

Experts

Diana Mendley Rauner, *President*

Diana Mendley Rauner is President of the Ounce of Prevention Fund. Prior to becoming President in January 2011, Rauner served for three years as Executive Director and for five years as a member of the Board of Directors. Rauner oversaw the expansion of the Ounce's Early Head Start program and the advocacy work that preserved state funding for early childhood programs during the worst economic crisis in Illinois history. She has also launched several new training and research initiatives at the Ounce. Prior to joining the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Rauner was a Senior Research Associate at Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, where she worked with public agencies and private foundations to evaluate programs that support early childhood development. She has a background in investment banking and private equity and previously worked for private equity investment firms in Chicago and San Francisco. She holds a doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Chicago, a master's in business administration from Stanford University, and a bachelor's degree from Yale University.

Areas of Expertise

- Early childhood education
- Economic benefits of early childhood programs
- Federal and Illinois policies and funding for early childhood education
- Strategies for closing the academic achievement gap
- School readiness of young children
- Infant and toddler social-emotional, language and literacy development
- Engaging parents of at-risk, low-income children
- Home visiting and doula programs
- Head Start, Early Head Start
- Educare Schools

Portia Kennel, *Executive Director, Educare Learning Network*

Portia Kennel created the Ounce of Prevention Fund's innovative Educare school on Chicago's South Side. As the Executive Director of the Educare Learning Network, a partnership between the Buffet Early Childhood Fund and the Ounce, Kennel is helping communities across the country create state-of-the-art early childhood centers for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Holding a master's of social work degree from the University of Illinois, Kennel has more than 20 years experience in social work with a concentration in the design and management of programs for young children.

Areas of Expertise

- Early childhood education
- Early childhood program development and management
- Early childhood curriculum and models
- Characteristics of high-quality early childhood education
- Head Start, Early Head Start
- Educare Schools

Brenda Eiland-Williford, *Director of Program and Curricula*

Brenda Eiland-Williford is the director of program and curricula for the Ounce of Prevention Fund's Educare of Chicago, a model early childhood school. Eiland-Williford is an accomplished early childhood educator, administrator and trainer, with more than 30 years of experience in Head Start as a classroom teacher, coordinator, manager and director. She holds a bachelor's degree in education and music from National Louis University and a master's degree in early childhood education from the Erikson Institute. She is currently working on a second master's degree in early childhood leadership at the Erikson Institute.

Areas of Expertise

- Early childhood education

- Early childhood curriculum and assessments
- Head Start, Early Head Start
- Early childhood language and literacy development
- Educare Schools

Anita Harvey-Dixon, Site Administrator

Anita Harvey-Dixon is the site administrator of Educare of Chicago, the Ounce of Prevention Fund’s model early childhood school. Ms. Harvey-Dixon has more than 19 years of experience in the field of education, including being a classroom teacher and Head Start site manager. Ms. Harvey-Dixon has a master’s degree from Erikson Institute in child development with a focus on administration and infants and toddlers. She earned her Illinois Director’s Credential in 2007.

Areas of Expertise

- Early childhood education
- Head Start, Early Head Start
- Early childhood language and literacy development
- Educare Schools

Nancy Shier, Director, Kids Public Education and Policy Project (Kids PEPP)

Nancy Shier oversees the Ounce’s advocacy efforts in Illinois on issues that impact young children’s growth and development, including education, health care, child care, mental health, and professional development. Shier is the Ounce’s principal strategist in the areas of Illinois policy and governmental relations and spearheads the agency’s legislative and administrative advocacy activities.

Areas of Expertise

- Illinois policies and funding for early childhood programs
- Preschool for All program in Illinois
- Early Childhood Block Grant in Illinois
- Federal policies and funding for early childhood programs

Dan Harris, Senior Manager, Kids Public Education and Policy Project (Kids PEPP)

Dan Harris’ primary responsibilities include legislative and administrative advocacy for early childhood programs. He has nearly 20 years of experience administering state government programs, including child care subsidy, child care licensing, state-funded preschool and home visiting programs. Harris holds a master’s degree in public policy from the University of Chicago.

