



# Agenda

## Awareness to Action: *Promoting Equity in Education and Careers*

### 11TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

February 29, 2024

Moraine Valley Community College

9000 College Parkway, Building M, Palos Hills, IL 60465

### CONTENT

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- » [Room map](#)
- » [Speaker biographies](#)



# SCHEDULE

8:00–9:00 A.M.	<b>Check In, Breakfast, &amp; Networking</b>	MORaine PLAZA
9:00–10:15 A.M.	<b>Welcome and Opening Plenary</b> Kenyatta Lovett, PhD, principal at Education Strategy Group will highlight strategies for aligning local and state goals, share best practices for advancing postsecondary attainment from across the country, and discuss how communities are using data to inform strategy development. 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 highlights from the Success Network’s newly released 10-Year Impact Report, as we reflect on the difference Leadership Communities are making to advance postsecondary attainment.  Conference emcees: » Cheryl Flores, Director of Community Engagement, Advance Illinois » Sam Nelson, Director of Capacity Management, Illinois Student Assistance Commission	MORaine ROOMS 1–3
10:15–10:25 A.M.	<b>Break</b>	
10:25–11:20 A.M.	<b>Concurrent Sessions</b> <b>Career Connected, Life Ready:</b> <b>Supporting Student Success by Leveraging State Frameworks</b> Making intentional choices in placing students in college and career groups, working with them to make college and career selections, and expanding outreach to parents and families in meaningful ways all equals success toward students being career-connected and life-ready. Speakers will discuss the value of understanding the purpose and goals of college and career groups and having strategies in place to implement them, using the PaCE (Postsecondary and Career Expectations) framework and the College and Career Readiness Indicator. They will address how to establish guidelines for those who serve as career coaches, recognizing that a single guidance counselor cannot develop collaborative relationships with all of a school’s students and their parents. Speakers will also address how, through small career coaching groups, schools can individualize the needs of students as they work within designated college and career planning time to motivate college and career readiness, foster a college and career-connected culture, and engage the family and community. » Leslie Bradley, Director of Student Career Services, Vienna High School » Josh Stafford, Superintendent, Vienna High School » Ken Wallace, PhD, Superintendent, Maine Township High School District 207	MORaine ROOM 1
	<b>Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary 2.0:</b> <b>A Relaunch Resource</b> Let’s dig into the Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary, a first-of-its-kind statewide resource. First developed in 2018, the dictionary was recently relaunched in close collaboration with a broad range of state agencies and key stakeholder groups. Learn what the newly expanded resource includes and how to utilize it, then discuss opportunities to ensure this resource helps Illinois practitioners effectively design college and career pathway systems and programs. » Laura Monteagudo, Policy & Program Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU	M202/204

## FAFSA Simplification

M201

Significant changes in the 2024–25 FAFSA will impact students and families across Illinois. Join us to learn about the changes in reporting parental and tax information, how to complete the application, and more!

- » Thomas Semanic, Professional Development Specialist, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

## Quality College & Career Pathway Endorsements:

MORAINÉ ROOM 2

### New ISBE Rules & Lessons Learned from Early Implementation

Since being established in the 2016 Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act, Illinois' innovative College and Career Pathway Endorsements (CCPE) system has grown rapidly statewide, with more than 1,000 students graduating with this distinction in 2023. With a renewed legislative nudge for districts to implement (Public Act 102-0917), even more districts are entering the implementation pipeline. Hear from ISBE about lessons learned in early implementation and the expectations set forth in the administrative rules, which the agency has developed and adopted to guide districts on their journey to offer CCPE to students.

- » Marci Johnson, CTE Director, Illinois State Board of Education

## Supporting First-Generation Students from High School to College Completion

MORAINÉ ROOM 3

ISAC's First Generation Scholars Network (FGSN) is connecting first-generation college students for peer connections and support from ISAC's First Generation Scholars Network mentors to combat summer melt and make the transition to college a whole lot easier—and successful. ISAC is partnering with schools, colleges, and universities to help ensure students develop a sense of belonging through the network and get them connected to the campus staff, programs, and services to support them. Students thrive when they connect with community care options that foster a sense of belonging on campus. Providing support for academic and social success must be a focus for all stakeholders. Learn how ISAC's FGSN can support your students as they transition to college, with the ultimate goal being college graduation.

- » Viviana Flores, Region Corps Coordinator, Illinois Student Assistance Commission
- » Abel Montoya, Director of Outreach Operations, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

## Elevating Employability: Regional Approaches to Essential Skills Validation

M210

Learn about regional approaches to utilizing the [GPEAK](#) badging system to measure and validate essential skills for meaningful employment. GPEAK, developed through a collaboration of employers, community-based organizations, and educational partners, includes a common language, assessment tools, and curricular resources aligned to Illinois' recommended ten essential employability competencies. The badges capture evidence of learning from various sources, such as internships, volunteer work, paid employment, and co-curricular activities. One GPEAK training site, Rockford Public Schools, will share how it's using the system in its new Work Study Program, empowering seniors to validate essential skills learned through part-time jobs. Job coaches help students develop soft skills, and students earn digital badges and high school credits as they demonstrate mastery. Employers report improved communication and performance conversations with students, as students gain confidence and receive emotional support through the program.

- » Bridget French, Executive Director of College and Career Readiness, Rockford Public Schools
- » Jessica Hayes, Work-Based Learning Coordinator, Rockford Public Schools
- » Heather Penczak, Director of Innovation & Implementation, Education Systems Center at NIU

11:20–11:30 A.M.

Break

## Concurrent Sessions

### Racial Diversity on Illinois Campuses After Affirmative Action

MORAINE ROOM 1

Dive into the Supreme Court's recent affirmative action ruling, examining Illinois' data and context and sharing recommendations for colleges to expand access for students of color. Join us to gain valuable insights into the implications of these decisions and explore strategies for equitable state and institutional policy.

- » Mike Abrahamson, Senior Manager of Research & Policy, Partnership for College Completion
- » Christian Perry, Director of Policy & Advocacy, Partnership for College Completion

### Evaluation and Continuous Improvement in Transitional Math Implementation

M201

Hear key findings from a recent evaluation of transitional math implementation and how the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois Community College Board are using data to support continuous cross-agency improvement.

- » Benjamin Creed, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Northern Illinois University
- » Melvin J. Harrison, Director for Academic Affairs, Illinois Community College Board
- » Xiaodan Hu, PhD, Associate Professor, Higher Education and Student Affairs, and Coordinator, Community College Leadership Program, Northern Illinois University
- » Charmell McGhee, Principal Consultant, Mathematics, Illinois State Board of Education

### Beyond Cognitive Skills: Preparation Through the Illinois PaCE Framework

M202/204

Preparation for student success begins at an early age. The expanded Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework for grades 6 through 8 is based on ISAC's middle school curriculum, which presents postsecondary planning and options in a way that aligns with the different stages of student development. The curriculum includes objectives and lesson plans organized into three key areas, or domains, encompassing the five student development stages outlined in the book *Ready, Willing, and Able* by Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne Bouffard. Learn more about ISAC's curriculum and how you can use this developmental-focused approach with your middle school students to prepare them for successful transitions and life after high school.

