

Virginia's Early Childhood Advisory Committee Members



Cecilia Suarez

Representing publicly-funded, licensed early childhood care and education providers

Cecilia Suarez has over 40 years of experience in early childhood education. She graduated with a degree in Early Childhood Education from the Instituto Peruano de Educacion Inical in Lima, Peru in 1978. She became the director of the Creative Learning School (CLS) in 1998 and has been the director and owner since 2007.

Cecilia knows firsthand how important it is for every child to have access to high-quality early childhood experiences, and for families to be given the opportunity and support to be active participants in their child's education. CLS operates under a trauma-informed and resiliency-focused framework to support those who need it the most. Cecilia is a big proponent of inclusion and promoting acceptance in our little community, an impactful experience to all those who walk through her program's doors.



Dr. Jennifer Parish

Representing publicly-funded, licensed early childhood care and education providers

Jennifer Parish received her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Virginia and her Doctorate from the College of William and Mary. She served as Superintendent of Poquoson City Schools from 2008-2020. Prior to becoming superintendent, she worked for the York County School Division, where she served as a teacher, principal, director, and Chief Academic Officer. She was a graduate of the CIVIC Leadership Institute and was selected as the Region 2 Superintendent of the Year in 2014 and 2017.

Jennifer served as the President of the Virginia Association of School Superintendents and was a member of the Governor's SOL Innovation Committee. She also served as a Sector Leader for the United Way campaign and on the Virginia Risk Sharing Association Members' Supervisory Board. After retiring from the superintendency Jennifer became the Executive Director of the Peake Childhood Center, formerly the Downtown Hampton Child Development Center. She also currently serves as an Adjunct Professor at the College of William and Mary, member of the WHRO Board of Directors, member of the UVA K12 Advisory Council and member of the Mercury 64 Kiwanis Club.



Clark Andrs

Representing early childhood care and education programs that are not publicly funded

Clark Andrs is the owner of the River's Bend Children's Centers in Chesterfield County. His goal is to be a voice for child care providers and to have a positive impact on this field of work. Clark holds a degree in Early Childhood Education with a concentration in Day Care Administration from Virginia Tech.

In 2012, Clark had the great fortune of being appointed to the Child Care Counsel of Virginia, where he served to help promulgate child day care regulations. He currently serves as Vice President for the Virginia Child Care Association (VCCA), a non-profit organization representing child care owners and directors in the child care industry. Clark has also served as chairman of the Wee School Committee for First Baptist Church in Hopewell, VA.

After being inspired by hearing Dr. Bob Pianta speak at a VCCA conferences on Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Clark could not wait to learn more about this manner of engagement with children in the classroom setting. Not long after, Clark was trained to be a CLASS validator. All preschool staff at River's Bend Children's Center are currently being coached in CLASS!

Clark has given his heart and soul to this field of work for the last 33 years. He is on site running the daily operation of the centers as well as weekends performing repairs, cleaning, special projects or whatever it takes to make his centers continue to thrive. Clark's passion for this work is what motivates him to help others in the field succeed and thrive as well. Clark looks forward to working together with the other members of this committee to make a difference for children and families of Virginia.



Cheryl Morman

Representing publicly-funded family day home providers

Cheryl Morman has been a licensed family childcare provider since March 2002. She has been married for 26 years and has two sons and three grandchildren.

After 13 years of working in corporate, Cheryl realized she needed more. She opened her family day home in January 2000 and shortly after became licensed. Her business grew quickly and Cheryl wanted to surround herself with other providers. She joined childcare organizations beginning with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), The Virginia Alliance of Family Child Care Association and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC).

Cheryl joined the Virginia Alliance Board as a Member at Large in 2010, serving as Election Chairperson, participating in Capital Steps, and continuing to advocate for family childcare. Cheryl completed her associate degree in early childhood development in August 2013. In 2017, she was elected as the President of the association. Cheryl's objective for Virginia Alliance is to be known as an organization with integrity, to increase the professional image, to grow local associations, to help others see quality family child care providers as educators, meet the needs and concerns of our members and to be a stronger organization on public policy and advocacy for children.



Dr. Christen Johnson

Representing license-exempt early childhood care and education providers

Christen has worked in both public and private education in general and special education classrooms. Currently her work is two-fold as the Director of First Presbyterian Weekday School, a NAEYC accredited early learning center, and as an adjunct professor of Early Childhood Education at Lord Fairfax Community College - both in Frederick County, Virginia.