Areas of Expertise

- Illinois funding for early childhood programs
- Child care subsidy
- Child care licensing
- Quality rating and improvement systems

Karen Yarbrough, Senior Manager, Kids Public Education and Policy Project (Kids PEPP)

Karen Yarbrough oversees and directs strategies for Kids PEPP’s work on infant-toddler policy and system issues. During her 10-year tenure at the Ounce, she has developed and implemented advocacy strategies to expand and enhance early childhood programs and services and improved systems coordination at the state level. Yarbrough also tracks federal legislation and initiatives that impact young children and their families. She holds a bachelor’s degree from Lake Forest College and a master’s degree from the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration.

Areas of Expertise

- Illinois policies and systems that affect infants, toddlers and their families
- Healthy Families Illinois
- Early Childhood Block Grant in Illinois
- Federal policies and funding for early childhood programs
- Comprehensive early childhood systems development

Ireta Gasner, *Senior Policy Associate, Kids Public Education and Policy Project (Kids PEPP)*

Ireta Gasner works with state and federal lawmakers to advocate for policies that benefit children ages birth to five. Before coming to the Ounce, Gasner provided direct services and administered programs for high-risk children and families for 14 years, including home-based Head Start. She has been active in state and federal lobbying efforts with the National Association of Social Workers and RESULTS. Gasner received her master's degree in social work from the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

Areas of Expertise

- Illinois and federal funding for early childhood programs
- Preschool for All program in Illinois
- Early Childhood Block Grant in Illinois

Karen Berman, *Senior Policy Associate, Kids Public Education and Policy Project (Kids PEPP)*

Karen Berman leads Kids PEPP on special education issues for children ages birth to five and tracks federal education initiatives, including the Early Learning Challenge, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Response to Intervention. Berman previously practiced law for 10 years with the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights as an advocate on education and disability issues for low-income and disadvantaged children. She has a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Michigan and a law degree from Northwestern University.

Areas of Expertise

- Special education issues for children ages birth to five
- Federal education initiatives affecting young children

Karen Freel, *Vice President, National Research and Evaluation*

Karen Freel oversees evaluation activities and leads the Ounce's efforts to build an early childhood mental health system in Illinois. In addition, Freel has experience with research in urban, lower-income, African-American communities. She holds a master's degree in applied clinical psychology from Indiana State University as well as a master's in public policy and a doctorate in human development from the University of Chicago.

Areas of Expertise

- Mental health of infants and toddlers
- Research on early childhood education programs

Debra Pacchiano, *Director of Continuous Quality Improvement*

Debra Pacchiano is responsible for the seamless translation and connection between research and practice, and the organization's continuous use of research and evaluation data in the program design and improvement processes. Pacchiano provides leadership and oversight in the implementation of quality improvement initiatives and facilitates the development and dissemination of procedures, tools and reports for sharing outcome information with stakeholders and lessons learned with the early childhood and K-12 education fields. She holds a doctorate in educational psychology and early childhood special education from Indiana University. She joined the Ounce in 2003.

Areas of Expertise

- Child development and learning
- Early childhood education standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment
- Data utilization to enhance teacher effectiveness and child outcomes
- Birth-to-third-grade child development and education alignment

Claire Dunham, *Senior Vice President, Programs*

With more than 25 years of experience in early childhood education, Claire Dunham oversees the program divisions at the Ounce of Prevention Fund that offer Head Start, Early Head Start, home visiting and doula services to young children and their families.

Areas of Expertise

- Child abuse prevention
- Home visiting and doula programs
- Early childhood program development and management
- Training of early childhood professionals

Nick Wechsler, *Director of Program Development*

Nick Wechsler has more than thirty years of experience working to support families and young children. A graduate of Erikson Institute's Infant Studies Program, Wechsler has led the development of the Ounce's statewide network of doula services in Illinois. He is a co-author of the book, *Teenagers and Their Babies: A Perinatal Home Visitor's Guide*, and has contributed a chapter on working with teenage parents to the book, *Beacon of Hope: The Promise of Early Head Start for America's Children*.

Areas of Expertise

- Doula programs
- Home visiting
- Infant-parent attachment
- Mental health of infants
- Strategies and services for young parents