



# 12th Annual Success Network Conference

*Building the Future We Want: Increasing Equitable Postsecondary Attainment*

## Agenda

February 25, 2025

I Hotel & Illinois Conference Center, Champaign, Illinois

### CONTENT

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# SCHEDULE

8–9 A.M.

*Check in, breakfast, and networking*

9–10:15 A.M.

## Welcome and Opening Plenary

ILLINOIS BALLROOM

### Bridging the Divide: Opportunity Gaps Impacting Students of Color and Students from Low-income Communities

Keynote speaker Wil del Pilar, PhD, Senior Vice President, EdTrust, will explore systemic opportunity gaps affecting students of color and students from low-income communities in Illinois, using data-driven insights to highlight trends and inform actionable solutions at institutional, state, and federal levels. Following his remarks, he will have a conversation with Kyle Westbrook, PhD, Executive Director of Education Systems Center at NIU, to discuss equity-centered practices to advance postsecondary attainment. Plus, Edith Njuguna, Director of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network, will share reflections on the Network's vision for 2025 and beyond.

Conference emcees:

- » Cheryl Flores, Director of Community Engagement, Advance Illinois
- » Sam Nelson, Director of Capacity Management, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

10:15–10:25 A.M.

*Transition*

10:25–11:20 A.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

### Data-Driven Advocacy: Tackling Opportunity Gaps in Postsecondary Success

ALMA MATER ROOM

In this interactive workshop, delve into the systemic opportunity gaps impacting students in Illinois. Explore how to use data to understand the interplay of factors contributing to disparities in postsecondary success. Then, analyze data to identify disparities across demographic groups and geographic locations within the state and consider data-driven strategies to advocate for equitable educational policies and practices.

- » Wil del Pilar, PhD, Senior Vice President, EdTrust

### Navigating the Future: An In-Depth Look at the Illinois PaCE Framework

HUMANITIES ROOM

Join us for an engaging and informative session on the Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework, a comprehensive guide designed to prepare students for life beyond high school. This session will provide educators, counselors, and administrators with a thorough understanding of the framework's components, implementation strategies, and the benefits it offers to students.

- » Kimberly Korando, Assistant Director of College Access, Illinois Student Assistance Commission
- » Ana Moya, Professional Development Specialist, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

### Successful Dual Credit Partnerships and How They Increase Enrollment and Student Success

KNOWLEDGE ROOM

Explore the potential of dual credit partnerships in driving student success and boosting enrollment as we discuss proven strategies for fostering effective collaborations between high schools and higher education institutions. Learn how these partnerships empower high school students to earn college credit while serving as a powerful enrollment growth tool. Gain insights into best practices, real-world success stories, and actionable steps to build or enhance dual credit programs, ensuring mutual benefits for both institutions and students.

- » Jacob Cushing, EdD, Director of Student Recruitment and Onboarding, College of Lake County
- » Meagan Mitchell, Director of Pathways, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Lirim Neziroski, PhD, Dean of Humanities, Fine Arts and Social Sciences, Illinois Valley Community College
- » Yazmin Patino, Lead College and Career Navigator, College of Lake County

## Breaking Barriers: Communicating College and Career Pathways to Students and Families

INNOVATION ROOM

Join us for an insightful panel discussion with high school district leaders who are transforming how they communicate college and career pathways to students and their families. Learn about their innovative approaches, proven strategies, and effective tools that help students make informed decisions about their future, then ask your questions on ways to enhance engagement and support students on their journey to college and career success.

- » Leslie Bradley, Director of Student Career Services, Vienna High School
- » Sarah Clark, Senior Director of Strategy and Development, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Jill Hlavacek, Director of Innovation and Learning, Naperville District 203
- » Joe Sieczkowski, Director of CTE, Pathways, and College and Career Readiness, CUSD 300
- » Josh Stafford, School Superintendent, Vienna High School

## Building Blocks for Equity... Literally

LINCOLN ROOM

In this interactive session, participate in an activity using Lego building blocks to talk about concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion and how they apply to work in higher education through a constructivist lens. A constructivist approach suggests that learning is a continual process of meaning making; it is how individuals make sense of their experiences (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Join us to learn a method for engaging colleagues and students in meaningful conversation.

- » Nick Branson, PhD, Assistant Vice President for Strategic Advancement, College of Lake County
- » Luis Jauregui, Communication Specialist, Student Recruitment and Onboarding, College of Lake County

11:20–11:30 A.M.

Transition

11:30 A.M.–12:25 P.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

### Unlocking Financial Aid: Navigating FAFSA Simplification and Supporting Students for 2025–26

KNOWLEDGE ROOM

The FAFSA has undergone significant changes due to the FAFSA Simplification Act. Join us to learn how you can assist students and families in completing the 2025–26 application. Receive the most up-to-date information from the Department of Education and find out how ISAC is leading the way in providing resources and support for students navigating the financial aid process.

- » Manuel Talavera, Professional Development Specialist, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

### Employer Panel: Work-Based Learning in Northern Kane County

ALMA MATER ROOM

An employer panel representing diverse industries will discuss strategies for supporting work-based learning in high schools, including how employers can foster meaningful experiences, partner with schools, serve as mentors, and benefit from engaging with the future workforce. By hearing directly from employers, participants will gain a clearer understanding of how to build mutually beneficial relationships that prepare students for college and career.

- » Todd Stirn, EdD, Work-Based Learning Specialist, Northern Kane Co. Regional Vocational System
- » Terry Stroh, Systems Director, Northern Kane County Regional Vocational System

### Growing Future Educators: Building a Pathway for Change at Crete-Monee High School

EXCELLENCE ROOM

Discover how Crete-Monee High School's grow-your-own teaching program is equipping students to return as change agents in their community, challenging the negative educational outcomes for students from marginalized communities. Through transparent reflections on successes and lessons learned, this session will cover essential recruitment strategies, innovative college and school partnerships, and more. Explore how a 9–12 institution serving over 1,450 students across four diverse communities is paving the way for a brighter educational future. The strategies discussed in this session can be used in planning pathways outside of education.

- » Lamont Holified, Principal, Crete-Monee High School
- » Sarah Valerio, Teacher Leader, Education Pathways, Crete-Monee High School

## Supporting Students in Rural Communities: Updates from the Rural Illinois CTE Project

HUMANITIES ROOM

This session will introduce the Rural Illinois CTE Project and review in-depth research done with rural school districts across Illinois on the highlights and challenges of their Career and Technical Education (CTE) programming. The session will focus on key findings across all districts and discuss specific recommendations for supporting strong rural CTE efforts. After discussing the research, participants from small and rural school districts will be given an opportunity to share their perspectives and offer suggestions for policy advocacy.

- » John Glasgow, Program Director, The Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools

## Improving and Accelerating Access to Credentials and Degrees for Working Adults in the Early Childhood Field

INNOVATION ROOM

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) was created to address a shortage of early educators and a need for equitable access to seamless higher education pathways designed to support working adults in the field of early childhood education. Key to dismantling the barriers to higher education has been the ECACE scholarship, the wraparound student supports, and the higher education navigators employed within regionally based Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies across the state. This session will provide an opportunity to hear from state advocates on the program's success and from local leaders who will discuss how the cross-sector work of ECACE is accelerating access, persistence, and completion of degrees and credentials for working adults in the early childhood education and care field.

- » Angela Farwig, JD, Vice President of Public Policy, Advocacy and Research, Illinois Action for Children
- » Maya Portillo, Senior Policy Advisor, Advance Illinois

## Foundations for Equitable Systems: Policy Updates

LINCOLN ROOM

Key to accelerating equitable success is effective policy that can drive improved access to quality college and career preparation opportunities throughout the P-20 and workforce spectrum. Learn about recent policy changes and emerging priorities that shape how partners across Illinois can serve their communities to achieve more equitable outcomes in secondary, postsecondary, and beyond.