Christen obtained a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood/Primary Education, followed by a master's degree in Special Education from Canisius College in Buffalo, NY. She obtained her doctoral degree from Liberty University in 2016.

As an educator of young children and teachers of young children for over 22 years, Christen has worked to align the needs of these two demographics through her membership in NAEYC and her work with the Lord Fairfax Affiliate as a board member.



Tina Alsop

Representing Head Start providers

Cristina Alsop has over 25 years of experience in elementary education. She graduated from Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi with a degree in Elementary Education in 1993 and earned her master's degree in administration from Cambridge College in 2003. She is currently the Director of Federal Programs and Foundational Learning for Henrico County Public Schools where she oversees several federal grants to include Title I, Title II, Title IV, McKinney-Vento, Virginia Preschool Initiative, and Head Start. Prior to joining Henrico in 2019, she was the Director of Federal Programs for Virginia Beach City Public Schools where she co-lead the efforts to align the Virginia Preschool Initiative with the K-12 program.

Cristina is the current president of the Virginia Association of Federal Education Program Administrators (VAFEP) and is a board member of the National Association of Federal Education Program Administrators after serving as a region representative since 2019. During her work in Virginia Beach City Public Schools, she served as the president of the Virginia Beach Reading Council and was a member of the Virginia Beach GrowSmart board. As a military spouse, Cristina has co-chaired the command spouse groups, served as ombudsman, and was the director of the Joint Military Spouses Conference overseeing the fundraising and workshops for over 500 military spouses in Oahu, Hawaii. As the mother of two daughters affectionately called President Girls, Tina's passion and why has always focused on ensuring opportunities are provided for all students to achieve their greatest potential.



Shikee Franklin

Representing Head Start providers

Shikee Franklin is an alumni from Mercer County Head Start program in Trenton, New Jersey! She began her career in Head Start as a volunteer with The Improvement Association Head Start program. She was soon hired as a Teacher Assistant and expanded her experience in various capacities such as Summer School Teacher, Community Services Coordinator, Family Services Coordinator, and then Head Start Director for 10 years. Since 2017, Shikee has served as the Early/Head Start Director for Hampton Roads Community Action Program (HRCAP), the largest Head Start program in Virginia. Currently, she serves on several Statewide Committees and Boards including Virginia Head Start Association, School Readiness Committee, Early Care and Education Workgroup, and the Pre-School Development Grant Advisory Committee. She also serves on the National Community Action Partnership Head Start Task Force.

Shikee has been fortunate to collaborate with ten of Virginia Public School Division throughout Regions 1 & 2. She has built relationships with Local Education Agencies that lead to coordinated enrollment, single point of entry, collaboration classrooms, joint professional development, and other innovative partnerships. She has also developed and supervised a Parents as Teachers program under Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting.

Shikee received her undergraduate studies in Organizational Management at St. Paul's College, and graduate studies in Education at Central Michigan University. In 2017, she was honored by Inside Business as a recipient of the Top 40 under 40.



Malinda Langford

Representing Head Start (not school-based) providers

Malinda Langford serves as the Senior Vice President of Programs for Northern Virginia Family Service. Malinda manages the early childhood education, therapeutic foster care, and the access to health and nutrition services within the agency. Malinda previously served as a training and technical assistance specialist for the Office of Head Start's Region Three Division in Philadelphia, PA.

She holds a bachelor's degree in human relations from Trinity University in Washington, D.C., and has worked in the field of early childhood education for the past 42 years. She has one daughter who is a stage actress and resides in Los Angeles.



Darrell Turner

Representing local school divisions or school boards that operate early childhood care and education programs

Darrell Turner serves as a general education teacher with the Virginia Preschool Initiative for Richmond Public Schools. Mr. Turner believes in educating the whole child through providing experiences that allow students to express their feelings and love of learning. As a teacher in a preschool inclusion classroom, Mr. Turner is passionate about making sure students of all ability levels feel accepted in their learning environment.

Mr. Turner attended Hampton University and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. He also holds a Post Baccalaureate Certificate in Teacher Licensure and a master's in Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Richmond. Furthermore, he has dual endorsements in Elementary and Special Education.