- » Ana Moya, Professional Development Specialist, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

### College & Career Pathway Endorsement Currency 2.0: A Framework for Creating Currency at Your Institution

MORAINE ROOM 3

To encourage students to earn the rigorous College and Career Pathway Endorsement and matriculate to postsecondary, Education Systems Center at NIU is working with a cohort of community colleges to develop innovative incentives or currency. Currency initiatives include specialized access to financial support upon enrollment in a postsecondary program within their pathway endorsement sector, as added application points on a highly selective academic program application, or selective employment.

This session will provide a framework to create currency options at your high school or community college. We will share lessons learned and best practices, then facilitate an activity to help your institution consider currency options for endorsement earners.

- » Julie Obermark, Provost & Vice President of Instructional Services, Kaskaskia College
- » Meagan Mitchell, PhD, Pathways Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU

## Building Bridges to Success: Employer Experiences with High School Internship Models

MORAINES ROOM 2

Join the conversation as employers share their firsthand experiences working with high school interns. School and community partners will also share an overview of their internship models and how they engage and support their employer partners. Participants will gain valuable insights into the practical aspects of integrating young talent into the workforce and how these internship models contribute to fostering the skills and aspirations of the next generation. By exploring the successes and challenges employers face, attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of businesses' critical role in bridging the gap between education and real-world career opportunities, ultimately contributing to the success of both students and companies.

- » Neil Gambow, Chair, Mayor's Employer Advisory Council, Evanston
- » Maurice Jefferson, Floor Forman, Benvenuti & Stein Inc.
- » Leah Miller, Director of Human Resources, City of Moline
- » Theresa Todd, Work-Based Learning Intermediary, Black Hawk College

## Why Illinois Needs an Equitable, Adequate, and Stable Higher Education Funding Approach

M210

In 2021, Illinois created the Commission on Equitable Public University Funding to examine and re-imagine how the state funds its universities. The commission has worked hard to develop an equity-centered funding model that generates sufficient and stable funding for the state's 12 public universities. Join us to learn more about the issues being addressed and some of the ideas the commission is exploring to develop a funding approach that drives more—and more equitable—resources to universities to close gaps and ensure students receive the support they need to enroll, persist, and complete their college education.

- » Kelsey Bakken, Senior Policy Advisor, Advance Illinois
- » Eyob Villa-Moges, Senior Policy Associate, Advance Illinois

12:25–12:35 P.M.

Break

12:35–2:00 P.M.

## Luncheon Plenary Student Voices

MORAINES ROOMS 1–3

Representatives from the Success Network Student Advisory Council (SAC) and the Board of the Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO) will share insights from a survey conducted by the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity and the Illinois State Board of Education. The representatives analyzed the survey responses from 7,000+ Illinois high school students to questions on their experiences taking dual credit and Career and Technical Education classes. The representatives will highlight identified barriers and share recommendations on ways to make dual credit and CTE more accessible.

- » Massillon Boyd, Junior, West Aurora High School (CTSO Board)
- » Madyson Carlyle, Senior, Collinsville High School (CTSO Board)
- » Nicole Griffith, Senior, Fulton High School (Success Network SAC)
- » Dania Ibrahim, Innovation Manager Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Marci Johnson, CTE Director, Illinois State Board of Education
- » Anthony Kelson, Junior, Mendota Township High School (Success Network SAC)
- » Jahnvi Kolli, Senior, Warren Township High School (CTSO Board)
- » Samuel Matura, Junior, Mendota Township High School (Success Network SAC)
- » Trinity Muszynski, Senior, Lockport Township High School (CTSO Board)
- » Pragati Shree Sasikumar Sophomore, Normal Community High School (Success Network SAC)
- » Rowan Smith, Junior, Moline High School (Success Network SAC)
- » Jose Vences, Junior, North Chicago Community High School (Success Network SAC)
- » Emily Won, Senior, Barrington High School (CTSO Board & Success Network SAC)

2:00–2:15 P.M.

Break

## Concurrent Sessions

### Using Data to Support Postsecondary Readiness and Success: Updates on the Success Network Dashboard and Illinois Longitudinal Data System

M202/204

Looking to better understand our data tools? Join us for an overview of the Success Network Dashboard and the Illinois Longitudinal Data System. We will discuss what data is available for districts to use now and what may become available over time. The session will have a workshop format to better understand districts' data needs in the education to workforce space and how that maps to what is available. Particular focus will be on how to help contextualize data so that it has the most meaning. Then, contribute stories about how your community uses data and what has worked and what has not worked in your data explorations.

- » Ben Boer, Senior Fellow, Project Lead, ILDS 2.0, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Memusi Ntore, Data Analyst, Education Systems Center at NIU

### Generating Policy Awareness & Taking Action with the Success Network Policy Committee

MORAINÉ ROOM 2

The Success Network [Policy Committee](#) will share college and career readiness policy updates and highlights from the past year. Launched in December 2022, the committee provides a collaborative space for local practitioners and policy leaders to learn from one another, elevates local practice to inform state policy, and supports local practitioners in implementing innovative policy opportunities. Learn the committee's findings around transportation-related barriers to work-based learning, emerging state policy efforts impacting college and career readiness and success, and how to get engaged in this work locally and statewide to increase equitable outcomes along the P-20 and workforce spectrum.

- » Laura Monteagudo, Policy & Program Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Emily Rusca, Managing Director of Policy & Programs, Education Systems Center at NIU

### Rural Illinois: Nurturing Rural Roots, Fostering College Futures

MORAINÉ ROOM 1

Explore the unique challenges rural high school and college students face and the strides the Rural Area Student Initiative (RASI), a student organization at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, is taking to address those challenges. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of the experiences of rural high school and college students, the importance of creating a supportive environment for rural students, and actionable strategies they can implement at their institutions to support these rural student populations.

- » Jasmine D. Collins, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- » Liz Soeliner, Student, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

### Put Me in Coach, I'm Ready To Play: Parents Are Not Spectators in Their Child's Future

M210

Did you know there is an 87% drop-off in parent engagement when students go to middle school? Not at Waukegan to College, a college readiness, access, and persistence program with 14 years of experience engaging parents in their child's middle school, high school, and college career. From learning alongside their students to volunteering in our programming, parents are co-collaborators in helping dreams come true!

- » Scarlet Mencia, Alumni Board Co-Chair and Parent Educator, Waukegan to College
- » Laura Rios, Program Director, Waukegan to College

## Competency-Based Education in Chicago Public Schools: Proficiency Leads to Postsecondary Success

M201

Learn how the CPS Competency-Based Education Team is supporting schools in developing integrated learning targets/instructional practices, fostering proficiency-based progression learning environments, utilizing equitable assessments to allow student voice and choice in demonstrating proficiency, and engaging learners through key adaptive competencies.

