budget and at the NYC Council under former Council Member Letitia James.

Ms. Hawkins received her Bachelor of Science from SUNY College at Oneonta in Political Science and Economics, and she holds a Master of Science from Fordham University.



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### **Dede Hill**

Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, Vice President of Policy

In this role, Dede coordinates the Schuyler Center's policy team and conducts policy analysis and advocacy in the areas of child care and economic security as well as overseeing child welfare and health policy. Prior to joining the Schuyler Center, Dede was a Professor of Law at Albany Law School, where her teaching and scholarship focused on labor and employment law. While in academia, Dede was active in local and statewide efforts to aid working families by increasing the minimum wage and organizing for stricter enforcement of labor and immigration laws to prevent wage theft in low wage and immigrant worker sectors. Dede earned a J.D. from the University of Wisconsin Law School, where she was a member of the Wisconsin Law Review, and a Bachelor of Arts from Vassar College.



### **Brigit Hurley**

*The Children's Agenda, Chief Program Officer*

Brigit Hurley is Chief Program Officer at The Children's Agenda, an advocacy organization whose mission is to improve the health, education, and success of children by advocating for effective, equitable policies, especially for families most impacted by poverty, racism, health inequities, and trauma. Brigit leads the Kids Can't Wait coalition, comprised of parents, providers and early education advocates working to expand access to services for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. Brigit holds a Master of Public Affairs from the Hubert Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota. She currently serves on the Board of the Society for the Protection and Care of Children in Rochester.



### **Liz Isakson, MD**

*Docs for Tots, Executive Director*

Dr. Isakson is the Executive Director of Docs for Tots, a non-profit organization that promotes practices, policies, and investments that will enable young children to thrive. Docs for Tots creates linkages between doctors, policymakers, early childhood practitioners, and other stakeholders to ensure that children grow up healthy. Dr. Isakson is a pediatrician and public health practitioner with over 20 years of experience. She has multiple publications published across the systems of early care and education, health, and family economic security. She teaches advocacy to graduate level students at Mt. Sinai School of Public Health. Dr. Isakson trained in general pediatrics at the Children's Hospital of New York where she was Chief Resident. She received her medical degree from the University of Connecticut Medical School.



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**Kristen Kerr**

*New York State Association for the Education of Young Children, Executive Director*

<http://www.nysaeyc.org>

Kristen is the Executive Director of the New York State Association for the Education of Young Children, (NYSAEYC), a membership association for early childhood professionals. She first joined NYSAEYC as Public Policy Coordinator and as a longtime member of the association, brings more than 20 years of experience as an early care and education professional. She represented NYSAEYC as co-convener of the Winning Beginning NY coalition.



**Karen Kissinger**

*NYS Office of Children and Family Services, Division of Child Welfare and Community Services, Bureau Director*

As the Director of the Bureau of Program and Community Development, Karen Kissinger leads a team to strengthen families across the state by enhancing protective factors. This work includes Healthy Families New York home visiting, Family Resource Centers, Family Opportunity Centers, and other voluntary primary prevention services that help families and communities thrive. Karen's past experience includes supporting families through work in the OCFS Division of Child Care Services, at a licensed child care program, and volunteering at pediatric hospital unit.



**Abbe Kovacik**

*BrightsideUp, Executive Director*

Abbe Kovacik is the Executive Director of the BrightsideUp, located in Albany, NY. BrightsideUp is a non-profit agency focused on improving the quality of early childhood education and after-school programming across the community. Abbe served as faculty at Schenectady County Community College, Fulton Montgomery Community College, and at the College of Saint Rose where she taught courses in early childhood education. Abbe holds a B.S. in Psychology from Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania, and a Master of Education in Educational Psychology from the College of Saint Rose. She is the co-author of *Observing and Understanding Child Development: A Child Development Manual* published by Delmar Cengage Learning.