- » Emily Rusca, Director of Policy, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Madeleine Greene, Policy, Education Systems Center at NIU

12:25–12:35 P.M.

Transition

12:35–2:00 P.M.

## Luncheon Plenary

ILLINOIS BALLROOM

### How the College and Career Pathway Endorsements Process Prepares Students For Life After High School

As we consider early outcomes from the College and Career Pathway Endorsements system, Amina Omanic, an Illinois State University student who earned an endorsement, will share insights on what she learned and how she benefited from the process. She will be joined by Kelli Appel, Director of Recruitment and Retention for ISU's College of Education, who will discuss why the institution is offering scholarships to endorsement earners and how Amina stands out due to her experiences.

We will also hear members of the Success Network's Student Advisory Council share insights on strategies to prepare students for life after high school:

- » Massillon Boyd, West Aurora High School, Class of 2025
- » Ethyn Bradley, Vienna High School, Class of 2025
- » Rowan Smith, Moline High School, Class of 2025
- » Kendyl Sparks, Vienna High School, Class of 2025
- » Annah Stevenson, Evanston Township High School, Class of 2025
- » Jose Vences, North Chicago Community High School, Class of 2025

2–2:15 P.M.

Transition

## Concurrent Sessions

### Student Perspectives on College and Career Preparedness

HUMANITIES ROOM

In this student-led session, members of the Success Network's Student Advisory Council will discuss how they engaged their peers in surveys about College and Career Pathway Endorsements currency and Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities to amplify student voice and advocate for their peers. Learn about the students' processes, key insights from their surveys, and their perspectives on offerings at their schools.

- » Massillon Boyd, West Aurora High School, Class of 2025
- » Rowan Smith, Moline High School, Class of 2025
- » Dania Ibrahim, Innovation Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU

### Thinking Longitudinally: Using Data to Support Postsecondary Readiness and Success

KNOWLEDGE ROOM

Learn how school districts can use longitudinal data to increase their impact. Concepts include the power of incremental improvement, goal setting, and approaches to measuring student growth and linking it to long-term success. The session will include an overview of data tools for tracking performance and a discussion about the future of longitudinal data in Illinois.

- » Ben Boer, Senior Director of Data, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Dominique Janvier, Data Analyst, Education Systems Center at NIU

### High-Quality Criteria for Pathways and Work-Based Learning

LINCOLN ROOM

To support the design, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of college and career pathways and work-based learning, we'll explore the [Scaling Work-Based Learning: Quality Criteria for Continuous Improvement and Equity](#) and [Quality Criteria for College and Career Pathways Implementation](#) resources and learn how they are applied in practice. Then engage in a self-assessment to evaluate your efforts in ensuring equitable access to high-quality pathways.

- » Ericka Kouba, Career Coordinator, Des Plaines Valley Region
- » Michael Kuhn, EDD, Director, Des Plaines Valley Region EFE
- » Laura Monteagudo, Pathways Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Heather Penczak, Director of Innovation, Education Systems Center at NIU

### Partnering Industry and Education for Student Success

ALMA MATER ROOM

At a local level, workforce development is best addressed when education systems and the business community are working together and have clearly defined goals. High-quality education for all students is critical to American business and our economy. Engaging industry partners in education allows students to explore and experience various career pathways and develop essential critical skills. Learn about best practices for sustainable educator/employer career-connected programs and relationships that you can implement in your community.

- » Deb Barnett, PhD, Executive Director, Southern Illinois Now
- » Kris Noble, Community Engagement Specialist, Midland Institute for Entrepreneurship

### Post-Pandemic Learning Renewal: Lessons Learned and Lingering Equity Issues

INNOVATION ROOM

Researchers will share trends in post-pandemic outcomes and district strategies related to recovery. Learn specific strategies implemented by diverse districts to tackle their unique challenges and address equity issues.

- » Mariana Barragan Torres, PhD, Researcher, Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) at the University of Illinois
- » Meg Bates, PhD, Director, Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) at the University of Illinois

## Concurrent Sessions

### Building an Adequate and Equitable Public University Funding Formula to Better Support Students

KNOWLEDGE ROOM

Learn about the Adequate and Equitable Public University Funding Formula (AEF) and dive into the evidence-based research underlying the formula that seeks to improve enrollment, persistence, and outcomes for college students in Illinois.

- » Mike Abrahamson, Senior Manager of Research and Policy, Partnership for College Completion
- » Kelsey Bakken, Senior Policy Advisor, Advance Illinois
- » Eyob Villa-Moges, Senior Policy Associate, Advance Illinois

### Chronic Absenteeism: How It Started and How It's Going

HUMANITIES ROOM

Participate in an interactive session that delves into the interrelated issues surrounding chronic absenteeism. Explore effective strategies and resources to address this challenge and engage in a facilitated discussion where you can share your insights and learn from others. This crucial topic requires the support of all community stakeholders to ensure our students thrive.

- » Mike McGreevy, Dean of Students, Rolling Meadows High School
- » Quanshanda Nicholson, Principal, James Avant Elementary School, East St. Louis SD 189
- » Antoinette Taylor, PhD, Consultant, A.T. Exceptional Consulting

### Regional Collaboration for Student Success: Authentic School and College Partnerships

ALMA MATER ROOM

Discover how Districts 214, 211, and 220, in partnership with Harper College, have fostered collaboration to advance dual credit and transitional instruction initiatives. This dynamic panel of secondary and postsecondary representatives will share their journey, including the processes, systems, and relationships that have propelled their work forward. Topics include strategies to build strong partnerships between high school instructors and college faculty; insights into obstacles and lessons learned; approaches to addressing misalignment in transitional instruction; and best practices for dual credit course selection, teacher credentialing, and balancing core versus CTE offerings.

- » Michele Napier, Director of College and Career Readiness, D211
- » Jennifer Greer, Early College Program Supervisor, D214
- » Sharon Rainbolt, Dual Credit Coordinator, Harper College
- » Jaime Riewerts, EdD, Dean of Liberal Arts, Harper College
- » Kimberley Polly, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, Harper College
- » Nancy Awdziejczyk, Executive Director, Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS)
- » Kelly Hansen, Director of Secondary Education, D220