- » Savannah Bell, Manager, Competency Based Education, Chicago Public Schools
- » Sonjanita Moore, Competency-Based Education SEL Integration Specialist, Chicago Public Schools

## So Many Skills in One Little Room:

MORAINÉ ROOM 3

### Developing and Enhancing Real-World Learning for Students

River Bend CUSD #2 in northwest Illinois is crafting creative opportunities for Fulton High School students to apply work-based learning to real-world situations. The Future Farmers of America, art, construction, culinary, and business classes are all working together to help run the school's Central Bank Steamer Suite. Learn how Fulton High School's administration, staff, and students are partnering with a local employer to provide business, culinary, PR, construction, agriculture, media, and life experiences to help students develop and apply their skills.

- » Nicole Griffith, Student, Fulton High School
- » Darryl Hogue, EdD, Superintendent, River Bend CUSD #2
- » Carolyn Meurs, Agriculture/Family & Consumer Life Science Teacher and FFA Advisor, Fulton High School
- » Jeff Parsons, Principal, Fulton High School

3:10–3:20 P.M.

Break

3:20–4:15 P.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

### Supporting the Adult Learner in a Post-COVID-19 World

M202/204

Adult learners are returning to the classroom at an increased rate and face academic and career success barriers. Learn who adult learners are and their diverse challenges, plus practical strategies that institutions of higher learning can implement to serve these students better and more equitably. You will also hear from an adult learner who will discuss the barriers they face and the kinds of supports that have helped as they navigate community college.

- » Kamilah Williams, EdD, Dean of College & Career Readiness, Illinois Central College
- » Alice Tchangoue, Student, Illinois Central College

### Unlocking Opportunities: Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges of Chicago's Tools for Postsecondary Success

MORAINÉ ROOM 2

Discover the transformative strategies reshaping the landscape of equity in education through the partnership of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and City Colleges of Chicago (CCC). Through a range of initiatives, including developmental advising and postsecondary pathway development, CPS and CCC are paving the way for economic and educational success for our young people. Whether you're an educator, administrator, or policymaker, this session will equip you with the knowledge and inspiration to champion equity in education and contribute to a brighter future for our students.

- » Krystle Mason, College & Career Specialist, Chicago Public Schools
- » Kirsten Watson, Program & Project Manager, Chicago Roadmap
- » Amanda Wojan, Special Projects Director, Chicago Roadmap

## Dual Enrollment Beyond Your Boundaries: Virtual and Hybrid Innovations by State Universities

MORAINES ROOM 1

Hear how state universities are partnering with a broad spectrum of Illinois high schools to offer virtual or hybrid dual enrollment coursework to help build high-quality college and career pathways. This approach is proving transformational, particularly for regions that struggle with the necessary human capital to implement dual credit locally and are looking for ways to expand their offerings affordably and strategically to serve students better.

- » Keva C. Gaston, EdD, Assistant Director of Academic Affairs, Illinois Board of Higher Education
- » Evan Glazer, PhD, President, Illinois Math and Science Academy
- » Juan Jose Gonzalez, Managing Director of Pathways & Operations, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Nkechi Onwuameze, PhD, Senior Associate Director for Academic Affairs, Illinois Board of Higher Education
- » Mallik Sundharam, Vice President for Enrollment Management & Student Affairs, Illinois Tech

## Bridging the Gap: Leveraging Out-of-School Time Programs to Shape Future STEM Careers

M201

Delve into the critical role of out-of-school time in closing the equity gap in STEM careers by promoting career awareness, developing 21st-century skills, and providing quality programming. Learn about the current state of STEM in Illinois and how to leverage afterschool programs as strategic partners to promote the PaCE (Postsecondary and Career Expectations) framework. Presenters will share insights gained through working with and evaluating out-of-school time programs statewide that are working toward ensuring that every student has equitable access to opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

- » Emma Spencer, Policy & Communications Manager, ACT Now
- » Kimberly Turnbull, Afterschool STEM Specialist, ACT Now

## The State of Our Educator Pipeline: Strengths, Opportunities, and the Early Impact of COVID-19

MORAINES ROOM 3

Join us for a presentation on Advance Illinois' report, *The State of Our Educator Pipeline 2023: Strengths, Opportunities, and the Early Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Learn the report's findings on the early impacts from the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic on our teacher, principal, and paraprofessional pipelines and look at where the state has made progress and where some of the largest barriers exist in increasing diversity among our schools' teachers and leaders.

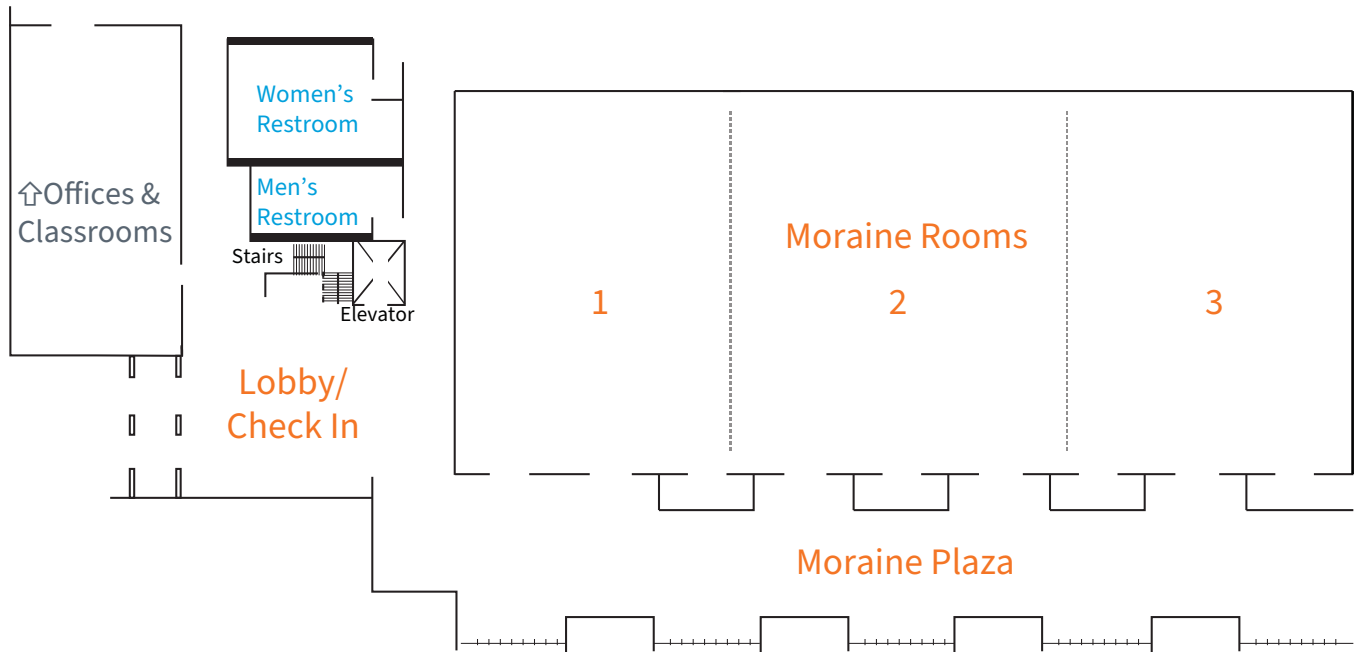
- » Jim O'Connor, Project Director, Advance Illinois
- » Briana Morales, English Teacher, Gordon Bush Alternative Center, 2023 Teacher of the Year
- » Josh Stafford, Superintendent, Vienna High School



