

Meet The 2026 Candidates For SECA President Elect

The Nominating Committee of the Southern Early Childhood Association has certified two President-Elect candidates for the 2026 election that will be held in the fall, they are: **Marla Pankratz** of **Oklahoma** and **Connie Stout O'Dell** of **West Virginia**

Over the next few months we'll publish more information on each candidate's unique vision for SECA, visit the SECA website at www.seca.info/presidentelect. Look for ballots to arrive in your inbox in September 2026!

Why do you want to be the President of SECA? What attributes and strengths would you bring to the position?



My desire to serve as President of SECA is rooted in both gratitude and responsibility.

Early in my career in Western Oklahoma, I was part of WECA, where I first experienced what it meant to gather with early childhood professionals who understood the unique context of serving children and families in the Oklahoma — rural communities, tight-knit towns, strong faith traditions, limited resources, and enormous heart. That experience shaped my heart for children, beliefs in what really mattered in my classroom, and my advocacy and leadership in professional settings.

Marla Pankratz, OK

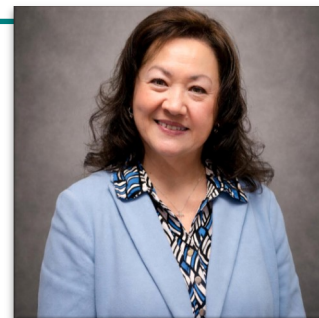
SECA's mission — improving the quality of care and education for young children and their families through advocacy and professional development — aligns directly with my life's work. I have dedicated my career to strengthening the Birth–8 workforce through teaching in early childhood classrooms, developing and teaching in a public school -Head Start PreK program, serving as an early childhood center principal, teaching future teachers in teacher preparation, developing on the job apprenticeship pathways, leading accreditation, and engaging in state-level collaboration. I believe quality improves when we invest in those people who invest in our children.

I am especially drawn to SECA's Core Values. The belief that every child deserves respect, love, and belonging is not simply aspirational — it must guide policy, preparation, and practice. As a university department chair, professor, and former classroom teacher and principal, I work daily to ensure educational practices are thoughtful, intentional, and grounded in research — while never losing sight of empathy.

I bring servant leadership, strategic planning experience, strong organizational skills, and the ability to build bridges across sectors — childcare, Head Start, public schools, and higher education. I also bring calm energy and optimism. Leadership is serious work — but it should also inspire hope, bring joy, and develop results.

The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) represents so much to many people across the southern states as well as in many other states and regions of our country. Those who are passionate about early care and education and young children and families have a deep connection to SECA. I'm blessed to be one of those people.

To me, SECA represents a long-standing passion for quality care, education, advocacy, and professional development for the children and families of the south. I have always loved telling people about SECA and saying that my beautiful state of West Virginia is the northern most of the southern states that are affiliates of SECA. It is an honor to have been introduced to SECA over 25 years ago and to have grown in my professionalism and networking with SECA during these years.



Connie Stout O'Dell, WV

When I talk about SECA and share stories, I light up and simply smile. SECA has become such a part of my professional journey and serving as the next SECA president would be one of my greatest blessings and accomplishments. I have always thought of leadership as an opportunity to serve and to be of service. Being elected as the next SECA president would be no different. It would be an honor and true commitment of service to the association and to its members both current and future. I have been encouraged by several dear friends and mentors to consider submitting my name for SECA President-Elect and I have not taken this decision lightly.

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I have given this much consideration and meaningful thought before making my decision. For my friends and mentors who have encouraged me, I am so thankful for their trust and confidence in me. Having a strong base of support in family and friends is critical for all leadership positions. For this, I am very thankful. I truly believe in the mission and values of SECA and am passionate about the history and future of this amazing association. Serving as the next SECA President would allow me to continue to strengthen the relationships and friendships that are formed through the networking and professional development that happens in SECA.

As president of SECA, I feel that I would bring a strong sense of collaboration and commitment to the association. I am extremely dedicated and have a strong set of organizational skills and positive dispositions. Listening to those around me and working to find solutions for problem solving are strengths that I have developed over the years in my leadership roles. I love working with people of all ages and celebrating their successes and also providing guidance in challenging times. I'm eager to learn as much as I can from the Fossils of SECA as they are the pillars of this organization. I'm also excited to spend time with the current and future members of SECA and explore their ideas and organizational needs. Kindness and a positive spirit fully encompass who I am. I've been described as a gentle, yet strong, effective, and productive leader in my roles at my university and in my roles in our state affiliate.

I have been blessed to serve in a variety of leadership roles at my university. It has been such a pleasure working with the university education student groups and serving as a faculty advisor for them. I've had the pleasure of guiding them in community service events, fundraising, professional development field trips and national, regional, and state-level conferences, and being the person who took them on their first airplane flight. I would be remiss to not mention the leadership opportunities that I have had with West Virginia Association for Young Children (WVAYC). I've been blessed to serve as president of WVAYC for several different terms, the affiliate representative to National Association for the Education of Children, the affiliate representative to the Southern Early Childhood Association, and the college student group liaison for WVAYC. These leadership roles have been rewarding and each has contributed to who I am today and the values I have for learning, professional development, advocacy, and professional relationships.

Don't miss next month's feature—candidates will share their ideas for growing membership and enhancing member benefits!