Some of his professional and volunteer accomplishments include; Active volunteering for VPI family engagement events, VCU Excel Center's Circle Time at Home Television Program, 2018-2021 member of the Mayor's Teacher Advisory Council, and a local officer and active member of the Virginia Education Association. Above all else, Mr. Turner is an advocate for his students, families, and fellow educators.



Dr. Gina Wohlford

Representing local school divisions or school boards that operate early childhood care and education programs

Gina Wohlford has climbed the educational ladder one step at a time; beginning as a daycare owner, and a public school Pre-K teacher, she has also filled the role of 21st Century Grant Coordinator, Reading Specialist, Assistant Principal, and Principal throughout her 25-year career in public education.

Now serving as the Superintendent of Norton City Schools, Dr. Wohlford advocates for student-centered learning, innovative practices, and the social-emotional well-being of all students as demonstrated in the division's participation in the first cohort of the Virginia is for Learners Innovation Network and her partnerships with local organizations such as United Way, Girls Inc, and Project Polaris. She also serves as the Region VII Representative for Women Education Leaders in Virginia.

She obtained her Bachelor of Arts from UVA-Wise, Master of Education from Radford University, and most recently completed her PhD in Early Childhood Education from East Tennessee State University in 2018.

She resides in Castlewood, Virginia with her husband Frank. She enjoys time with her two children and their families. She is looking forward to grandchildren and becoming a "GeeMa" in the Spring!



Vivien McMahon

Representing nonprofit early childhood advocacy organizations

Vivien McMahon serves as Vice President of Community Impact for United Way of Roanoke Valley and utilizes her skills to support the United Way Initiatives and Partners focusing on a Collective Impact Model so everyone can achieve their shared goals.

Vivien has spent her professional career in the field of Early Childhood as an educator in the private sector, faith-based community, and Head Start, always with a focus on elevating the lives of vulnerable families. Vivien has served as the Director of Early Learning Strategies for United Way of Roanoke Valley to create systemic change in the value of early childhood education. She has led the charge in Virginia to develop the first Coordinated Enrollment System in the Commonwealth by empowering Partners to have a voice and develop innovative solutions that work for families. As an advocate for early childhood professionals, Vivien has also successfully worked with providers and the Department of Labor and Industry to improve pathways for education in the workforce by establishing two Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeships in the Roanoke Valley.

Vivien thrives in organizations that work in partnership to elevate the lives of children and adults ensuring all have opportunities to be heard and to reach their goals. Vivien prioritizes the strength and value of relationships to create lasting change.



Michelle Howard

Representing nonprofit early childhood advocacy organizations

Michelle Smith Howard, Executive Director of Smart Beginnings Alexandria, is an experienced educator committed to addressing the socio-economic disparities and challenges affecting underserved communities. She began her career as an early childhood special education teacher and administrator with the District of Columbia Public Schools. She then served as the Director of Early Learning for the signature program of the Obama Administration's White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative.

Additionally, Michelle has worked as the Director of Early Childhood Development and Intervention with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington and as the Coordinator of Citywide Early Childhood Programs with Alexandria City Public Schools.

Michelle holds a bachelor's in political science from Southern University and A&M College. She also holds a master's in early childhood special education and an educational specialist' in educational leadership and administration from The George Washington University.

Michelle credits her love for education to her mother, a retired public school teacher, and to her pre-Kindergarten teacher, Beverly Ann Wingfield.



Dr. Maryam Sharifian

Professional or faculty member with expertise in early childhood from a college or university in Virginia

Maryam Sharifian is an Assistant Professor at James Madison University, College of Education. Dr. Sharifian received her undergraduate and graduate degree in School Counseling from Tehran University in Iran. After completing her PhD in Early Childhood Education from SUNY at Buffalo, she has started her position at JMU to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in Early Childhood Education. Dr. Sharifian serves as country liaison at Childhood Education International (CEI) National Representative (representing Iran/Middle East). She also served as Board of Directors of CEI for three years. She currently serves as a Secretary/Treasurer of American Educational Research Association (AERA) PEACE Education SIG.