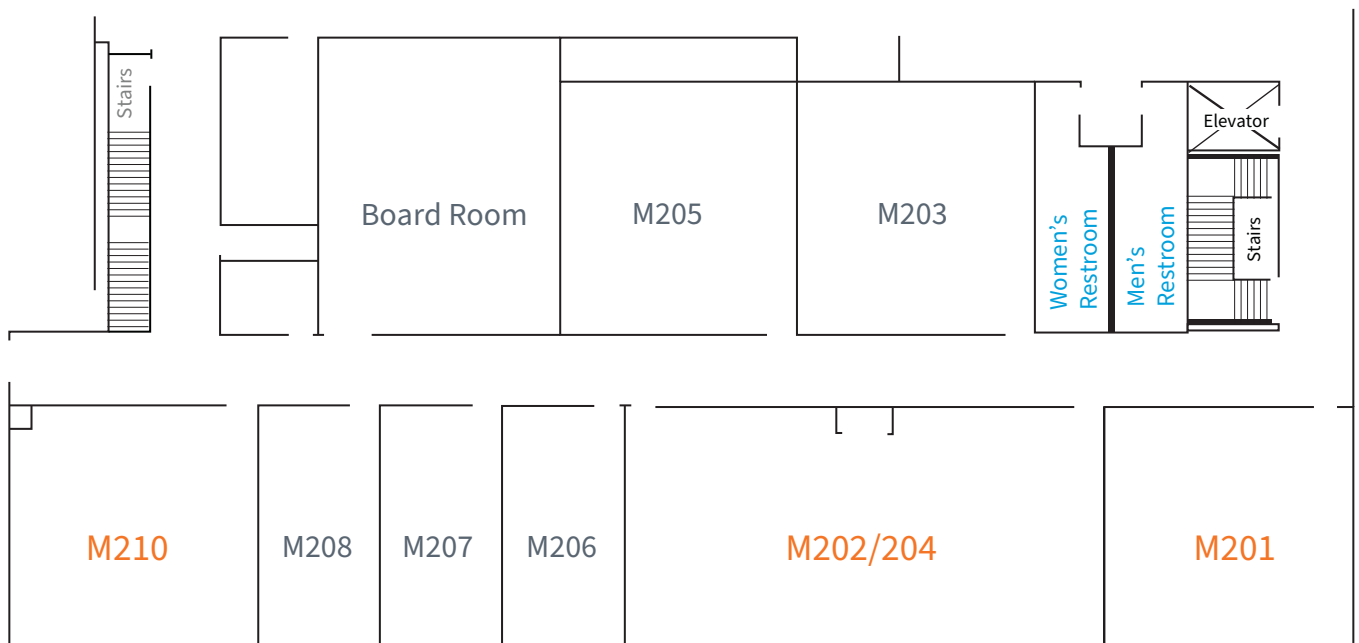
# ROOM MAP

Moraine Valley Community College  
Business and Conference Center, Building M

## First Floor



## Second Floor



# 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.

**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.

**Savannah Bell** Savannah Bell is the Manager of Competency Based Education in Chicago Public Schools, where she promotes the district's efforts to develop and spread proficiency based learning models, as well as support schools participating in Illinois' CBE Pilot. Savannah has spent her career in education championing innovative learning environments that allow students to design and achieve their own pathways to success. She has previously served as an elementary school teacher, school-transformation designer, school-based coach, resident principal, and district personalized learning specialist. Savannah is extremely passionate about the adoption of personalized, proficiency based learning as she believes that it is how we can fulfill our country's promise of providing a high quality education for ALL children.

**Ben Boer** Benjamin Boer is a senior fellow at Education Systems Center at NIU and 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, culminating in a partnership with a variety of state advocacy organizations to develop and refine the evidenced-based funding legislation, which became law in August 2017. He also partnered closely with EdSystems on the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act. Ben is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago in Educational Policy Studies. His area of study is the use of data in schools. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science from Brown University and a Master of Public Policy from the Harris School at the University of Chicago. He lives in Chicago with his wife and two daughters.

**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 pursue further education. She earned her master's degree in education from Olivet Nazarene University. This 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 has taught 15 of the 25 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.

**Jasmine D. Collins, PhD** Jasmine D. Collins, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on expanding pathways to and thorough higher education for rural and underserved students; creating inclusive learning and teaching environments for racially minoritized populations in college and university settings; and promoting equitable access to high priority careers in agriculture, food, and natural resources for all.

**Benjamin Creed, PhD**

Benjamin Creed, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Northern Illinois University in the Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Foundations. His research, teaching, and service focus on conducting and communicating high-quality research to shape the practice of current and aspiring school administrators. In particular, his research focuses on the equity implications within the prek-20 educational system of who accesses what resources. His work has examined school choice, leadership pipelines, and examining key transitions in the prek-20 system. He has published his work in peer-reviewed journals, including AERA Open, Educational Administration Quarterly, Oxford Review of Education, Educational Theory, Educational Management Administration & Leadership, and Peabody Journal of Education and shared study findings with policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

**Cheryl Flores**

As a first-generation college graduate, Cheryl Flores understands the gender, economic, cultural, and social barriers young people face to reach their potential and continue their educational goals. She now brings these experiences to her role as Director of Community Engagement for Advance Illinois. Prior, 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.

**Viviana Flores**

Viviana Flores works for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission as a Regional Corps Coordinator. She was born on the south side of Chicago and raised in the south suburbs. Both parents emigrated to the United States from Mexico as young children but did not have the opportunities or resources to obtain a postsecondary credential. As a first generation college student, navigating the path to higher education was difficult. Through her current role at ISAC, she feels she is now able to give back to her community and support other first generation college students who face the same challenges she once did. Viviana graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2021 as a communications major with a double minor in business administration and moving image arts.

**Bridget French**

Bridget French has been the Executive Director of College and Career Readiness for Rockford Public Schools since 2017, responsible for the development, implementation, assessment, and continuous improvement of programs aimed at increasing student access to postsecondary education and employment opportunities, specifically through College and Career Academies and Career and Technical Education programs. She facilitates curriculum development, revision, and review that supports district initiatives; assists in hiring and supervision of personnel; supports teachers as they implement curriculum; provides mentoring to ensure retention of highly qualified teachers; analyzes achievement data at the district and building levels; oversees master schedule, SAT preparatory programs, and preparation of high school planning guide; oversees early college access programs including Running Start and dual credit; promotes the participation of stakeholders: families, community agencies, state and national organizations; and guides necessary changes to achieve excellence and equity. Prior to joining Rockford Public Schools, Bridget was the Executive Director of Alignment Rockford, an education-based not-for-profit organization that supports the strategic initiatives of the Rockford Public Schools.