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**Lauren Moore**

*NYS Education Department, Office of Cultural Education, NYS Library*

Ms. Moore has served in various leadership positions at public libraries and library systems throughout her career. Most recently, she has served as the Executive Director of the Pioneer Library System where she leads the development of 42 small and rural libraries in Ontario, Wayne, Wyoming and Livingston Counties by coordinating shared services. She previously served as the Assistant Director of the Pioneer Library System and the Deputy Director of the Southern Tier Library System. Ms. Moore has also served in leadership positions for various library professional organizations as well as for local, regional and statewide community service groups, including most recently, The New York State Complete Count Commission. The Commission was created to inform and help direct the State's efforts in the 2020 Census.

Ms. Moore earned her Master of Library and Information Sciences degree from the University of Pittsburgh. She also holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Rutgers University.



**Jenn O'Connor**

With over 25 years of experience in public policy at the state and national level, Jenn O'Connor brings deep expertise in improving the systems that serve children and families. Known for strategic thinking and relationship-building, she led efforts to craft impactful policy, navigate complex political landscapes, and build coalitions that drive lasting change. She previously served at several nonprofits, both state and national, including: as Director of Policy and Advocacy for Prevent Child Abuse New York (PCANY), where she was also Director of the NYS Home Visiting Coordination Initiative (HVCI); as NYS Director of Council for a Strong America; as Senior Associate for the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy; as Senior Analyst for the National Governors Association; and as Director of Legislative Affairs and Education for the National Conference of Insurance Legislators. In addition to a background in early childhood, maternal and child health, mental health, health insurance, and education policy, she has several years of campaign and legislative experience.

Jenn is currently a board member and policy committee co-chair of New York Zero to Three. She is immediate past co-chair of Winning Beginning New York, as well as former public policy chair for both the NY Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC) and the NYS Network for Youth Success, and former vice president of the board of PCANY.

She sits on the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) and the Governor's Child Care Availability Task Force. She represents the Empire State Campaign for Child Care on the ECAC.



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**Raymond Pierce**

*NYS Department of Health, Bureau of Early Intervention*

Ray Pierce is the Director of the Early Intervention Program in New York State which serves nearly 70,000 children and families. He has over 20 years of experience helping people with disabilities to live independently in the community with appropriate services and supports. His previous experience includes working at state rehabilitation and developmental disability agencies in NYS and Massachusetts. In the nonprofit world, he enjoyed assisting people to access public benefits, employment, housing, and health care. A Binghamton University graduate, Mr. Pierce concentrated his studies in human development, public administration, and leadership.



**Suzanne C. Sousa**

*Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, Executive Director*

Suzanne C. Sousa, Executive Director of the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, is responsible for all aspects of the organization's grant making, including both daily operations and broader program strategy development. Before joining the Foundation, Ms. Sousa was the Director of Development and Special Projects at New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS), where she served as the lead liaison to the philanthropic community as well as state and federal agencies and secured and managed millions in funding for several strategic initiatives. She had first served as the agency's Director of the Central Mentoring Office overseeing efforts towards expanding mentoring opportunities for children and youth in foster care. Ms. Sousa has also held senior positions at the National Guild for Community Arts Education and The Peter F. Drucker Foundation, both in New York City. Suzanne holds a B.A. in Art History and Geography from Rutgers University and a M.S. in Public Policy and Management from The New School University.



**Lauri Strano**

*Children's Institute, Director of Programs*

As the Director of Programs and Services at Children's Institute, Lauri Strano manages large-scale community-wide collaborations and assessment systems serving young children and youth. Her experience includes working with providers, parents, and policymakers in the context of local, state, and federally funded grants and initiatives. She holds BS degrees from University of Rochester in Psychology and Political Science, and an MS in Elementary Education and NYS certification with specialization in early



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childhood from Nazareth College. Lauri also has fifteen years of experience in early childhood development programs as an administrator, teacher, and caregiver.



**Erik Sweet**

*New York State Education Department, Office of Early Learning, Executive Director*

Erik Sweet is the Executive Director of the New York State Education Department's Office of Early Learning. He has worked for the New York State Education Department since 2006, in the Office of Standards and Instruction and the Office of Early Learning. In his role as Executive Director in the Office of Early Learning, he oversees the state's Universal Prekindergarten Program as well as other Prekindergarten-Grade 3 initiatives.