### Bridging the Gap: Supporting 'Some College, No Credential' Learners

LINCOLN ROOM

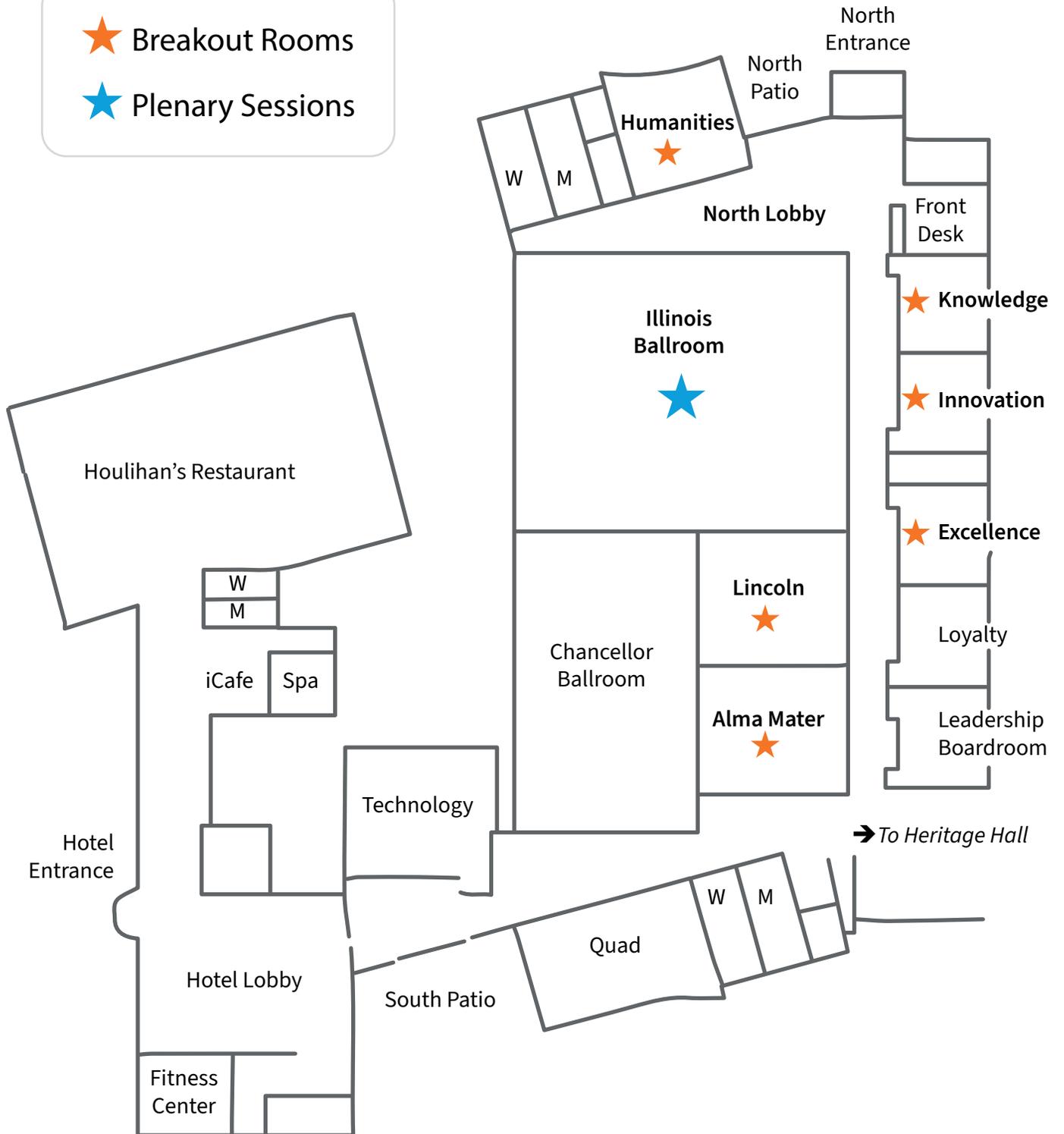
Join an experienced panel to learn about best practices and initiatives in Illinois that support degree completion for our 'some college, no credential' learners. It is critical that higher education help bridge the gap for this population, which is quite large and growing in Illinois. Panel members include representatives from four-year institutions, community college adult re-entry (transfer and workforce development) program advisors, and students who returned to college to complete their degrees.

- » Oulay Harvey, Administrative Aide for University Academic Programs and Services, University of Illinois System
- » Tony Hooker, Adult and Returning Student Services Advisor, Parkland College
- » Dena Lawrence, IL MyCredits Transfer Project Coordinator, University of Illinois System
- » Gina Modica, IL MyCredits Transfer Technical Coordinator, University of Illinois System
- » Elizabeth Nieto, Spanish Teacher, Villa Grove High School
- » Stephane Potts, Director of Advisement and Counseling, Transfer Articulation Coordinator, and Chief Diversity Officer, Danville Area Community College

# ROOM MAP

★ Breakout Rooms

★ Plenary Sessions



# SPEAKERS

**Mike Abrahamson** Mike Abrahamson is the Senior Manager of Research and Policy for the Partnership for College Completion, where he works on policy affecting equitable college access, affordability, and accountability in Illinois. Before joining the Partnership, Mike worked as a Mayoral Fellow while completing a master's degree from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy.

**Kelli Appel** Kelli Appel, MS in Special Education, has worked at Illinois State University in teacher education for over 25 years. As the Director of Recruitment and Retention in the College of Education, she has extensive experience working directly with teacher candidates as well as collaborating with CTE programs and teacher pathways across Illinois.

**Nancy Awdziejczyk** The Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS) is a leader in creating equitable, high-quality pathways that ensure postsecondary success. As Executive Director, Nancy Awdziejczyk fosters a culture of innovation, accountability, and transparency, and manages state and federal CTE grants as EFE Director for region 070. With over twenty-five years in education, she has championed CTE, previously serving as Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instructional Technology after starting her career in early childhood education. She holds a master's in Educational Leadership from Concordia University and a bachelor's in Elementary Education from Elmhurst College.

**Kelsey Bakken** Kelsey Bakken spent seven years teaching special education at a neighborhood high school in Gage Park, Chicago. Through that venture, Kelsey became passionate about ensuring that all students had access to the resources and opportunities needed to hone their college and career readiness skills. During her time at Eric Solorio Academy High School, Kelsey also worked to build the cheer program at the school and was assistant softball coach. Kelsey transitioned out of the classroom to focus on research and policy attending the Harvard Graduate School of Education where she completed a master's program in Education Policy and Management. Most of Kelsey's research and policy experience stems from her time at the Illinois State Board of Education in which she held various roles in the research department. One of her primary projects included facilitating the mixed methods Evidence-Based Funding Five-Year Evaluative Study in collaboration with the Professional Review Panel. Other projects included an analysis of bilingual educator supply and demand, how to implement trauma-informed practices statewide, and understanding the implementation of newly passed Black History Curriculum. Most recently Kelsey advised on the evaluation of current Learning Renewal programming and how best to use data to better understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Mariana Barragan Torres, PhD** Mariana Barragan Torres, PhD, is a researcher at the Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) at the University of Illinois. Her work focuses on using data and advanced statistical methods to understand educational systems in order to inform policy and decision-making, so that every student has the opportunity to be everything they can be. Over the last three years, she has authored or co-authored more than a dozen publications and reports, including on learning renewal in Illinois since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, postsecondary enrollment trends in Illinois, teacher preparation programs, and the challenges and opportunities faced by Latino students pursuing higher education. Dr. Barragan Torres received a PhD in Education from UCLA. She also holds a Master of Arts degree in International Comparative Education from Stanford University, and bachelor's and master's degrees in economics from ITAM in Mexico.

**Deb Barnett, PhD** Deborah Barnett, PhD, earned both her doctoral and master's degrees in Workforce Education and Development (WED) at Southern Illinois University (SIU) Carbondale and holds a bachelor's degree in business administration. Deb proudly serves as the Executive Director for SI Now, a 17-county Southern Illinois regional economic development initiative with priorities in business growth, marketing the region, and education and workforce. SI Now's Education and Workforce Development Task Force led the work to establish the Southern Illinois Region Leadership Community through the Illinois Education and Career Success Network. Prior to joining SI Now, she served as the Director of Business Incubator Programs at SIU's Office of Innovation and Economic Development where she grew the incubator capacity with a wait list for the first time in its 30-year history. In addition to her work in higher education, she has ten years of experience as a small business owner and has held roles in workforce training, elementary education, and ministry-related service. Deb has served on a number of teams to advance economic development and regional growth initiatives. As a lifelong resident of southern Illinois, she is passionate about contributing to collaborative efforts to advance the region she serves.

**Meg Bates, PhD** Meg Bates, PhD, is the inaugural Director of the Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) at University of Illinois. IWERC is a research-practice partnership with the State of Illinois that focuses on emergent education issues of interest to policymakers and practitioners. Since joining IWERC in September 2020, Dr. Bates has cultivated close relationships with state government, developed novel data sharing agreements with state units, overseen the production of 40 research reports, and raised over \$5 million in grants, contracts, and gifts (on top of IWERC's initial operating gifts of \$4.3 million). By training, Dr. Bates is an educational psychologist with expertise in STEM education (PhD 2009, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign). Before coming to IWERC, she spent over a decade at University of Chicago working with schools and teachers on STEM education research, technology, and pedagogy. She has served as PI or Co-PI of numerous NSF grants related to mathematics teacher learning.