**Neil Gambow**

Neil Gambow is a graduate of the University of Dayton in Mechanical Engineering. He has spent his entire career in manufacturing companies producing engineered products principally in the aviation, high voltage electrical products and the rail tank car industrial segments. Over the last 30 years, he has held the positions of general manager, president and COO. Neil retired from the paying work world at the end of 2016 and began his volunteer work on career pathway development for young people shortly after that. He was recruited in early 2018 by the Mayor of Evanston, Illinois to be the Chair of his Mayor's Employer Advisory Council. Since that time, he has devoted most of his time to this work. He is a member of the Rotary Club of Evanston Lighthouse and is the Youth Exchange Officer there. His hobbies include classic cars (he has a 1965 Corvair convertible) and cycling. Neil serves on the Finance Committee for Turning Point, a behavioral health nonprofit organization.

**Keva C. Gaston, EdD**

Keva C. Gaston, EdD, has diverse experience in K-12 and postsecondary education with a background in student services, admissions and recruitment, career and transfer services, academic advising, and school authorization. She currently serves as the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs at the Illinois Board of Higher Education. She previously held administrative roles at the City Colleges of Chicago, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago Public Schools, and the Illinois State Board of Education. Keva holds a Bachelor of Science in Journalism from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, a Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership from Northeastern Illinois University, and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from Chicago State University.

**Evan Glazer, PhD**

Evan Glazer, PhD, joined the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA) on July 1, 2021, bringing a wealth of education experience at both the secondary and university levels. A native of Illinois, he has deep expertise in leading high-performing, specialized secondary STEM schools with rigorous academic programs, including Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology and Roanoke Valley Governor’s School for Science and Technology. Raised in the Midwest, Evan is a student of STEM and leading a STEM school is part of his core experience and identity

Before joining IMSA, Evan was Head of School for Avenues: The World School in New York. Earlier he served as principal of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a state-chartered magnet high school in Alexandria, Virginia, which, under his leadership, received the Star Innovator for Science award (2010) and was named the number one high school in the country by U.S. News and World Report (2014) and by Newsweek (2015). Passionate about teaching, Evan also made time to teach math class and clubs and offer electives and minimester seminars about leadership and social impact to students. Evan has also served as the director of Roanoke Valley Governor’s School for Science and Technology (Roanoke, VA). He began his career in education at his alma mater, Glenbrook South High (Glenview, IL), where he taught math. Evan received his BS and MS degrees from the University of Illinois (Champaign, IL). He earned a PhD in instructional technology from the University of Georgia (Athens, GA). Evan has published two books, *Using Internet Primary Sources to Teach Critical Thinking* and *Everyday Use of Mathematical Concepts: A Reference Guide*.

**Juan Jose Gonzalez**

Juan Jose Gonzalez, Managing Director of Pathways & Operations at Education Systems Center at NIU, is heavily involved in implementing Illinois’ Postsecondary Workforce Readiness Act, State Perkins V Plan, College and Career Pathways Endorsements framework, and developing industry-specific pathways in school districts and communities throughout the state.

Juan Jose began his career as an immigration rights organizer for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, where he mobilized immigrant citizens to vote and lobby at the state and federal levels for better immigration policy. He then served as the Chicago director for Stand for Children Illinois, leading regional advocacy and policy efforts. Following, he was the director of youth and education policy for the City of Chicago Mayor’s office under Mayor Rahm Emanuel, managing a portfolio that included elementary and secondary education policy, college access, summer employment, and out-of-school time opportunities. Juan Jose received his Bachelor of Arts at Princeton University and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Chicago Harris School. Since 2018, Juan Jose has volunteered as a student mentor with Chicago’s I-Mentor program at Phoenix Military Academy, supporting Chicago students in the college application and transition process. He is an elected parent member of a Chicago Public Schools Local School Council and previously served as an elected community member and council secretary.

**Nicole Griffith**

Nicole Griffith is a senior at Fulton High School She started managing the Steamer Suire two years ago. She is responsible for working with the bank to promote and expand their brand, helping coordinate the menus and scheduling groups to use the suite. She works closely with district administration, bank staff, teacher, and students as well as those who rent the suite. She is passionate about creating a great experience for those who use the suite. She is also a member of the Success Network Student Advisory Council and hopes to provide continued guidance on how best to support students.

**Melvin J. Harrison**

Melvin J. Harrison is the Director for Academic Affairs at the Illinois Community College Board and serves as the agency’s lead on the implementation, scaling, and evaluation of transitional instruction and other college and career readiness initiatives. Prior, he served as Chief Student Affairs Officer at campuses in the Louisiana Community and Technical College System. Melvin is a native of Kankakee, Illinois, a proud graduate of Grambling State and Nicholls State Universities in Louisiana, and a doctoral student at the University of Illinois-Springfield with an emphasis in public policy. His educational philosophy is rooted in the words of the Apostle Paul, “Brothers, I will not have you to be ignorant.”

**Jessica Hayes** Jessica Hayes has been the Work-Based Learning Coordinator with Rockford Public School District 205 since 2020. She manages community partnerships that support work-based learning experiences and events at all five of the local high schools. The district has four key areas of career exploration for the high schools: Freshmen Academy Expo, Sophomore Site Visits, Junior Job Shadows, and Senior Capstone and/or Internships. Her role is to manage these events and find and maintain community support for Rockford Public Schools.

**Darryl Hogue, EdD** Darryl Hogue, EdD, has worked in the River Bend Schools since 2014. As a former Navy Hospital Corpsman, his goal has always been to provide hands-on learning opportunities that support career choices. His efforts created a wealth of real-world learning opportunities for the students and communities that River Bend serves. He has supported the Success Network since 2015 and continues to work to create more opportunities for students and employers.

**Xiaodan Hu, PhD** Xiaodan Hu, PhD, is an associate professor in Higher Education and Student Affairs, and coordinator of the Community College Leadership Program at Northern Illinois University. She teaches higher education administration, finance and policy, and community college leadership. Her research typically employs quantitative methods to examine the impact of state policies and institutional initiatives, focusing on postsecondary success of historically marginalized students. Hu has recently published in prestigious journals, including AERA Open, American Educational Research Journal, Educational Policy, Educational Researcher, Research in Higher Education, The Journal of Higher Education, and Community College Review on topics such as the impact of diverse postsecondary pathways, performance-based funding, and community college baccalaureate programs.

**Dania Ibrahim** Dania Ibrahim is the Innovation Manager at Education Systems Center at NIU where she supports work-based learning initiatives. She largely focuses on improving accessibility to career development experiences 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 BS from the Georgia Institute of Technology where she studied Neuroscience with a focus on Health and Medical Sciences and Middle Eastern Studies.

**Maurice Jefferson** Maurice Jefferson has been with Benvenuti & Stein Inc. - Design Build Solutions/ Handcrafted Cabinetry located in Evanston, IL for 20 years. He is the Floor Forman as well as cabinet maker and draftsman for the company. Benvenuti & Stein has been a member of Evanston's Mayor's Employer Advisory Council roster of host employers since 2022.

