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Erikson's Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows Program Launches New Cohort *Early Childhood Leaders will leverage expertise to influence policy*

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, August 14, 2023

Erikson Institute welcomes a new cohort of Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows (BBLF) program, which runs October 2023 through July 2024. Eighteen diverse and experienced early childhood leaders will leverage their field expertise to develop policy recommendations designed to ensure Illinois' publicly funded programs and resources are equitable, accessible, and of high quality for young children and their families.

"Early childhood leaders are positioned to inform state-level policy and resource allocation. The BBLF program gives them the time and tools to address public policy issues and create greater change," said Penny Smith, Director of Learning and Impact for Erikson's Policy and Leadership Department.

The BBLF program, now with a sixth cohort, experienced a hiatus due to the COVID pandemic and, instead, focused on providing coaching to program alumni to support their leadership during those uncertain times. The program, redeveloped with learnings from the pandemic and social justice uprisings, builds the capacity of early childhood leaders by providing them with key insights on public policy and the tools to examine issues affecting young children and families using a racial equity lens.

"Under the guidance of the BBLF program, my policy memo proposed legislation that addressed inequities in the teacher workforce. In confronting the challenges of teacher preparation, my proposal was codified into state law. The fellowship empowers its participants to become influential change-makers in the state of Illinois and beyond," said Natalie Vesga, alumna of the BBLF program and director of the Chicago Early Childhood Preparation and Pathway Project at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

Presentations by subject matter experts, group activities, and data research help guide fellows as they develop a policy memo on a current issue that can be used post program on the floors of the state capitol, boardrooms, public hearings, and more. The 10-month program concludes with a policy pitch event where fellows can pitch their recommendations in two minutes to a room full of policy experts and decision-makers. Many fellows have gone on to provide testimony at legislative hearings or moved into positions where they have more opportunities to effect state or regional policy change.

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The program is named in honor of Barbara Taylor Bowman, who co-founded Erikson alongside Maria Piers and Lorraine Wallach. Barbara's legacy as an education activist, policy adviser, and early childhood practitioner matches the characteristics of individuals this program aims to attract. It is one of two leadership programs offered through Erikson's Early Childhood Leadership Academy, a signature initiative that provides knowledgeable leaders with dynamic, cohort-learning experiences to enhance their capacity to influence early childhood policy. For more information, please visit [the Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows webpage](#).

[The 2023-2024 Barbara Bowman Leadership Fellows:](#)

Julissa Cruz, Senior Director, Community-Based Advocacy Carole Robertson Center for Learning

Cassandra Davis, District Manager, Chicago Public Schools

Kisha Davis, Bureau Chief of Collaboration and Partnerships Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS)

Shannon Ellison, Director of Programs and Contracts, Collaboration for Early Childhood

Felicia S. Gray, Associate Director of Operations, Division of Early Childhood, IDHS

Rosario Hernandez, Senior Education Policy Analyst, Latino Policy Forum

Emily Kelin, Early Childhood Project Manager, Chicago Public Schools

Maggie Koller, Communications Manager, Birth to Five Illinois

Rayshonda McElroy, Director of Education & Child Development Services, Brightpoint

Dara Munson, President & CEO, Family Focus

Lynn Reuter, Early Learning Administrator, School District U-46

Krystal A Ross, Director of Early Childhood Programs, Gads Hill Center

Erick Saldivar, Manager, Illinois Action for Children

Verletta Saxon, Deputy of Research & Child Well-being, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Guadalupe Valdivia, Manager, Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship, City Colleges of Chicago

Ricardo Villalobos, Director Family and Community Engagement Christopher House

LeTosha White, Vice-President, Black Child Development Institute Chicago Metro

Michelle Wood, Bureau Chief, Quality Initiatives, IDHS

Erikson Institute educates, inspires, and promotes leadership to serve the needs of children and families. We are a premier graduate school dedicated to child development. We provide direct services to our community's children and families. We are leaders in influencing early childhood policy. We work tirelessly every day so that all children can achieve optimal educational, social, emotional, and physical well-being. At Erikson Institute, we know that investing in the early years of children will last a lifetime. Learn more at www.erikson.edu

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