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Speaker Bios



Charles Aull

Dr. Charles Aull serves as Vice President of Policy at the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, overseeing its Center for Policy and Research. Since joining the Chamber in 2021, he has led major research initiatives on workforce development, education, and tax reform. Formerly Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy at Greater Louisville Inc., Aull's policy research has been cited in The New York Times and The Washington Post.



Lavonda Cantrell

Lavonda Cantrell serves as Director of Marketing and Communities and Vice President of The Hillcrest Healthcare Foundation. A Licensed Nursing Home Administrator, she joined Hillcrest in 2007 and has been instrumental in advancing community engagement and support for older adults. She brings a deep commitment to improving access and quality in senior care across East Tennessee.



Chuck Carter

Dr. Chuck Carter is Director of Schools for Sullivan County Schools, where he is focused on career-connected education, workforce readiness, and academic excellence. A lifelong educator within the district, he has advanced programs that strengthen both academic and vocational pathways. Carter's leadership emphasizes preparing students for success in college, career, and community life.



Leslie Cowell

Dr. Leslie Cowell is Dean of the College of Education at Lipscomb University, bringing more than two decades of experience in K-12 and higher education leadership. Previously Dean of Education at Faulkner University, she also directed its Pre-K program and served on the Alabama School Readiness Alliance board. A former classroom teacher and elementary principal, Cowell remains deeply committed to high-quality early learning and teacher preparation across Tennessee and beyond.



Amy Doran

Dr. Amy Doran is Corporate Director of Early Care and Education for Ballad Health, leading the system's \$37 million Centers for Early Learning initiative across the Appalachian Highlands. With nearly 40 years in early childhood and elementary education, she oversees efforts to create up to 11 high-quality, affordable child-care centers for families and team members. Before joining Ballad, she served as District Supervisor of Early Childhood for Kingsport City Schools.



Katie Harbison

Katie Harbison is President & CEO of the Chambliss Center for Children in Chattanooga, leading programs that serve children and families through child care, residential, and youth services. Since joining in 2005, she has strengthened fundraising, operations, and partnerships. A community leader, she serves on the boards of Youth Leadership Chattanooga and the Association of Fundraising Professionals.



Heather Hicks

Heather Hicks is Executive Director of Statewide Services at Signal Center, where she has served since 2008. She oversees more than 250 staff leading Tennessee's Child Care Resource & Referral and Child Care WAGE\$® programs. Throughout her career, Hicks has focused on improving child care quality, access, and workforce stability across Tennessee's early childhood system.



Monique Hodison

Monique Hodison is the Executive Director of Schrader Lane Childcare & Learning Academy in Nashville, Tennessee. In this role she leads the Academy's efforts to provide high-quality early childhood care and learning, and she also serves on the advisory council of the Nashville Early Education Coalition (NEEC), representing the early-childhood-provider contingent in the city's effort to expand affordable, quality childcare for birth-to-age-five children.



Lori Humphreys

Lori Humphreys is Vice President of Child Care Services for the YMCA of East Tennessee, where she has led early learning programs since 2000. With extensive experience in child-care management and family services, she previously directed Children's Circle Child & Family Tennessee. Humphreys has dedicated her career to ensuring safe, high-quality environments that help Tennessee's children and families thrive.



London Lamar

Sen. London Lamar represents Tennessee's 33rd District (Shelby County) and chairs the Shelby County Legislative Delegation, where she has helped secure more than \$40 million in state resources for her community. The youngest African American woman ever elected to the Tennessee Senate—and the first to give birth while in office—she has been a leading voice for maternal health, family well-being, and economic opportunity. She has sponsored more than 45 bills advancing healthcare access, job creation, voting rights, and efforts to eliminate human trafficking.



Patrick Lanne

Patrick Lanne is a Partner at Public Opinion Strategies, serving as lead pollster for numerous Republican officials nationwide, including members of Congress, governors, and a U.S. Senator. His research spans issues such as early education, economic development, health care, and public policy. Lanne is widely regarded for his strategic insights and polling expertise that inform campaigns and policy decisions across the U.S.



Sean Lee

Sean Lee has served as President of Porter-Leath in Memphis since 1997, leading the organization's expansion of early childhood and family support services across West Tennessee. Under his leadership, Porter-Leath launched tuition-based preschool options and the Early Success Coalition to scale high-quality early education region-wide, improving outcomes for children and families.



Colleen ("Coco") Melchiorre

Colleen "Coco" Melchiorre is CEO of Little Wonders Early Learning Center in Nashville, where she leads strategic growth and innovation in early education. Under her leadership, Little Wonders partnered with Lipscomb University to launch an apprenticeship program addressing workforce shortages in early education. Melchiorre also provides consulting and fractional leadership to mission-driven organizations in the child-care sector.



Dave Miller

Dave Miller serves as Executive Vice President and Head of Strategy and Performance for First Horizon Bank, overseeing strategic planning, performance analytics, and business transformation across the company's \$60 billion banking segment. During his 31-year career with First Horizon, he has led major regional, consumer, and corporate initiatives, and won national honors from *IR Magazine* and *Institutional Investor*. A committed civic leader, Miller serves on the boards of numerous community organizations.



Brittany Monda

Brittany Monda is West Tennessee Growth Officer for Reach University, where she supports apprenticeship-based degree pathways for educators and paraprofessionals. A former middle-school science teacher and charter-school leader in South Memphis, she brings a decade of experience connecting classroom practice with workforce development. Monda leads Reach's Tennessee partnership initiatives, expanding access to higher education through work-based learning.