**Ben Boer** Benjamin Boer, Education Systems Center at NIU's Senior Director of Data, is the project lead for ILDS 2.0 providing support on policy issues that include school finance, assessment, accountability, and the use of data. As the former deputy director of Advance Illinois, Ben provided analytic and modeling support for numerous K-12 funding proposals. This culminated in a partnership with various state advocacy organizations to develop and refine the evidence-based funding legislation, which became law in August 2017. He also partnered closely on the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act. Ben is a PhD candidate in educational policy studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His area of study is the use of data in schools. He earned a bachelor's and master's degree in computer science from Brown University and a master's degree in public policy from the Harris School at the University of Chicago. He lives in Chicago with his wife and two daughters.

**Massillon Boyd** Massillon Boyd is currently a senior at West Aurora Senior High SD 129 and plans to major in Biology for his postsecondary studies. In addition, as a member of the Success Network's Student Advisory Council and as intern for Education Systems Center at NIU, he provides a new insight into the lives of many students in Illinois through his contributions to projects centered around postsecondary currency and endorsements for students, researching existing currencies, and collecting data on how to best serve students after their secondary education. In addition to this work Massillon works under the Illinois State Board of Education, as President of the Illinois Career and Technical Student Organizations Board, to spread awareness about CTSOs, their benefits for students seeking to advance themselves, and barriers to accessing these organizations. Massillon seeks to tear down the barriers that hold students back from advancing themselves in order to create a level playing field of equity within education. Outside of his work in education policy, Massillon is a part of a CTSO himself, specifically HOSA-Future Health Professionals for which he serves as the State President. Within this organization he collaborates with his fellow officers in order to lead and inspire the next generation of healthcare professionals.

**Ethyn Bradley** Ethyn Bradley is a senior from Vienna High School in Vienna, Illinois. He has completed trainings the past two years to build a career in nursing including certifications in My Preparedness (MyPi), Narcan, Stop the Bleed, FEMA Emergency Preparedness,, NOAA/National Weather Service Storm Spotter, and he has obtained a Certified Nursing Assistant license and an Amateur Radio license. Currently, he is completing Emergency Medical Responder certification. He is a member of Beta Club, Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA), Travel Club, Future Educator Club, 4H Teen Teacher, Johnson County 4H Eagles, Math Field Day team, Scholar Bowl, University of Illinois Unit 27 Council financial reporter, Football, Wrestling and was a member of FEMA Regional 5 Youth Preparedness Council. After high school graduation, he will enter the nursing program at Southern Illinois University - Carbondale where he will be attending on a full-ride Chancellor scholarship. Upon completion of a BSN, he plans on continuing his education to one day serve in the capacity of a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner.

**Leslie Bradley** Leslie Bradley's journey in education began at Southeast Missouri State University, where she pursued a Bachelor of Science in Secondary English Education. Her commitment to her students and her desire to excel in her profession led her to earn her Master's in Education from Olivet Nazarene University. Last year, Leslie embarked on a new chapter in her educational journey when she assumed the role of Director of Student Career Services at Vienna High School, where she taught 16 of the 26 years of her teaching career. Leslie's mission is to guide and empower students in their career choices, helping them realize their full potential. Under Leslie's leadership, the Student Career Services department at Vienna High School has introduced innovative programs, organized career fairs, and fostered partnerships with local businesses and colleges, offering students valuable opportunities for growth and exploration.

**Nick Branson, PhD** Nick Branson is the Assistant Vice President of Strategic Advancement at the College of Lake County and leads the college's initiatives to improve students' experiences by collaborating across all units of the institution to drive systemic change that fulfills the college's student success vision. He also oversees the College's institutional effectiveness, planning, research and grants areas. Nick earned a BA from Loyola University Chicago, a MA from University of Chicago, and a PhD from Loyola University Chicago.

**Sarah Clark** Sarah Clark is the Senior Director of Strategy and Development at Education Systems Center at NIU, developing and executing organization-wide strategy, supporting executive leadership, driving fundraising efforts, and leading communications. She also served as project lead for the Scaling Transformative Advanced Manufacturing Pathways (STAMP) initiative. Sarah first worked in journalism as a reporter and news anchor and, since 2007, has worked in marketing communications and development for non-profit organizations in the Chicago area. She earned a Bachelor of Journalism and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Missouri.

**Jacob Cushing, EdD** Jacob Cushing, EdD, is the Director of Student Recruitment and Onboarding at the College of Lake County (Grayslake, IL). In this role, he leads a team of College and Career Navigators, Admissions staff, and Welcome Center personnel with a purpose-driven approach, prioritizing front-loaded retention strategies to support student success from the outset. With over a decade of experience in higher education administration, Dr. Cushing has specialized in international education, student records, admissions, and recruitment. His work consistently aims to enhance the student experience through innovative and inclusive practices. His academic research focuses on international student success, particularly through the development of acculturative support models that ease transitions and foster belonging. Dr. Cushing earned a Bachelor of Arts in History and a Master of Arts in History and Education from Truman State University, and holds a Doctorate in Higher Education Administration and Community College Leadership from Northern Illinois University.

**Wil del Pilar, PhD** Wil Del Pilar, PhD, serves as EdTrust's Senior Vice President. In this role, Wil spearheads EdTrust's mission to highlight inequities and outline solutions in order to improve access, success, affordability, and completion in higher education for low-income students and students of color. Prior to joining E Trust, Wil served in Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf's administration as deputy secretary of postsecondary and higher education, where he developed and implemented the state's strategic vision for higher education. Before joining Governor Wolf's team, Wil had experience in the Pennsylvania Department of Education, working as an executive assistant in the state's higher education office. In this role, he managed an array of services for the state, including the College Access Challenge Grant and the Pennsylvania Information Management System. Aside from working for Pennsylvania's Department of Education in higher education policy roles, Wil has held senior development positions, as the director of development at Pennsylvania State University and at the University of Florida's Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Program. In both positions, he fought to secure funding to support access and success initiatives for historically underrepresented students. In addition to his policy and development experience, Wil has a wealth of institutional experience, working in admissions at Chapman University in Orange, California, and the University of California Santa Cruz, as a financial aid counselor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, and as a research assistant at Penn State. Wil holds a doctorate in higher education/higher education administration from The Pennsylvania State University, a master's degree from California State University-Dominguez Hills, and a bachelor's degree from Chapman University.

**Angela Farwig, JD** Angela Farwig, JD, is the Vice President of Public Policy, Advocacy and Research at Illinois Action for Children. In this role, Angela works to improve public policy in early child care and education and building organizational capacity, at the grassroots level. She serves as the key policy leader with multiple constituencies including other nonprofit organizations, foundations, agency staff and leadership, and statewide county and locally elected officials. Previously, she was the Senior Policy Advisor at Advance Illinois and served as co-chair of the Policy Committee of the diverse statewide coalition We, The Village. Angela has also held roles at numerous organizations committed to childhood education including Flourish Strategies, the Community Learning Center Institute, Start Early (formerly Ounce of Prevention Fund), and the Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning. Angela has a Master of Public Policy from Loyola University Chicago and a Juris Doctor from Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law.