Dr. Sharifian addresses educational issues relating to children and teachers in area of armed conflict (their wellbeing and resilience strategies). In addition, she served as a Co-PI in Shared Services for Family Day Homes (S.T.E.P.) 2019-2020 grant to expand the availability of quality child care for infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, and children in need of care during non-traditional hours. Currently, she is the Principal Investigator of Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and Mixed-Delivery Grant (MDG) to increase the quality and equity of early childhood education in the Commonwealth.



Dr. Bweikia Steen

Professional or faculty member with expertise in early childhood from a college or university in Virginia

Dr. Bweikia Steen is an Associate Professor and the Internship Coordinator in the Early Childhood Education Program within the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Dr. Steen completed her Doctorate of Education in International and Multicultural education from the University of San Francisco. Her research focuses on promoting social, emotional, and academic success among children of color during the early years, and providing early childhood educators with developmentally appropriate strategies and practices that will enable this success.



Dr. Bergen Nelson

Representing the Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Bergen Nelson, MD, MS, is a primary care pediatrician at the Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU, and serves as Early Childhood Champion for the VA Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. She is a graduate of Wellesley College and Harvard Medical School, the Pediatric Leadership for the Underserved (PLUS) residency program at the University of California, San Francisco, and the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. She conducts research in developmental screening and systems of care to promote early childhood health and development.



Sandra Wilberger

Representing advocacy or service organizations that focus on serving children with disabilities

Sandra "Sandy" Wilberger, M.Ed. is employed at the Partnership for People with Disabilities where she serves as the Co-Director for the Training and Technical Assistance Center (T/TAC at VCU). In this capacity, she leads a team that provides professional development to professionals who work with young children with disabilities. Her degree and background is in Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and she has worked over 30 years in this field as a teacher, inclusion specialist, and provider of professional development. Sandy is passionate about advocating for and supporting services to young children with disabilities and their families. When she is not working she enjoys spending time with her family which includes her partner, adult son Conner, his husband, and her rescue dog Winne Cooper.



Dr. Holly McCartney

Statewide nonprofit association representing before- and after-school nonprofit child care and preschool providers

Dr. McCartney has over twenty-seven years of combined teaching in Virginia, including six as a classroom teacher in a VPI classroom and twenty-one as a professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at James Madison University (JMU). While at JMU, she also directed the Early Childhood M.A.T. program and collaborated with the VECF, VCCS, and other four-year institutions across the state to develop the AAS to BIS program, allowing graduates with an associate degree in ECE to earn a teaching license and bachelor's degree. She currently consults with schools and nonprofits on curriculum design, arts integration, and other education-related topics. Dr. McCartney is the past President and Secretary for VAEYC (Virginia Association for the Education of Young Children) and serves as an executive board member for Harrisonburg Rockingham Child Day Care Center, assisting teachers with curriculum, planning for the future, budget, and personnel issues.



Wendy Lipscomb

Representing the Virginia Council on Private Education

Wendy Lipscomb has over twenty years of experience in early childhood education in the private sector, both as an educator and an administrator. She served on a team to rebuild the early childhood program at St Mary's Catholic School where she spent her time in the classroom, and then at The Blessed Sacrament Huguenot School assuming the role of educator then Director of Early Childhood, where she remains to date.

Wendy graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in Business and a concentration in Marketing. Her years of experience in the field of marketing has proven to be beneficial in her roles in the field of Early Childhood in the areas of development, communication, and as an advocate for ensuring the success of the youngest learners within the Commonwealth in terms of academic and social-emotional development.



Angela Wirt

Representing a nonprofit entity that provides child care resource and referral services

Angela Wirt has over twenty years of professional experience in human services, focused primarily on services supporting and advocating for families and children. Angela has served in the arenas of domestic violence and sexual assault crisis counseling, child care administration, Head Start family support services, and as a child care subsidy social worker with the department of social services. For the last thirteen years, Angela has served in various roles within the statewide child care resource and referral network administrative office, Child Care Aware of Virginia, moving from data and quality assurance, to staff management as the Deputy Director, and into her current role as Executive Director of the network in January 2017. Angela received her bachelor's degree in social work, with a Minor in Journalism, from Longwood University and attained a master's degree in human services with a Specialization in Nonprofit Management from Capella University.

Vacant

Representing license-exempt early childhood care and education providers

Vacant

Representing business owners, operators, and employees in the Commonwealth

Vacant

Parent of a child enrolled in a publicly-funded early childhood program