**Marci Johnson** Marci Johnson has worked at the Illinois State Board of Education for the past 16 years. Most recently, she served as Director for Career and Technical Education (CTE) for seven years. Marci is from Litchfield and worked in the Litchfield School District for 14 years. Marci is committed to providing Career and Technical Education opportunities for all students in Illinois. Marci co-chairs the Opportunity Youth Committee and sits on the apprenticeship committees of the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board, and serves on the Comptia National Advisory Council.

**Anthony Kelson** Anthony Kelson is a junior at Mendota Township High School and a member of the Success Network Student Advisory Council. He helped form a Dungeons and Dragons club at his high school and is an unofficial assistant coach on the track team, teaching proper hurdle techniques to younger athletes.

**Kenyatta Lovett, PhD**

Kenyatta Lovett, PhD, serves as Principal of Postsecondary Attainment at the Education Strategy Group. Under his portfolio he leads strategies to set goals and improve attainment, noncredit-to-credit strategies, adult attainment, and credit mobility. Kenyatta Lovett served as the Managing Director for Higher Education and Workforce at Educate Texas. In this role, he managed the portfolio of programs to support the organization's strategic plan to significantly contribute to the attainment goal for Texas. Under his leadership, Kenyatta led statewide initiatives focused on improving outcomes in college access, work-based learning, and transfer and credit mobility. Prior to joining Educate Texas, Kenyatta served as the Assistant Commissioner for Workforce Services at the Tennessee Department of Labor & Workforce Development. Under his leadership, the agency launched the state's first apprenticeship office and improved collaboration with the state's higher education systems. In 2016, Kenyatta Lovett helped to launch the nation's first education advocacy group focused on increasing postsecondary attainment - Complete Tennessee, serving as the Executive Director. Prior to joining Complete Tennessee, Kenyatta served as an Assistant Vice Chancellor at the Tennessee Board of Regents and also worked in different roles at Volunteer State Community College. Kenyatta led statewide initiatives for the community college system in Tennessee and played a critical role in the implementation of major higher education reforms, including the Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010 and Governor Haslam's Drive to 55 Plan. The Tennessean recognized him as one of five key people responsible for the successful launch of the Tennessee Promise, the state's initiative to cover tuition for high school graduates attending a community college. Kenyatta serves on national advisory boards to advance the growth of credential-to-career strategies and regional collaboration to improve economic mobility. He is an adjunct professor at Tennessee State University and Lipscomb University. Kenyatta has served as a columnist and contributing author for topics related to higher education, public policy, and governance. Kenyatta has a BFA from Howard University, an MBA and a PhD in public administration from Tennessee State University.

**Krystle Mason**

Krystle Mason holds her Bachelor of Art in English from Hampton University, her Master of Education in Secondary Education from DePaul University, and is currently completing her Doctor of Educational Leadership degree at DePaul University. Krystle Mason is a highly motivated educational strategist that supports families, school leadership, and community partners in building meaningful programs that support students post secondary success. Krystle currently works for Chicago Public Schools as a College and Career Specialist serving Networks 17 and 12.

**Samuel Matura**

Samuel Matura is a junior at Mendota Township High School and a member of the Success Network Student Advisory Council. He considers himself to be an excellent team player who is willing to work with others at home, school, and within my community. He is open to sharing ideas and listening to others while maintaining self-confidence, responsibility, reliability, and punctuality.

**Charmell McGhee**

Charmell McGhee is an educator with over two decades of experience in teaching and learning. She is a math interventionist and reading specialist who has taught students from Kindergarten to 9th grade. Charmell received her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Illinois State University. She strives to continually refine her practice, so she obtained her mathematics endorsement from the University of Chicago and earned her master's degree in Reading Education from Concordia University. Charmell has certification and practice in both Illinois and South Carolina and has gained wisdom and expertise in mathematics and reading standards, instruction, interventions, and assessments. She has had the privilege of serving students with diverse backgrounds, cultures, learning styles, and family structures—and enjoyed every minute of it! In addition, Charmell has provided professional development, curriculum and assessment training, and mentorship to her colleagues. Currently, she serves as the mathematics principal consultant for the Illinois State Board of Education, where she advocates for equity in education. Charmell is a wife and mother of three.

**Scarlet Mencia**

Scarlet is a first-generation college graduate and business owner. She obtained her Bachelor's in Science in International Business from Cardinal Stritch University. She is the founder of VOS Business Solutions LLC. The business began as a digital marketing and project management consultant firm, which later changed to cater to the community that raised her. Now, it has transitioned to educate the immigrant community on career opportunities and how to manage their money as they generate an income. She is still actively involved in advocacy for higher education by going from being a student in Waukegan to College to now the Co-Chair of the Alumni Board and a Parent Educator.

**Carolyn Meurs**

Carolyn Meurs is the Agriculture/Family and Consumer Life Science teacher and FFA advisor. She grew into the position as the head cook at River Bend Middle School, and through the CTE Licensing Program was able to become certified to teach. Helping young people connect to culinary and life skills through class and out-of-class experiences is her passion. Using the Steamer Suite as a conduit has provided a way to connect education with skills needed to be successful in work and life.

**Leah Miller** Leah Miller has an extensive and diverse career in Human Resources, accumulating over 20 years of experience in the field. In her current role, Leah serves as the Director of Human Resources for the City of Moline. She leads an HR team that supports over 400 employees. She and her team focus on managing and enhancing the organization's human capital by recruiting, developing, and supporting employees to achieve both individual and organization-wide success. Leah began her professional journey with the City of Moline in 2011, serving as their Human Resources Specialist, and in 2021, she advanced to the role of Director.

Before her tenure with the City of Moline, Leah spent a decade working in Human Resources for various drug discovery and development companies in San Diego, California. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in General Studies with a minor in Human Resources from Western Illinois University. Additionally, she has obtained certification as a SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management) Certified Professional.

**Laura Montegudo** Laura is the Policy and Program Manager at Education Systems Center at NIU. 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 is excited to make an impact through state policy work. 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.

**Abel Montoya** Abel Montoya is the Director of Outreach Operations at the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, the state agency that administers over \$700 million annually in grants and scholarships to students in Illinois. Abel oversees the ISACorps, comprised of approximately 85 recent college graduates who work and live in communities throughout the state. Corps members serve as near-peer mentors to students and help them navigate the college going process, especially on how to pay for college. He has worked for over 29 years in higher education in the fields of undergraduate admissions and financial aid at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, respectively. Abel holds two bachelor's degrees in sociology and Spanish, and a master's degree in higher education administration from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

**Briana Morales** Briana Morales is a proud Latina and freedom fighter for students in alternative education, where she has spent her career loving and learning alongside students furthest from justice in East St. Louis, IL. She focuses on empowering her students with personalized, competency-based education where their cultural funds of knowledge are honored and students work at their own pace to master content rather than traditional learning that focuses on seat time and completion of work. Briana was honored as a 2021 NCTE Early Career Educator of Color and has shared the journey she and her students have embarked on to turn pain into power through narrative poetry of witness both locally and nationally. Her commitment as a school board member for the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, School District #428 has allowed her to elevate the voices of justice-impacted youth. She is deeply passionate about creating healing-centered spaces where Black and brown students can feel seen, heard, and, one day, be free to be their authentic selves. Her love offering toward this future is her nonprofit, (Sister)Hood of Hope, Inc., dedicated to honoring brighter futures for girls of color everywhere by empowering them through the community of sisterhood. She earned her BA in secondary English education from St. Ambrose University and her MED in curriculum and instruction from American College of Education. She is currently pursuing an EdD in diversity and equity in education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Briana is the 2023 Illinois Teacher of the Year.