**Cheryl Flores** As a first-generation college graduate, Cheryl Flores understands the gender, economic, cultural, and social barriers young people face in reaching their potential and continuing their educational goals. These experiences led her to the education space. Before joining the team at Advance Illinois, Cheryl spent time working with community-based organizations on youth development, youth organizing, community schools, and education issues. Most recently, Cheryl worked for the Golden Apple Foundation ensuring that preservice teachers had the academic and social-emotional supports to graduate and thrive as teachers in the classroom. Over the years, she has been involved with different organizations and non-profit boards, most recently as a board member for Telpochcalli Community Education Project (TCEP), a community-based organization on the southwest side of Chicago. She is an alumna of the Illinois Latino Nonprofit Academy with the Latino Policy Forum and a 2019 Surge Fellow with the Surge Institute. Cheryl is currently a doctoral student in Policy Studies in Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She holds a Master of Public Administration from DePaul University and earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago. In her spare time, she enjoys running and trying new cooking or baking recipes.

**John Glasgow** John Glasgow serves as the Program Director for the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools. He leads the Rural IL CTE Project in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education. The project is a state-wide effort to understand and address the needs and equity gaps of rural Career and Technical Education programming. John was born and raised in rural Illinois, and is passionate about building rural prosperity through student success and strong schools.

**Madeleine Greene** Madeleine Greene, Policy Manager for Education Systems Center at NIU, supports policy work in communities throughout Illinois, largely focusing on transitional instruction, dual enrollment and the implementation of college and career pathways. Madeleine convenes practitioners in forums such as the Success Network's Policy Committee to inform equitable policy at each stage of the P-20 pipeline. Madeleine began her career as a middle school teacher in Gary, Indiana, and in Chicago Public Schools, where she developed a passion for eliminating systemic barriers to student success. Most recently, Madeleine supported research and analysis into transfer pathways at the Partnership for College Completion as well as equitable higher education funding work with Advance Illinois. Madeleine holds a bachelor's in journalism from Northwestern University and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Chicago.

**Jennifer Greer** As the Early College Program Supervisor in Township High School District 214, Jennifer Greer oversees dual credit programming and works closely with the district's postsecondary partners. Together, they create and maintain dual credit and early college opportunities, both inside and out of the classroom. With a background as both a college advisor and high school counselor, Jennifer's goal is to make higher education more accessible, reduce future college costs for students and families, and give students a head start on their college education and career pathways. She holds a master's in Counseling and Counselor Education and bachelor's in Human Development and Family Studies from Indiana University.

**Kelly Hansen** With 23 years of experience in education, Kelly Hansen currently serves as the Director of Secondary Curriculum and Instruction in Barrington, Illinois. In this role, she is dedicated to enhancing educational outcomes for high school students through innovative curriculum development and instructional leadership. Kelly is particularly focused on establishing a robust dual credit program that empowers students to earn college credits while completing their high school education. Her commitment to fostering academic excellence and providing diverse learning opportunities reflects her passion for preparing students for success in their future endeavors.

**Oulay Harvey** Oulay Harvey is a dedicated Administrative Aide for University Academic Programs and Services at the University of Illinois System, using her skills in organization, communication, and problem-solving to streamline office operations and provide exceptional support to her team. Oulay is a proud graduate of Parkland College and Eastern Illinois University.

**Jill Hlavacek** Jill Hlavacek is the Director of Innovation and Learning for Naperville District 203. Jill is instrumental in leading practice and learning transformations in several areas across the district. As a Career and Technical Educator for 29 years, Jill works to shift programming and practice related to college and career readiness preparation for students. She has led the development of comprehensive counseling curriculum aligned to career and postsecondary standards and has been leading the development of career pathways of study. As Director of Innovation and Learning, Jill's responsibilities include leading the transformation of learning spaces, redesign of purpose and function of the district libraries, developing innovative Career and Technical Education courses, increasing online and blended learning options for students, implementing a 6–12 counseling curriculum with embedded individual learning plan tool, and developing diploma endorsement options for student in specific career cluster areas.

**Lamont Holifield** Lamont Holifield currently serves as the Principal of Crete-Monee High School, bringing a wealth of experience, dedication, and an commitment to academic excellence and equity. Holifield earned his Associate of Arts in Teaching High School from Harold Washington College, followed by a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics from Roosevelt University. He furthered his expertise with three master's degrees—Training and Development, Secondary Education, and School Leadership—and is currently completing his dissertation for a PhD in Mathematics Education from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Holifield began as a high school mathematics teacher. He progressed to leadership roles, serving as a Mathematics Department Chair, Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction, and Principal at several schools. His expertise in Career and Technical Education (CTE) also led him to serve as an Education for Employment Director, where he supported four south suburban Illinois school districts in delivering robust CTE programs. At Crete-Monee High School, Holifield channels his deep-rooted passion for transforming educational outcomes and his commitment to equity into creating pathways for all students to succeed. He has launched initiatives to empower educators, equipping them to teach with intentionality and to focus on leveling the playing field for marginalized students. Holifield's vision is one of inclusivity and opportunity, where all scholars have the support and resources needed to thrive academically and personally.

**Tony Hooker** As the Adult and Returning Student Services Advisor at Parkland College, Tony Hooker uses his unique skills and experiences – including being a US Navy Veteran – to help contemporary, nontraditional students find their educational pathways. Tony earned an Associate of Arts degree from Parkland College, and bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

**Dania Ibrahim** Dania Ibrahim is the Innovation Manager at Education Systems Center at NIU (EdSystems). She supports work-based learning and competency-based education initiatives. She largely focuses on improving accessibility to work-based learning experiences across the continuum and the role of mentorship in bridging the opportunity gap. Dania conducted learning methods and education equity research for four years before joining EdSystems and continues to lead education-focused research projects as a PhD student at University of California San Diego. Dania received her bachelor's degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology where she studied Neuroscience with a focus on Health and Medical Sciences and Middle Eastern Studies.

**Dominique Janvier** Dominique Janvier the Data Analyst at Education Systems Center at NIU. She is committed to investigating educational equity gaps through evidence-based policy, advocacy, and program implementation. She supports the work of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network's data dashboard. Previously, she led the programmatic outcomes data collection and analysis for Braven's Accelerator Course. Dominique started her career in education as a teaching assistant with the Teaching Assistant Program in France (TAPIF), where she taught English at the middle school level. She has since transitioned to working in the non-profit space. Dominique has a Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy Studies and a minor in Romance Languages and Literatures from the University of Chicago.

**Luis Jauregui** Luis Jauregui is the Communication Specialist at the College of Lake County, where he works to develop structures and standardize the college's recruitment and onboarding efforts to create a seamless transition for incoming students. Additionally, he serves as a Communication Studies instructor, teaching Public Speaking and Intercultural Communication courses. Luis earned a bachelor's degree from Augustana College, a master's degree from Illinois State University, and is currently completing his doctoral research in Higher Education Administration with a focus on College Teaching at Northern Illinois University.

**Kimberly Korando** Kimberly Korando is the Assistant Director of College Access and Outreach at the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). She started with ISAC in 2011 as an ISACorps Community Worker in the southern Illinois area. In 2013 she relocated to Chicago and became part of ISAC's Professional Development team, training school counselors and other professionals on best practices for implementation of the Illinois PaCE framework after it was introduced in 2017. Kimberly has since returned to her hometown in southern Illinois and serves as project director for ISAC's second federal GEAR UP grant, which was awarded in late 2024. Prior to working at ISAC, Kimberly received her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from Southern Illinois University - Carbondale and worked as a counselor at a juvenile justice facility.