Todd Norris

Todd Norris serves as Senior Vice President of Community Health and System Advancement for Ballad Health, where he helps lead the system's transformation into a community health improvement organization focused on prevention and disease management. Previously, he was Senior Vice President of System Advancement for Wellmont Health System, overseeing marketing, communications, and philanthropy to strengthen community engagement and impact.



Cynthia Osborne

Dr. Cynthia Osborne is Executive Director of the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center and Professor of Early Childhood Education and Policy at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. She founded the Center to translate research into actionable state policy for the birth-to-three years. Prior to joining Vanderbilt, Osborne spent 16 years at the University of Texas at Austin, where she founded the Child and Family Research Partnership and served as Associate Dean at the LBJ School of Public Affairs.



Alison Peak

Alison Peak is Executive Director of Allied Behavioral Health Solutions in Nashville, where she leads statewide initiatives integrating behavioral health into primary care and strengthening Tennessee's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health workforce. With expertise in clinical practice, systems design, and workforce training, she is a leading voice in building coordinated behavioral health solutions for young children and families.



Cameron Sexton

Rep. Cameron Sexton is the 83rd Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives, representing the 25th District (Upper Cumberland). A pragmatic conservative and former House Health Committee Chairman, he has championed innovative, patient-centered healthcare solutions – including serving as chief architect of the CARE Plan to strengthen access and rural health systems. With a background in banking and a B.A. in Public Administration from the University of Tennessee, he has led major initiatives in healthcare reform, education policy, and fiscal responsibility.



Melanie Shinbaum

Melanie Shinbaum leads the Nashville Early Education Coalition, a Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee initiative addressing the child-care crisis by improving access, affordability, and quality. She partners with community leaders to build a coordinated early childhood system. With 25 years in nonprofit leadership, her experience includes CEO of St. Luke's Community House and Executive Director of Fannie Battle Day Home.



Andria Smith

Andria Smith serves as Child Care Special Projects Coordinator at the First Tennessee Development District, leading initiatives that align early childhood access with workforce and community development across the eight-county Northeast Tennessee region. As part of the Workforce and Literacy team, she advances collaborative projects that support family stability and regional economic growth.



Linda Smith

Linda Smith is Director of Policy at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and former Director of the Early Childhood Initiative at the Bipartisan Policy Center. She previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development at the U.S. Administration for Children and Families and as Executive Director of the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies. Earlier, she led the Department of Defense's Office of Family Policy, where she helped build its nationally acclaimed, fully accredited child-care system.



Natalie Tackitt

Natalie Tackitt serves as North Carolina Coordinator for the HealthySteps initiative at ZERO TO THREE, collaborating on statewide efforts to integrate early childhood behavioral health into pediatric medical homes. She supports services reaching more than 35,000 children across the state and advances evidence-based policy and systems change to strengthen early childhood development and family well-being.



Blair Taylor

Blair Taylor is Founder, President & CEO of Tennesseans for Quality Early Education, advancing policies and practices across the state that ensure a strong start for every child. She also leads Memphis Tomorrow, an association of CEOs of Memphis' largest companies working with civic and government partners to drive economic opportunity and community progress. A longtime social impact leader, Taylor has founded and led multiple organizations focused on advancing opportunity and upward mobility for children and families.



Deniece Thomas

Commissioner Deniece Thomas leads the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, where she has advanced innovative workforce strategies since joining the department in 2007. Rising through leadership roles from the Clarksville American Job Center to Deputy Commissioner, she now represents Tennessee on the National Governors Association's Executive Committee. Thomas also co-chairs the Workforce Information Technology Support Center and serves on the Tennessee Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations.



Jenny White

Jenny White serves as Director of Community Engagement and Digital Advocacy for Tennesseans for Quality Early Education. She leads statewide efforts to engage parents, educators, and community advocates through events and digital campaigns that strengthen voices for Tennessee's youngest learners. Previously, Jenny was spokesperson and marketing director for an early education AI company, where she honed her expertise in storytelling and digital engagement.



Mark White

Rep. Mark White represents Tennessee's 83rd District (Shelby County) and chairs the House Education Administration Committee, leading efforts to boost K-12 funding, raise teacher pay, expand early literacy and career-technical training, and strengthen school safety. A former science teacher and principal turned small-business owner, he founded the Global Children's Education Foundation to expand learning opportunities in Panama and authored *May I Call You Dad: Why Fathers Are Needed in the Home*.



Rebecca Woods

Rebecca Lofty Woods serves as Vice President of Government Relations for Tennesseans for Quality Early Education. As TQEE's chief lobbyist, she leads legislative strategy and advocacy for research-based early learning policies. Woods also directs Tennessee Advocates for Early Learning, TQEE's affiliated political action committee. A veteran of Tennessee's government affairs arena, she has led grassroots campaigns and represented health care and community organizations statewide.



Dan Wuori

Dr. Dan Wuori is Founder and President of Early Childhood Policy Solutions and serves as Strategic Advisor on Early Childhood to the Saul Zaentz Charitable Foundation. Previously, he was Founding Director of Early Childhood at the Hunt Institute, where he worked with state leaders nationwide to strengthen early learning systems. A widely followed voice on child development and policy, he is also the author of *The Day Care Myth*.