**Carolyn L. Wiggins**

*NYS Head Start Association, Fort George Community Services, Executive Director/CEO*  
<http://www.fortgeorgecenter.org>

Carolyn brings over 30 years of experience as an early childhood and higher education administrator to the Head Start Community. She is skilled in nonprofit organizations, event planning, program evaluation, strategic planning and organizational development. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Education from Antioch College and a Master of Education from Antioch College Graduate School of Education in Elementary Education. She holds both New York State Permanent Teacher's Certification and California Community College Instructor's Credential in Early Childhood Education, valid for life. Under Carolyn's leadership she has expanded Fort George from a NYC Head Start Delegate Agency, serving 186 children, to a Direct Head Start/ Early Head Start Grantee serving 422 children. The agency now covers two boroughs and four communities: Washington Heights, West Harlem, and Hamilton Heights in Manhattan and Morrisania in the Bronx. In partnership with NYP Hospital Fort George provides community health workers serving children with chronic health conditions. Carolyn is also a member of NYP/PPS Finance Committee. She is member of South Bronx Rising, the New York City DOE Birth-Five Advisory Group, the National Head Start Association State Leadership Team and the President of the New York State Head Start Association.



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### **Elizabeth Wolkomir**

*NYC Administration for Children's Services, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Child and Family Well-Being*

Elizabeth Wolkomir is the Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Child and Family Well-Being (CFWB) at the NYC Administration for Children's Services. In this role, she oversees the development and execution of strategies that promote child, family, and community well-being through the provision of child care subsidies; approaches to prevent child injury and promote child safety; and community-based investments. During her tenure at ACS, she has served as Associate Commissioner in the Division of Prevention Services and as Assistant Commissioner for Strategic Planning and Financial Management.

Ms. Wolkomir has extensive policy experience in poverty alleviation, child care, child welfare, food assistance, immigration and budget. Prior to joining ACS, Ms. Wolkomir worked as a Senior Policy Analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, where she focused on strengthening and protecting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Ms. Wolkomir also has years of experience working at the White House Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Labor.

Ms. Wolkomir received a Bachelor of Arts from Tufts University and a Master of Arts in Economics and International Development from Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies.



### **Nora Yates**

*NYS Office of Children and Family Services, Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Child Care Services*

Nora Yates is the deputy commissioner in the Division of Child Care Services and is responsible for overseeing all aspects of New York's early care and education system supported by the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), which currently includes more than \$2 billion in federal funding. The division also oversees all federal training requirements for early childhood providers supported by CCDF, provider health and safety and quality compliance, state licensing and regulations and the child care assistance program to support families accessing care and regularly collaborates with a wide variety stakeholders on key priorities related to children and families.

Previously, Ms. Yates served as the director of the Center for Community Health at the New York State Department of Health where she oversaw more than \$2 billion in state and local funding that supported key public health programs, including chronic disease prevention, communicable disease control, family health and nutrition.



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During the COVID-19 pandemic response, she led the creation and stand up of the state Contact Tracing Initiative, the largest contact tracing program in the country, and also directed the COVID-19 testing sites and testing initiatives. Before joining the Department of Health, Ms. Yates served as the Governor's assistant secretary for human services and the director of the Community, Opportunity, Reinvestment (CORE) Initiative, where she worked to align state and local agencies on a common framework to examine key issues in distressed communities. Ms. Yates joined the State as part of the inaugural class of Empire Fellows, one of nine individuals selected to serve in policy-level positions throughout Executive agencies.

Before joining the state, Ms. Yates served as the executive director of the Pride Center of the Capital Region and worked at the Empire State Pride Agenda as field director leading New York's marriage equality effort. She earned bachelor's and master's of arts degrees at the State University of New York at Albany, a master's in public administration from the Sage Graduate School and a master's in women's studies and public policy from the University at Albany.