**Ericka Kouba** Ericka Kouba is the dedicated Career Coordinator at Des Plaines Valley Region, where she promotes career readiness to ensure postsecondary success for Career and Technical Education students. Ericka holds a bachelor's degree in Hospitality Management from Kendall College and a master's degree in Organizational Leadership with a concentration on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Ericka collaborates with nine high schools in her region and has built strong partnerships with employers and organizations within the community. She has played a pivotal role in helping students earn the prestigious College and Career Pathway Endorsements, a vital recognition by the State of Illinois that highlights a student's dedication to their chosen career path. Ericka guides students toward career opportunities and ensures they are well-prepared and confident in their professional pursuits. Through her forged partnerships, students have been offered high-wage, high-demand opportunities. Ericka is passionate about fostering inclusive environments and promoting equity in education. She aims to support and inspire all the students she serves, helping them navigate the path to a successful and fulfilling future.

**Michael Kuhn, EdD** Michael Kuhn, EdD, has extensive experience in both career development and Career and Technical Education. Dr. Kuhn is an educator with proven success in assisting students in diverse educational settings, specializing in data collection, retention, and ongoing development of career programs and activities. He is currently Director of DesPlaines Valley Region (DVR), an Employment for Education (EFE) office, where he provides support to area high schools. Before joining DVR, he was Director of Career and Technical Education for Peoria Public Schools, District 150 and the Principal of Woodruff Career and Technical Center. Prior to education, he worked in business management.

**Dena Lawrence** Dena Lawrence is the IL MyCreditsTransfer Project Coordinator, investing her passion and knowledge of transfer to help Illinois students, colleges and universities smooth the process of transfer advising. As a transfer student herself, Dena has an associate degree from Parkland College, a bachelor's degree from Eastern Illinois University, and a master's degree from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

**Mike McGreevy** Mike McGreevy was born and raised in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He moved to Chicago in 2005 after working at PNC Bank in the accounting department and realized he wanted to be an educator. Since making that career change, he has never dreaded the alarm clock. He has worked at Maine South High School for 15 years as a teacher, coach, and eventually a dean of students. He also had the honor of serving the students of Morton West High School as their Assistant Principal for Student Services, where he oversaw the student support team of five deans, four psychologists, four nurses, twelve guidance counselors, and eight social workers. He has recently returned to the dean's office role at Rolling Meadows High School. Discipline can never be one size fits all, and he is grateful beyond words to serve students and families.

**Meagan Mitchell, PhD** Meagan Mitchell, PhD, is the Director of Pathways at Education Systems Center at NIU, where she leads projects advancing college and career pathways, dual enrollment, and other college and career readiness initiatives. She has focused much of her career as a student affairs practitioner in higher education, creating university-wide student retention initiatives, decreasing students' time to college completion, and enhancing various program curricula. Meagan holds a doctorate in Curriculum Studies from DePaul University and a master's degree in Higher Education Student Affairs from Indiana University.

**Gina Modica** Gina Modica is the IL MyCreditsTransfer Technical Coordinator, helping Illinois institutions make the most of Transferology by assisting schools in updating their transfer articulations and helping train users on functionality. Gina earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and master's degree from the University of Illinois Chicago.

**Laura Monteagudo** Laura Monteagudo is the Pathways Manager at Education Systems Center at NIU. She supports communities across Illinois through the Scaling Transformative Advanced Manufacturing Pathways (STAMP) and Community College Pathway Equity and Currency projects, as well as statewide initiatives to support alignment with the State of Illinois Model Programs of Study Guides. With a background in college admissions, Laura has worked with many first-generation and low-income college students as they navigate the transition from high school to college. Through this work, Laura developed a passion for racial equity and helping students overcome barriers. She first joined Education Systems Center as the policy manager, and her transition to the pathways team builds on that knowledge and experience while deepening her direct work with communities across Illinois. Laura holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and a Master of Public Administration from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

**Ana Moya** Ana Moya is a first-generation college student and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminology from Dominican University. She joined the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) as an ISACorps member for the Triton Community College District, where she found her passion for working with first-generation college students and Spanish-speaking parents. Before joining the Professional Development team, Ana served as an ISACorps Regional Coordinator for the South and West suburbs. She currently resides in the west suburbs of Chicago and enjoys the short commute to coffee shops and dog parks for morning walks with Dakota.

**Michele Napier** As Director of College and Career Readiness for District 211, Michele Napier coordinates programs and resources aligned with academic, social/emotional and postsecondary planning for students. Her work includes overseeing the First Generation College Symposium, College Night, Girls STEAM Ahead, College and Career Pathways, College and Career Readiness Indicators and the Dual Credit Program. All are aimed at providing students opportunities to explore colleges and careers before graduation. She is the district's liaison to the Northwest Education Council for Student Success, and works with counselors, department chairs and teachers to align District programs to student needs and industry and collegiate trends, bringing relevant instruction and real-world experiences to students. She also secures and manages grant funding that opens doors for college and career exploration. Michele was appointed in 2021 after serving as Assistant Principal and Activities Director for Schaumburg High School. Her work there included leading students in a multi-tiered system of support to provide academic and behavioral strategies for student success and building stronger community connections and alumni relationships. She previously worked as Schaumburg's Department Chair of Student Services and was college and career counselor, helping prepare students for successful futures in college, careers and life. Michele holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from DePaul University and master's degrees in Human Resources and Industrial Relations from Loyola University and School Counseling and Educational Leadership from Roosevelt University.

**Sam Nelson** Sam Nelson is the Director of Capacity Management for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). Sam has worked in higher education for over 30 years. Prior to joining ISAC in 1993, he worked in the financial aid office at North Central College. In his current role at ISAC, he works as a network weaver with stakeholders from multiple sectors across Illinois on their participation in the College Changes Everything® movement to support the state's goal to increase the percentage of Illinois adults with high-quality degrees, certificates, and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. His work helps partners and communities increase their ability to support students' postsecondary and career exploration, preparation, and attainment by intentionally building awareness, collaboration, and opportunities at the local level. This capacity development includes leveraging existing resources to produce greater results through sustainable initiatives, fostering partnerships, and connecting state policy efforts to local needs and initiatives.

**Lirim Neziroski, PhD** Lirim Neziroski, PhD, MBA, MSIS is the Dean of Humanities, Fine Arts, and Social Sciences at Illinois Valley Community College, which serves the towns of LaSalle, Peru, Mendota, Ottawa, Princeton, and others in the Starved Rock region. Dr. Neziroski also supervises the Dual Credit Office at IVCC. Dual Credit accounts for 15-20% of IVCC's total enrollment with partnerships at 20 high schools. Dr. Neziroski also serves at the Coordinator for the ASTDEA "Transfer Deans" commission for the ICCCA and the Coordinator of the Starved Rock regional success network of the Illinois Success Network. Prior to becoming a dean, Dr. Neziroski was an LMS administrator and an English instructor.

**Quanshanda Nicholson** Quanshanda Nicholson is the Principal of James Avant Elementary School. With 23 years of experience in education, Principal Nicholson has a proven track record of being an effective leader, developing curriculum, and fostering student achievement. Principal Nicholson earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Lane College, Master of Arts in Education and Special Education from Fontbonne University, Master of Arts in Education Administration, and an EdS in Instructional Leadership from Lindenwood University. Principal Nicholson's educational experiences allow her to successfully serve diverse communities and collaborate with a community of highly qualified professionals to achieve the shared goal of increasing student achievement by promoting equity, wellness, and data-informed practices. Her service is evident at James Avant Elementary, where a highly qualified and vision-driven educational leadership team fosters a positive learning environment and promotes effective, meaningful family and community engagement that enriches student learning experiences and drives decision-making. Principal Nicholson has improved school status from Targeted to Commendable and maintains a Commendable designation with improved statewide assessment performance and percentile by over 60%. James Avant Elementary School has received numerous awards under the leadership of Principal Nicholson. In 2023, Principal Nicholson received the Those Who Excel Award of Excellence. Principal Nicholson's professional goal is to continue to affirm a positive school culture and climate where students, staff and families feel welcome, supported and work collaboratively to ensure highly effective teaching and learning for all students.