**Sonjanita Moore** Sonjanita Moore (she/her/hers) is the Competency-Based Education SEL Integration Specialist for Chicago Public Schools (CPS). A CPS graduate, she has more than 27 years of experience in the field of education—first as a teacher and later becoming a Credentialed College & Career Access Advisor. She is a Fulbright Specialist in Education and NBCT who has supported the development of more than 50 educators from a number of Chicago area universities. In 2019, Sonjanita served as a member of the Office of Equity's Instructional Equity Working Group and is a Chicago Public Schools' Equity Champion. Sonjanita believes in creating authentically engaging learning experiences rooted in community-building, liberatory design and student voice.

**Ana Moya** Ana 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 staff at ISAC, 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 on the weekend and dog parks for morning walks with Dakota.

**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.

**Edith Njuguna** Edith Njuguna is the Director of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network and a member of the Education Systems Center at NIU team. Edith has extensive experience designing and implementing programs to improve education outcomes for children and youth in Chicago and internationally. In addition to her work with the Illinois Education and Career Success Network, she also leads 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.

**Memusi Ntore** Memusi Ntore is a data analyst at Education Systems Center at NIU. Memusi has focused his career on providing equitable classroom experiences for students. Memusi supports data initiatives by delivering integrated data through dynamic and interactive dashboard tools using state- and community-level data. Memusi also engages with community stakeholders by effectively communicating with data to inspire systemic change across the birth-to-career continuum. Prior, Memusi spent seven years as a mathematics teacher in classrooms with students from diverse backgrounds, including many immigrants and refugees. Memusi received a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and a Master of Arts in Secondary Mathematics Education from Georgia State University. He initially joined EdSystems as an Education Pioneers fellow in fall 2022.

**Jim O'Connor** Jim O'Connor grew up on a farm near Kankakee, Illinois, and has degrees from University of Notre Dame, the University of Chicago, and National Louis University. Before joining Advance Illinois, Jim was a Noble Street Charter School teacher, and the founding principal at KIPP Ascend Charter School in Chicago, where he was a principal for six years. Jim was also the Executive Director of Student Services at School District U-46 in Illinois, where he administered SES tutoring for 1,000 students. Jim is an elected school board member in an elementary school district with about 5,600 students (including his two children) in Oak Park, Illinois. Jim works to ensure that every student has the opportunity to attain an excellent education.

**Julie Obermark** Julie Obermark, Provost and Vice President of Instructional Services at Kaskaskia College, has an extensive background in nursing, healthcare administration, and instruction which prepared her for a career in higher education. Her experience in these fields has provided her with a wealth of knowledge and leadership skills that she has been able to apply to her current role and take KC to the next level for student experience and instructional delivery. Since assuming her position in 2021, Julie has been responsible for overseeing all academic programs and curricula at the institution. Under her leadership, the college has experienced a remarkable increase in dual credit programs, resulting in a significant headcount increase of approximately 5%. In addition, Julie has overseen the expansion of 240 articulation agreements with KC's 4-year university partners, solidifying the college's commitment to education and transfer pathways, plus creating student opportunities.

Julie is an alumni of Kaskaskia College and received her Master of Nursing Leadership and Administration from Walden University. She resides in Greenville where her and her husband operate a family grain farm and raise their two children. Julie is the current secretary for the Illinois Community College Chief Academic Officers, serves on the board for LWIA 23 Board, is a member of the Illinois Southwest Leadership Council, and was the 2022 Centralia Business and Professional Woman's Club Business woman of the year.



**Nkechi Onwuameze, PhD**

Nkechi Onwuameze serves as the Senior Associate Director for Academic Affairs with the Illinois Board of Higher Education and oversees the review of institutions' applications to operate and implement postsecondary degree programs in the State of Illinois. Nkechi also oversees various agency consumer protection roles, including student complaints, the nationwide interstate initiative with National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement for the implementation of distance education, as well as support implementation of early college programs such as the Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual credit. Nkechi holds a Bachelor of Science degree in finance from the University of Lagos, a Master of Science degree in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Iowa, and a PhD in Educational Policy from the University of Iowa.

**Jeff Parsons**

Jeff Parsons is in his first year as the Principal at Fulton High School where he also serves as the athletic director. He is in his 32nd year in education. He coached basketball and baseball for 30 years and was inducted into the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2020. Jeff enjoys leading his staff and students and holding them to a high standard. He also oversees the business and athletic side of the Steamer Suite.

**Heather Penczak**

Heather Penczak is the Director of Innovation and Implementation 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 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.

**Christian Perry**

Christian Perry is the Director of Policy & Advocacy for the Partnership for College Completion, where he leads a dynamic policy team working to ensure Illinois has the most equitable higher education landscape in the country. Prior, Christian worked as the State Director of Community Development at the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, later serving as Deputy Political Director to Governor JB Pritzker and Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton and most recently as Political Director to Mayor Brandon Johnson.

**Laura Rios**

Laura Rios is the program director with Waukegan to College. She earned her BA in Business Administration from Baldwin Wallace University. She uses her business acumen, passion for youth, and desire for educational equity to help first-generation students on a path to college. Laura has worked with the organization for 13 years and worked with both students and their parents in her career with Waukegan to College. Laura believes that parents play an essential role in supporting their children to and through college and looks forward to sharing that methodology.

**Emily Rusca**

Emily Rusca is the Managing Director of Policy & Programs 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 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.

**Pragati Shree Sasikumar**

Pragati Shree Sasikumar is a sophomore at Normal Community High School and a member of the Success Network Student Advisory Council. She enjoys assisting young children in dance classes, which has taught her great communication skills and patience. She also founded a DECA club, which gave her the opportunity to lead a team as a freshman.

**Rowan Smith**

Rowan Smith is a junior at Moline High School and a member of the Success Network Student Advisory Council. She is part of the Student Leadership Team as a librarian and the band manager and drum major for the school's marching band. She helps maintain the music library, co-chairs the homecoming parade committee, and is captain of the JV academic team.

**Liz Soelner** Liz Soellner is a Senior at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign majoring in Neuroscience and Sociology. Upon her arrival to campus, Liz began to realize all the ways in which rural communities—including her own—were underserved and underrepresented in higher education. This prompted her to found the Rural Area Student Initiative (RASI), a student organization that strives to not only support rural college students as they navigate the transition to higher education, but also provide resources to rural high school students interested in pursuing higher education. After graduation, Liz hopes to attend medical school and ultimately expand access to both general and specialized healthcare in rural and low-income regions.

