



Our Presenters

Tuesday: Is It All About the Money? Federal Funding of Special Education



Sarah Abernathy has been the Deputy Executive Director of the Committee for Education Funding since 2016. She has nearly 30 years of experience working on education and budget issues in both Congress and in the Administration, Sarah worked for 18 years on the House Budget Committee Democratic staff focusing on education, social services, and job training. She previously spent 6 years working for several House members. From 1994-1998 Sarah worked at the U.S. Department of Education on rehabilitation services and adult and vocational education issues. She was detailed to the Office of Management and Budget's education branch to handle policy and budgets for special education and vocational rehabilitation, and to the San Francisco regional office of the Department of Health and Human Services to work on child care, welfare, and Head Start programs. Sarah graduated from Williams College and earned a Master's in Public Affairs from the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

Advocacy tip:

In any email, phone call, or Tweet to your Members of Congress, start off by saying "I am a constituent of yours from [town/county]" because that gets their attention immediately – requests from people who can vote for them get attention!



As president of MRM Associates, LLC, **Myrna Mandlawitz, M.Ed., J.D.** serves as legislative consultant to CASE. She has worked in Washington for close to 30 years as a consultant/lobbyist on special and general education policy and legislation. Myrna is a former president of the Committee for Education Funding, a coalition of over 100 national organizations focused on increasing the federal investment in education, and also served for 12 years as co-chair of the National Alliance of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel. Her first position in Washington was as Director of Government Relations for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. A native of Virginia, Myrna spent fourteen years as a classroom teacher and assisted in the development of Virginia's program for infants and toddlers with disabilities. She holds a master's degree in Early Childhood Education from Boston University and a law degree from Temple University.

Wednesday: Stemming the Tide: Addressing the Educator Shortages in Special Education



Dr. Cassandra Boyd Willis is a native of Richmond, VA. She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Virginia and received her Master's degree, Postgraduate degree and Doctorate from Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Willis was the recipient of the Jane West Spark Award in 2018 and also received the Outstanding Dissertation Award from VCU's School of Education for her work on administrative support of early career special education teachers. Dr. Willis has previously worked as special education teacher, math supervisor and as an associate principal. She currently works as an Education Specialist for Henrico County Public Schools where she oversees the Title I program. She is also an Adjunct Professor for the Department of Special Education and Counseling at Virginia Commonwealth University while she continues her research on special education teacher preparation and disability policy.



A former teacher and education administrator, **Jane E. West, Ph.D.** is visiting professor at the University of Maryland and Virginia Commonwealth University and policy advisor to several national education organizations, including the [American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education](#), the [Higher Education Consortium for Special Education](#) and the [Teacher Education Division](#) (TED) of the Council for Exceptional Children. For 8 years she led AACTE's advocacy and policy work as Senior Vice President. In the mid 1980's she worked as senior education advisor on the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions where she led the national effort to craft multiple federal education statutes. Jane's work focuses on teacher quality and building a bridge for professional educators to engage with policy makers. Her policy work focuses on the Higher Education Act, IDEA, ESSA and appropriations. She was a founder of the [Coalition for Teaching Quality](#). Dr. West holds a BA from the University of California at Santa Barbara, an MA from Teachers College, Columbia University and a Ph.D. in special education from the University of Maryland.

Advocacy Tip: *If you are not at the table, you are likely on the menu.*



Dr. Naomi Ondrasek serves as a Sacramento-based policy advisor and senior researcher for the [Learning Policy Institute](#). She previously worked on the California Assembly Education Committee, where she served as a California Council on Science and Technology science fellow. As a fellow, she reviewed, analyzed, amended, and drafted legislation covering a broad range of education policy issues, including child health, curriculum and instruction, college- and career-preparedness, and educational equity. She also staffed bills on STEM and special education for Assembly member Patrick O'Donnell. Prior to her time in the California Legislature, Dr. Ondrasek spent a decade of her career training and working as a neuroscientist, with a professional focus on studying how brain chemicals, hormones, and the environment interact to influence social bonding and group formation. Dr. Ondrasek received a Ph.D. from the UC Berkeley Department of Integrative Biology and a B.S. with honors in Biology from Randolph-Macon Woman's College.

Thursday: Addressing the Mental Health Crisis in Our Schools



Sharon A. Hoover, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist and an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Co-Director of the [National Center for School Mental Health](#) (NCSMH), and Director of the Center for Safe Supportive Schools (CS3). She currently leads national efforts to support states, districts and schools in the adoption of national performance standards of comprehensive school mental health systems ([the SHAPE System](#)). Since 2004, she has worked with the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Treatment Services Adaptation Center for Resiliency, Hope and Wellness in Schools, to train school district and school leaders, educators and support staff in multi-tiered systems of support for psychological trauma. Dr. Hoover has also devoted considerable efforts to understanding the implementation of “collaborative” mental health care in primary care settings, including school-based health centers.



Dr. Byron McClure is a National Certified School Psychologist currently redesigning a high school in Southeast, D.C. His work centers around influencing systemic change and ensuring students from high-poverty communities has access to a quality education. Dr. McClure has extensive knowledge and expertise in mental health, social emotional learning, and behavior. Dr. McClure has done considerable work advocating for fair and equitable discipline practices for all students, particularly, for African-American boys. He has designed and implemented school-wide initiatives such as SEL, restorative practices, RTI, and trauma responsive practices. As a result of this work led by Dr. McClure, his school recently won the 2019-2020 Whole Child Award. Dr. McClure has presented at the NASP national conference in Texas, Illinois, Georgia, and most recently in Maryland. He was a keynote speaker at the Florida Association of School Psychologists Summer Institute and recently at the San Diego County Equity Conference.



Dr. Kelly Vaillancourt Strobach is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist and is currently the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the [National Association of School Psychologists](#). Dr. Strobach has developed, authored, and coauthored numerous articles and resources on school safety and school mental health, including NASP's *Framework for Safe and Successful Schools* and has presented nationally on issues related to school safety, school mental health, effective discipline policies, and the relationship between education policy and school practices.

Advocacy Tip: *Remember that you are the expert!*

Friday: Special Education and the Pandemic



Dr. Amanda Fitzgerald serves as the Director of Public Policy for the [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\)](#). She has worked for the association since 2003 in various capacities. While she serves as a liaison for community partnerships, she primarily focuses on government relations efforts for the national office. Amanda serves as a liaison for both congressional offices and the US Department of Education. Amanda earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Elementary Education from Arizona State University, a Master's of Arts in School Counseling from The George Washington University and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania. She completed the DC Education Policy Fellowship Program in 2010 and is an active member of the Association for Women in Government Relations and the American Society of Association Executives earning her Certified Association Executive designation in 2020.



Dr. Lisa Thomas is Associate Director, Educational Issues, [American Federation of Teachers \(AFT\)](#), providing research and programmatic support to the nation's second-largest teachers' union. Dr. Thomas manages a portfolio of topic-specific special education, behavior, and classroom management courses within AFT's Professional Development Program, Educator Academy. She has directed several national campaigns on bullying prevention, school discipline, restorative practices, and autism and special education. In addition, Dr. Thomas represents AFT on a number of federal committees, national leadership and coalition groups, including the National Universal Design for Learning Task Force, co-communications chair; State Accountability for All Students Advisory Board; Atlantic Philanthropies Research-to-Practice Collaborative on Equity and Access; National Academy of Science and Technology; and the former federally-funded National Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Partnership.

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