- Elizabeth Nieto** A Spanish teacher at Villa Grove High School, Elizabeth Nieto has an associate degree from Parkland College and a bachelor's degree from Millikin University.
- Edith Njuguna** Edith Njuguna is the Director of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network. She has extensive experience designing and implementing programs to improve education outcomes for children and youth in Chicago and internationally. She focuses on leading the Illinois Education and Career Success Network, a collaborative of communities across Illinois driving improved outcomes for learners by fostering partnerships, connecting state policy and local efforts, and leveraging the resources of the three Network Organizers to help communities deepen their impact. She also leads Education Systems Center at NIU's career pathways work in Tanzania. Prior, Edith was a senior program officer at Grand Victoria Foundation, where she stewarded investments of up to \$4 million a year in grants related to policy and practice in education and workforce development to support Illinois nonprofits. She has also worked in fund development in the nonprofit sector. Edith holds a Master of Public Service Management from DePaul University, a certificate in Spanish from Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Nairobi.
- Kris Noble** With 35 years in Community Development, Kris Noble has worked to impact change in communities through building relationships, creating collaborations, and executing initiatives to bring together all community sectors, including business, education, healthcare, and non-profit organizations. In her current role as Community Engagement Specialist with Midland Institute of Entrepreneurship, Kris works to engage and support communities in bringing together the education sector and business community to collaborate on workforce development and essential skills development for high school students through the lens of the Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) Program. As Executive Director of the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce from 2014–2024, Kris led her team and volunteers to develop and promote various workforce development strategies and initiatives to increase connectedness between education/students and businesses/employers.
- Amina Omanic** Amina Omanic is from Arlington Heights, Illinois. She was awarded the College and Career Pathway scholarship through her education dual credit classes. She is a freshman pursuing an earth and space science education major at Illinois State University. She plans to pursue a career as a middle school science teacher.
- Yazmin Patino** Yazmin Patino is a Lead College and Career Navigator at College of Lake County. As a Lead College and Career Navigator (CCN), Yazmin supports a team of nonembedded CCNs in recruitment and advising efforts. Additionally, Yazmin manages a caseload of students and assists them as they transition from high school to college. Recently, Yazmin has been focused on collaborating with the P20 Education Partnership department at College of Lake County to increase access and equity in dual credit. Yazmin holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Anthropology from Lake Forest College and a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership with a focus on Higher Education from Northeastern Illinois University.
- Heather Penczak** Heather Penczak is the Director of Innovation at Education Systems Center at NIU. She has focused much of her career on ensuring students have the skills, network, and experiences necessary to succeed in college and professional settings. Heather leads statewide efforts in work-based learning through the Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network and provides technical assistance to communities for pathways implementation. Heather also supports competency-based education projects related to implementing Illinois' Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act. A certified teacher in secondary education, Heather earned a Master of Education Policy Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Bachelor of Science from Purdue University.
- Kimberley Polly** Kimberley Polly is a dedicated and accomplished educator with over 35 years of experience in STEM education, spanning middle school, high school, university, and community college teaching. She holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics and education from the University of Wisconsin–Platteville and has completed all but her dissertation (ABD) in Applied Mathematics at the University of Missouri–Rolla. Currently, she serves as the Dean of Mathematics and Science at Harper College. She began her career in higher education at Parkland College where she became a tenured Associate Professor of Mathematics. She later worked as a mathematics lecturer at Indiana University–Bloomington before joining Harper College where she became a tenured Associate Professor of Mathematics. In 2009, she spearheaded a curriculum alignment project between District 211 and Harper College, which evolved into the robust and thriving partnership that exists today. Throughout her career, Kimberley has remained deeply committed to student success, focusing on removing barriers and fostering transformative change in developmental mathematics.

**Maya Portillo** Maya Portillo grew up in Tucson, Arizona and Northwest Indiana. Having experienced cross-state educational systems, Maya is passionate about educational equity issues, particularly for children ages 0–5. Maya has worked in various roles ranging from research, evaluation, community organizing, philanthropy, and policy. Prior to this role, Maya worked as a Policy Associate in early childhood education funding equity. Maya holds a bachelor’s degree from Cornell University, majoring in Industrial Labor Relations and minoring in Education and Inequality Studies, and an Master of Public Administration from New York University focusing on Public and Non-Profit Management and Policy Analysis.

**Stephane Potts** Stephane Potts brings nearly 20 years of experience in Student Services to her roles. Stephane’s educational journey began at Danville Area Community College, where she earned her associate degree in psychology; she then transferred to Eastern Illinois University where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and later a Master of Science in Counseling. Stephane is currently pursuing a doctorate at Northern Illinois University.

**Sharon Rainbolt** As Dual Credit Manager at Harper College, Sharon Rainbolt oversees a program serving more than 5,500 unduplicated high school students annually and awarding over 28,000 college credits each year. She collaborates closely with high schools and college leaders to align curricula and expand early college opportunities. With over 20 years’ experience, Sharon is known for her camaraderie, ability to drive progress, and talent for building strong partnerships that foster student success. Previously, she worked as the registrar and student services director at AIU London in the UK, where she led student engagement initiatives. Sharon is passionate about making higher education more accessible, reducing college costs for students and families, and creating pathways for academic and career achievement. She holds a bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and a Master of Business Administration in Organizational Development.

**Jaime Riewerts, EdD** Jaime Riewerts, EdD, serves as the Dean of Liberal Arts at Harper College. She began her administrative career 15 years ago, following her tenure as a full-time faculty member in the Communication department at Kishwaukee College. Dr. Riewerts holds a bachelor’s degree from Bradley University, a master’s degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and a Doctorate of Education from Northern Illinois University. Her professional passions center around the arts and humanities, with a dedicated focus on supporting developmental English learners and English language learners. She has been actively researching hyflex learning models and is committed to integrating innovative practices that empower students and enhance faculty support.

**Emily Rusca** Emily Rusca is the Policy Director at Education Systems Center at NIU. Since joining the team as an Education Pioneers fellow in 2015, Emily’s portfolio has spanned from college and career pathways to data engagement. She leads the team’s state policy portfolio by facilitating interagency and statewide structures, cultivating and managing relationships with state agency partners and fellow policy organizations, exploring national best practices and representing Illinois in cross-state learning opportunities, and collaborating with team members to identify where implementation and innovation work across Illinois can inform new opportunities for effective policy. Emily previously managed the U.S. State Department-sponsored Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study grant program for a high school exchange nonprofit in San Francisco and has additional background in international development, city planning, and gender equity work. She holds a bachelor’s degree in international development from the University of California, Berkeley, and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Michigan.

**Joe Sieczkowski** Joe Sieczkowski is an experienced educator with 17 years in the field, specializing in Career and Technical Education (CTE). His career includes eight years as a technology and engineering education teacher, as well as leadership roles such as instruction coach, division chair, and district director. Currently, he serves as the Director of CTE, Pathways, and College and Career Readiness for D300. Joseph is also an active member of professional organizations including IACTE and ACTE, where he was a 2020 Fellow.

**Rowan Smith** Rowan Smith is a senior at Moline High School and plans to attend Bradley University to major in accounting and criminology. Her most notable involvement at school includes participating in Student Congress as President, Marching Band as Senior Drum Major and Chief Librarian, and the Head News Editor for the school paper, and this is her second year on the Success Network’s Student Advisory Council (SAC). After presenting at the Success Network’s 2024 annual conference on Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Dual Credit, Rowan has diligently continued the important work with her school and district administration to further promote and expand these valuable educational opportunities. They have run multiple surveys in her district to help engage her peers in CTE-based learning and increase enrollment. Recently, she has been in collaboration with a student team to discover methods of enhancing awareness of CTE classes. Rowan plans to continue her work with the goal of presenting her findings to the Illinois State Board of Education.

