

SECA 2026 President Elect Candidates

Please share some of your accomplishments in the early childhood profession.

Marla Pankratz, OK



I currently serve as Chair of the Department of Education at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, where I lead as the Director of Early Childhood and teacher preparation programs aligned to national standards. I am President-Elect of OKAEYC and have served as Conference Co-Chair for the 2024-2026

Annual Conferences.

I have led policy development to award CDA candidates 9 hours of college credit in Early Childhood Education, accept transfer credits from community college programs in child development, and support awarding college credit for experience in the field through internship credits. I have led the development of Registered Teacher Apprenticeship pathways to strengthen the Birth–8 workforce, secured grant funding to support educator preparation, and presented at national, state, and regional conferences, including SECA.

As Director of Early Childhood at SWOSU, I am most excited and honored to be a part of the development of a transformative partnership between the Greater OKC/Great Plains YMCA, Southwestern Oklahoma State University, the City of Weatherford, and the SWOSU Foundation. This collaboration reflects months of intentional relationship-building, shared visioning, and strategic planning focused on strengthening early childhood education and care across Western Oklahoma. The planned Great Plains YMCA Child Development Center will not only expand access to high-quality care for approximately one hundred children and families, but it will also serve as a vital clinical and workforce development site for our CAEP NAEYC-recognized bachelor's and master's candidates. With a shared commitment to pursuing NAEYC accreditation for the center and our degree program and implementing developmentally appropriate, research-based practices, this initiative demonstrates the powerful impact that can occur when higher education, community organizations, municipal leadership, and philanthropy unite around a common goal—investing in children, families, and the future early childhood workforce.

Connie Stout O'Dell, WV



As a senior in college, I attended my first West Virginia Association for Young Children Conference. I had such a great time and was hooked on professional conferences after that weekend. That was the first time I saw Greg and Steve in concert! Their song, The

Freeze, was one of my favorites to include during my first year of teaching. I continued to attend as much professional development as I could while teaching preschool and kindergarten and while I taught special education classes. I was recruited to teach an adjunct early education college course the fall after my son was born and then the following semester, I was invited to be a teacher-in-residence at Glenville State College (now university). That was supposed to be a one semester position, but I've been a faculty member there since then.

I have been very fortunate in my career to have taught every grade level that I wanted to including teaching at the college level. I've advised hundreds of pre-service teachers, supervised student teaching and residency placements, served as Director of Field Experiences for seventeen years, served as faculty advisor for education student groups, served as Chair of Education Department and now currently serve as the Dean of Teacher Education. I've been lead faculty in obtaining NAEYC's specialized association recognition for our Early Education PreK-K teacher education program and most recently our WV State Content Area Program Approval for our Early Education PreK-K teacher education program.

The work in the college student groups has included starting the Early Education Student Group and the Student Reading Interest Group. My dear colleague and I have the pleasure of serving as co-advisors for both of these groups. It has been my pleasure writing grants for these student groups to be able to attend conferences, assisting with fundraising events, sponsoring community events such as Trick or Reading and Dr. Seuss Reading Night, hosting events to school supplies and book drives for local schools,

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Marla Pankratz, OK



This has been made possible by a two-million-dollar endowment to fund a position to have a SWOSU Director at the joint YMCA-SWOSU Child Development Center.

Before higher education, I served as a childcare worker, PreK-Head Start teacher, classroom teacher in Kindergarten-2nd grade, early childhood librarian, and early childhood principal. As a teacher, I developed and taught at public school – Head Start PreK collaboration in my community. As a librarian, I started the tradition of weekly engaging Storytime helping promote falling in love with reading through language and play. As an early childhood principal, I worked to develop teachers and staff on developmentally appropriate practices and keeping true to play-based learning environments. Each role shaped my understanding that empathy, belonging, and intentional practice are not abstract values — they are daily decisions.

Early childhood is not just my profession. It is my calling — and I am deeply committed to ensuring SECA continues to stand with children, families, and educators across the South.

Connie Stout O'Dell, WV



and hosting professional development events. Many of the students who have attended conferences with me, including SECA conferences, have gone on to do amazing things. They are lead teachers in their schools, directors, youth leaders, and Nationally Board Certified Teachers. My heart overflows with joy and pride for their accomplishment.

I have had the pleasure of creating courses in our elementary and early education program including introduction to early education, early childhood assessment, child development, and methods courses. My work continues to be a learning experience and every day is a new experience and adventure. It has been a tremendous ride and the work continues as we are in an accreditation semester at this time.

During my tenure at our university, I have presented at numerous conferences sharing action research, literacy, diversity, math, and social and emotional learning and well-being. In recent years, I have invited fellow colleagues to attend conference presentations with me and I have also invited college students to join in the presentations. I'm very proud of the work of the college students in their willingness and preparation in conference presentations.

I've mentioned the state affiliate work that I've been a part of in WWAYC, NAEYC, and SECA. WWAYC is no longer affiliated with NAEYC, but while our association was, I served as president during the re-affiliation process and was the affiliate representative for more than ten years. My work in WWAYC has been amazing and so full of adventures and learning. The relationships and friendships over the years is something I would not trade at all. Several of the WWAYC Board members are people that I had invited and have remained vital members of our Board. While serving on the SECA Board of Directors, I had the pleasure of being on the Leadership Commission and serving as Chair of Leadership Commission. I also served as secretary while on the SECA Board. I was blessed with two terms on the SECA Board and serving under four SECA presidents.

At the university, I was awarded the Curtis Elam Award for Teaching Excellence. With this, a monetary award was given for faculty development and I chose to focus on professional development of pre-service teachers in early education. Students attended three SECA Conferences with me as a result of this award. I was also honored with the SECA 2026 Outstanding Member Award at the SECA 2026 Conference. I'm still humbled and honored with this recognition and am thankful for my family and friends in my early care and education circle.

We'll periodically publish candidates bios, articles, videos on the SECA website at www.seca.info/presidentelect.

Candidates are listed in alphabetical order.

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