**Thomas Semanic** Thomas Semanic is from the southwest side of Chicago and currently resides in Woodridge, IL. He is a Professional Development Specialist with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) and has been with ISAC for 4+ years as an ISACorps member, completing a fellowship with the Program Services & Compliance division and now with the training team. In his free time he enjoys weightlifting, sports, and singing. Thomas has a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with a minor in Conflict Resolution from North Central College and a Master of Public Administration – Local Government from Northern Illinois University.

**Emma Spencer** At ACT Now, Emma works closely with internal staff members such as the Network Lead and committee members to develop policy initiatives for the coalition, curate communications and resources for the out-of-school time field, and manage social media platforms and the website. In addition to providing support to coalition members, Emma also assists in providing technical assistance for professional development opportunities for program providers on a variety of topics such as STEM, SEL, and community engagement. Emma earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Affairs from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania and is a former White-Riley-Peterson Institute Fellow. Emma is also a returned Peace Corps Volunteer and served in Peru from 2017 to 2019.

**Joshua Stafford** Joshua Stafford grew up in Southern Illinois, working for his family’s farm businesses, and 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 Stafford’s leadership, Vienna has been noted both regionally and throughout the nation for its strong early college program and expansion of initiatives connecting all students to meaningful career paths. He also serves in various regional, statewide, and national initiatives dedicated to education policy and advocacy. Joshua is active with various local boards and committees and is the youth leader at Fellowship Baptist Church.

**Mallik Sundharam** Mallik Sundharam assumed the role of Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs at the Illinois Institute of Technology in July 2022. Prior, Sundharam oversaw the enrollment management enterprise at Northeastern University. In this capacity, he managed operations across 14 campuses in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom, encompassing enrollment strategy, marketing, recruitment, and admissions. His strategic and data analytics-driven approach at Northeastern resulted in rapid enrollment growth, notably establishing the university’s international student enrollment as the largest in the United States. Mallik has also served as the Vice President for ELS Educational Services. In this role, he guided over 30 universities on recruitment strategies and played a pivotal role in global business development, marketing, and recruitment efforts for more than 650 partner universities worldwide.

**Alice Tchangoue** Alice Tchangoue completed the Bridge program at Illinois Central College and is currently pursuing a healthcare track. She is grateful for the opportunity to represent Illinois Central College and share her experience.

**Theresa Todd** Theresa Todd is a passionate advocate for student success and bridging the gap between education and real-world experience. With a Mass Communications degree from St. Ambrose University, she brings a wealth of experience connecting students and employers. Having worked in both non-profit organizations and the private sector, she transitioned into the field of education after dedicating 10 years to raising her children at home. She served as a College & Career Advisor at a local high school for 6 years before transitioning to her current role 2 years ago. As the Work-Based Learning Intermediary at Black Hawk College in Moline, IL, she is dedicated to empowering students in grades 7–12 to explore, connect and thrive through real-world experiences. Theresa works with district administrators, teachers, students, and community partners to create comprehensive work-based learning opportunities that span the entire continuum of their academic journey.

**Kimberly Turnbull** At ACT Now, Kim Turnbull works closely with afterschool programs to implement quality STEM programming in all areas of the state. This includes facilitating trainings, creating curriculum, evaluating STEM programming, and providing coaching for programmatic staff. Kim also works with the STEM Guiding Team and internal staff to determine needs in the field and develop resources to address these needs and to advocate for STEM in the out of school time space. Kim earned a Bachelor of Arts in Chemistry from Know College in Illinois. She also possesses a Master of Arts in Science Education from Governors State University and a Master of Arts in Teacher Leadership from Concordia University. Kim has over 20 years of secondary science classroom experience and school administration.

**Jose Vences** Jose Vences is a junior at North Chicago Community High School and a member of the Success Network Student Advisory Council. As part of the Junior Achievement of Chicago student panel, he presented to a final board meeting, sharing common opinions of the JA program in schools and in the community. At work, he trains new people and deal with sometimes angry customers which has taught him a valuable skill: diffusing conflicts and staying calm in a high-stress environment.

**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.

**Ken Wallace, PhD** Ken Wallace, PhD, is the Superintendent at Maine Township High School District 207. Since becoming superintendent in 2009, District 207 has been named one of America's most innovative districts for advances in technology, adult learning, and career advisement. Ken is a 2017 Illinois Association of Career and Technical Education Champion, a 2018 National Association of Career and Technical Education Champion, and one of EdTech's top 100 influencers for 2017–2018. He also helped pass the first building referendum in 50 years, and the district is entering year four of a four-year comprehensive 240-million-dollar rebuild of its schools. Ken presents District 207's work regularly in the School Superintendents Association's (AASA's) Superintendent Certification and Aspiring Superintendent program as well as to other state and national audiences, and he is the Co-Chair of the AASA IDEAL cohort, which works to advance the ability for school districts to incorporate strategies to improve outcomes for all learners through evidence-based, equitable approaches. Ken is also a member of the AASA Superintendents' Leadership Network, supporting district leaders and districts around the U.S. and its territories to improve educational outcomes for all students.

**Kirsten Watson** With nearly a decade of experience in the nonprofit sector, Kirsten specializes in youth development, postsecondary education, and community engagement. Armed with a Master of Human Development and Family Sciences degree, her lifelong commitment is to empower and guide today's youth in making life-changing decisions. Currently, she serves as a Chicago Public Schools Program and Project Manager.

**Kyle Westbrook** Kyle Westbrook, PhD, joined Education Systems Center at NIU as the executive director in 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.

**Kamilah Williams, EdD**

Kamilah L. Williams, EdD, is a seasoned educational professional who has spent over two decades in higher education. Kamilah is the Dean of College and Career Readiness at Illinois Central College in Peoria, Illinois. She is a disability rights advocate, scholarly practitioner, and educational consultant. Kamilah enjoys research on disability law and rights, diversity, equity, inclusion, and access and supports social justice issues of equity and belongingness. She enjoys collaborating on issues around disability rights with other disability service professionals and topics related to DEIA justice, adult learners, student support services, and academic achievement effects on students of color and students of color with disabilities.

**Emily Won**

Emily Won is a senior at Barrington High School D220. She is on the Success Network Student Advisory Council and works as an intern at Education Systems Center at NIU, where she contributes to several projects with a focus on policy and career education, as well as assisting the team by providing student insights and contributions. Currently, she is developing a toolkit to support work-based learning initiatives and social capital growth, helps advise the Illinois Success Network’s Student Advisory Council, and works with XQ Institute to assist with their youth engagement toolkit.

Emily is an advocate for educational equity and youth policy engagement. She currently serves as the president of the Illinois Career and Technical Student Organizations Board, where she works with the Illinois State Board of Education to advance career education awareness and equity. She also serves as the president of Illinois Science Olympiad, where she works with Science Olympiad students to cultivate the next generation of leaders in STEM. Emily plans to major in public policy for her postsecondary studies.

**Amanda Wojan**

Amanda received her Master of Public Health degree in Community Health Science from the University of Illinois at Chicago. There, she developed a passion for the intersection of public health and education. She has taken that passion and pursued a career in ensuring educational equity for all Chicagoans. Originally from the mitten state, she has developed a deep love for Chicago and is excited to continue working with Chicago young people for years to come.