**Kendyl Sparks** Kendyl Sparks is a senior at Vienna High School in Vienna, Illinois. Kendyl is the youngest of three children who have all pursued higher education. Over her high school career, Kendyl has remained a dedicated student with a 5.0 GPA. Kendyl has been involved in a variety of clubs and other extracurricular activities: National Beta Club, Student Council, Youth for Christ, Pep Club, Scholar Bowl, Drama Club, Chorus, Clever Clovers 4-H Club, Johnson County 4-H Eagles, Teen Teachers 4-H Club, Future Educators Club, Cooking Club, Speech and Debate Team, community theater productions, the mission trip programs of Mission Serve and World Changers, and acting junior counselor and worship leader at a local church camp. For the past two years, Kendyl has observed the Speech Language Pathologist at her local grade school where she has gained abundant knowledge that has solidified her desire for her future career. Kendyl will graduate high school with her Associate of Arts which will allow her to enter university on a path that should help her graduate with both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in a shorter period. After completing university, Kendyl plans to become a Speech Language Pathologist within a school system.

**Josh Stafford** Joshua Stafford grew up in Southern Illinois, working for his family's farm businesses, where he learned a great deal about management and hands-on hard work. While working full-time, he pursued his education in business administration, which led to many opportunities, including serving as school superintendent in Vienna. He has served in the school district since 2004. Under Josh's leadership, Vienna has grown into an early college career-connected system that, according to Stafford, is always leading with the question, "What is best for kids?" Through this process, Vienna is noted both regionally and throughout the nation for its strong early college program and expansion of initiatives that connect all students to meaningful career paths. Vienna offers over 125 college-level dual credit hours on its high school schedule. Vienna also serves as a hub for numerous initiatives that allow students from across the region to participate in opportunities such as college-level courses, meaningful career preparation planning, regional economic development, and various other programs that otherwise would not be accessible. Josh is frequently asked to present on educational topics and serves as a guest lecturer at various universities, addressing a wide range of topics. He is active in various regional, statewide, and national initiatives dedicated to education policy and advocacy, and is also engaged with various local boards and committees and is a youth leader at his local church.

**Annah Stevenson** Annah Stevenson is a dedicated senior at Evanston Township High School, deeply involved in academics and extracurricular activities. She serves as Co-Chair of the Emerge Program and contributes to the Black Student Summit Planning Committee, demonstrating her leadership within the ETHS community. Beyond school, Annah is the President of the Jack and Jill Northshore Teen Group, where she leads service initiatives, including volunteering with Feed My Starving Children and other community outreach efforts. She also extends her passion for mentorship as an AmeriCorps Member for Youth and Opportunity United (Y.O.U.), working as a Y.O.U.th worker supporting elementary-aged children.

**Todd Stirn, EdD** With a career spanning decades, Todd Stirn, EdD, has navigated the evolving landscape of education from his foundational principles in Lutheran education to high-level public school administration. His experience includes 14 years as a superintendent and now as a Work-Based Learning Specialist with Northern Kane County Region 110, where he dedicates his expertise to helping students realize their career pathway goals. Dr. Stirn's approachable demeanor, humor, and deep knowledge create a unique learning environment, and his commitment to a growth mindset drives others to reach new heights in their own practice and confidence.

**Terry Stroh** Terry Stroh's career journey is a story of resilience and adaptation. A graduate of Lewis University and a former commercial pilot for American Eagle Airlines, Terry pivoted to education following the events of 9/11, which required a reinvention of his professional life. While working in business management, he attended night school to earn both his teaching credentials and a master's degree in education. This unique combination of business acumen and educational expertise led him to roles as a high school science teacher, assistant principal, and Director of Career Technical Education. Today, as Regional Director for Northern Kane County Region 110, Terry leverages his diverse background to create robust connections for educators, students, and administrators to deliver "education that works."

**Manuel Talavera** Manuel Talavera was born and raised in the southwest side of Chicago to immigrant parents from Mexico. Manuel, a first-generation college student, graduated from Roosevelt University with a B.A. in International Relations and holds an MPA from the University of Illinois Springfield. Manuel began working for ISAC in 2015 as an ISACorps™ member where he was based in the Malcolm X Community College District. Manuel is currently a Professional Development Specialist, where he organizes professional development opportunities for college access professionals on a wide variety of topics pertaining to college and financial aid access including the Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) Framework. Manuel currently resides in the South Loop neighborhood in Chicago with his wife and two children. Manuel enjoys going on walks, biking, and volunteering.

**Antoinette Taylor, PhD** Antoinette Taylor, PhD, has over 33 years of experience in education. She focuses on evidenced based academic and social emotional development, learning and competency services and policies by consulting with policymakers, professionals, districts, and agencies across the birth-20 spectrum including but not limited to individuals with exceptional needs including disability, gifted and talented, twice exceptional and mental health. Dr. Taylor has also worked with the business community, support groups, community-based organizations, and the faith-based community since 1999. In addition, Dr. Taylor was the Exceptional Needs Consultant for the University of Chicago's USI/UEI Network from February 2006 to June 2010. Professional contributions have included, but not limited to: Advisory Board: Illinois Multi-Tiered System of Supports Network (Advisory Board Sunset 6/30/21); Chairperson: State of Illinois Attendance Commission (Commission Sunset 12/2020); Co-chair: Illinois Early Childhood Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Consortium; Illinois DEC: Policy Chair, Multi-Tiered System of Supports Chair, and Illinois CEC liaison; Co-chairperson: Division of Early Childhood (DEC) 38th International Combined Conference.

**Eyob Villa-Moges** Raised in Evansville, Indiana, as the son of two Ethiopian immigrants, Eyob Villa-Moges studied economics and political science at Indiana University-Bloomington. After graduation, he worked in the higher education community at Purdue University as a community organizer and student mentor. Most recently, Eyob focused on data integrity, survey methodology, and statistical analysis as a part of the General Social Survey at NORC at the University of Chicago. Through his upbringing and education, Eyob learned the essential role that public policy plays in influencing and determining social and economic outcomes for individuals and communities alike. He is committed to using data-driven, socially-informed insights to close knowledge gaps that stand in the way of crafting better, more equitable, policy solutions for Illinois.

**Jose Vences** Jose Vences is a senior at North Chicago Community High School. At school he is involved in National Honors Society, Student Council, running a volleyball club, being a devoted community advocate in the MIKVA challenge and many community service events. Outside of school, he works as a server at Egg Harbor Café while refereeing middle school volleyball in his free time. Jose also cares about building relationships, learning about others' different opinions, and keeping a close relationship with his family.

**Kyle Westbrook, PhD** Kyle Westbrook, PhD, joined EdSystems as Executive Director in July 2023. Most recently, Kyle served as the founding executive director of the Partnership for College Completion. Previously, he served as the executive director of education policy in the Office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Kyle has extensive experience in public education, having spent almost 30 years in public education as a teacher, teacher leader, leadership consultant, and district-level administrator, including five years leading the Office of Magnet, Gifted, and International Baccalaureate programs for Chicago Public Schools. He has also held posts at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute and teaching positions at Walter Payton College Prep and Lincoln Park High School in Chicago. In addition, he has taught graduate and undergraduate courses in history and the history of education at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and the University of Illinois Chicago, and National Louis University. Kyle has served on the board of directors for the Woodlawn Children's Promise Community, Project Onward, and ACE Technical Charter High School and on advisory committees for the Library of Congress, the Newberry Library, and the Illinois Advisory Council for the US Commission on Civil Rights. Kyle holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Education Policy from the University of Illinois Chicago and a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science in Education from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.