

SECA 2026 President Elect Candidates

What ideas do you have for increasing membership or member benefits?

Marla Pankratz, OK



Membership grows when professionals feel represented, valued, and connected to something bigger than themselves.

SECA has had a powerful legacy since 1948 of bringing together preschool, kindergarten, primary educators, caregivers, and administrators. I would build on that legacy by strengthening a Birth–5 childcare focus while intentionally building bridges into the school age spaces with 4–8-year-olds.

First, I would elevate the visibility of infant/toddler educators, family childcare providers, and center directors. Continuing the work of promoting dedicated conference strands, leadership roundtables, and practical micro-learning sessions focused on child development, family engagement, workforce retention, and culturally responsive practice would reinforce that SECA stands with children — today, tomorrow, and always.

Second, I would expand recruitment through partnerships with higher education and vocational programs, apprenticeship pathways, and community colleges. Offering reduced “emerging professional” memberships for paraprofessionals, CDA candidates, and college students helps bring educators into SECA early.

At the same time, we can naturally recruit professionals serving school age children by highlighting alignment across the continuum — PreK–3 transition sessions, literacy and math development conversations, and research-to-practice panels grounded in thoughtful, intentional educational practice.

Finally, I think that we need “boots on the ground” visibility across organizations and states. As a regional partner to affiliates, we need to see them where they are and meet them where they are. When professionals see that SECA supports them as organizations, professionals, and families, values belonging, and promotes research-based practice rooted in Southern realities, membership becomes meaningful — not transactional. Connection matters!

Connie Stout O’Dell, WV



SECA is an organization that has a long-standing history of excellence throughout the southern states. Exploring options for SECA’s growth is of utmost importance. How can SECA best grow in its mission, its membership, and its awareness? These are questions that are critical for the association’s growth. This is also exciting. I feel that SECA can work with its state affiliates to offer professional development in regionally located places. This might look like SECA and state affiliate sponsored one-day workshops on odd years and full SECA conferences in even years. These are simply ideas to reach a broader and more diverse population including prospective members and college student groups.

College students are another population that must be targeted. Working with college faculty in both two-year and four-year universities would be a productive start. Possibly offering college student group memberships at discounted rates and stronger promotion of the SECA student leadership grants would be great places to start.

I do feel that SECA offers valuable member benefits. Collaborating with SECA’s state affiliates in awareness of those benefits would further promote what a SECA membership includes. The work of the SECA Board of Directors and its leadership including the social media directors has made a great difference in awareness over the past few years. Marketing and public relations are areas to focus on as well to continue SECA’s mission and awareness.