



Zelphine Smith-Dixon

Chief Student Support Officer

Rockdale County (GA) Public Schools

Conyers, Georgia, USA



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Oct. 3 – Oct. 19, 2022

Learn directly from Zelphine what inspired her to apply for the Board of Directors.

[Watch the video.](#) [Read the transcript.](#)

Biographical Information:

Dr. Zelphine Smith-Dixon completed various educational studies: K-12 education in Orangeburg Consolidated School District #3; Bachelor’s Degree in Special Education (Columbia College); Master of Education Degree in Elementary Education (South Carolina State University); and a Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership (Nova Southeastern University).

Dr. Smith-Dixon has a longstanding history in improving achievement for schools in SC and GA. She received the following accolades: Tri-County Special Educator of the Year, Vance-Providence Elementary Teacher of the Year and Orangeburg Consolidated School District Three Alternate District Teacher of the Year. In April 2018, Columbia College presented her with the Wil Lou Gray Outstanding Educator Award. She was the State Director for the Division for Special Education at the Georgia Department of Education. Zelphine served as the Board President for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). In addition to this past role, she currently serves as a key stakeholder and/or cadre advisor for the National IDEA Data Center, National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, CEEDAR Project, Gates Foundation K-12 Education to Work Foundation, Council of Chief State School Officers (CSSO) Advancing Inclusive Principal Leadership (AIPL) Project and the National Center on Intensive Intervention.

In March 2021, she published an article in the Case in Point edition in the Journal of Special Education Leadership (JSEL). The State of Special Education: The Shift from Available to Appropriate!

In September 2021, Dr. Smith-Dixon received both the NASDSE Gavel Award and the Dr. Glenn I. Latham Annual Excellence Award. Currently, Dr. Smith-Dixon works for Rockdale County Public Schools as the Chief Student Support Officer and enjoys the opportunity to keep students first. She serves as a ministry leader at the dReam Center Church of Atlanta and the Educational Development Committee Chair for Covington Area Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Candidate Statements:

What makes CEC’s mission meaningful to you? (Limit 150 words)

I appreciate the mission to cultivate, support and empower education professionals. As a young classroom teacher, I commenced my career publicly decreeing three truths: (1) acknowledge my desire to

directly impact student success, (2) accept my current reality that forging a path of success for each student with a disability would not be easy, and (3) expand availability of local resources to grow professionally and meet the needs of diverse and differently abled learners. After college, I intentionally made a choice not only to teach but to give back to my local county. Orangeburg was nationally recognized among poor, rural counties cited as the Corridor of Shame. I am confident that my CEC network provided access to resources that would not have been available otherwise. After two years of teaching, I received the Tri-County Special Educator of the Year Award, and my life has been made all the better.

Provide three specific examples of how your leadership experiences, including professional and volunteer, have had an impact on fostering change or moving an organization/entity forward. (Limit 300 words)

As a special educator, I have been able to impact change on a national, state, and local level. I served as the State Special Education Director for five years in Georgia and provided leadership to increase the number of students with disabilities who graduated with a general education diploma. To effectively impact change, I developed infrastructure to review and revise the state's plan for General Supervision developing a statewide system for policies, procedures, and practices.

Teacher shortage was a critical area of concern at multiple levels of leadership. I inspired others to partner and showcase Georgia's inaugural Teacher Pipeline Summit, bringing together both local and national talents. The partnership promoted the teaching profession as a career of first choice and garnered both general education and special education expertise.

I believe firmly in engaging other stakeholders in the work and modeled this excellence with the Georgia State Advisory Panel and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Success is possible by leveraging partnerships. Serving in leadership for the past three school years has not been easy but necessary. The COVID-19 Pandemic impacted everyone and exposed vulnerabilities in our educational system – especially for under-served populations. While there was no didactic playbook, I proudly served as a change agent to develop both school closure and restart guidance, all the while preserving our highest commitment to students, families, teachers, and leaders.

Most importantly, I have impacted change by challenging leaders across this country to remain focused on students and keep our profession first. We must shift beyond tolerating diversity to embracing our differences as unique truths. I have effectively fostered change in building capacity for individuals and organizations to use data to tell their stories and ultimately change their outcomes.

Describe an idea you have to help CEC achieve one of the strategic plan goals, and explain how your knowledge, skills, and expertise will be applied to this idea. (Limit 250 words)

I admire CEC's commitment to establish the organization as a globally recognized leader in the field of special education. Personally and professionally, I believe that CEC embodies the opinions and excellence of front-line workers who are committed to students, engaged with families, and connected to culture. CEC has so much value to offer the profession globally on a macro, meso, and micro level. In many instances, the professionals who understand the needs of the profession the best have been limited in the volume of voice and vote regarding education's most critical matters.

Every special educator should have access to a professional network designed to support and empower them. Georgia has four CEC Chapters and three Student Chapters. If local or regional chapters are not accessible, affordable, and amenable, then the national influence of outstanding mission and vision will

have limited outreach. I would like for the national organization to increase capacity for local states to grow the network and increase the access to local or regional chapters. It would be helpful to develop national toolkits regarding how states could expand the network and increase the number of local chapters. Local chapters create a platform for teachers and other practitioners to lead largely on issues that are critical to our local classrooms. The toolkit could offer strategies to promote simply the "why" behind the work. We are always better together. Local professionals can best change both the narrative and the mindset of what it means to be an educator.

What methods do you suggest would assist CEC to recruit more diverse members into volunteer and leadership positions, especially within units and divisions? (Limit 250 words)

Essentially, diversity in volunteer and leadership is directly impacted by diversity among the workforce. Arthur Chan stated that diversity is a fact. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action, and belonging is an outcome. The organization must continue to expand the development of student chapters and recruitment of individuals interested in becoming a special educator. We can choose to create the most appropriate representation of unique contributions and differences based upon available workforce, or we can address barriers that would attract and retain individuals with different demographics and backgrounds.

We should seek opportunities to leverage volunteers and leaders among the units and divisions who can influence outcomes for CEC. As an example, local CASE chapters can minimize barriers for CEC Membership and foster a climate that benefit the empowerment of local educators. Another great strategy is the recognition that often motivates and inspires educators to ignite and engage with others. It could be both rewarding and residual if states or chapters offered membership for teachers during the initial induction year of teaching at no cost to the local professional. The strategy would ensure that local chapters could engage from the onset establishing a strong start and steady educational career. Most importantly, we must address diversity beyond representation and create an inclusive climate and environment to foster a sense of belonging.

Professional Position and Education:

Primary Professional Position:

Chief Student Support Officer
Rockdale (GA) County Public Schools

Highest Degree:

Ed.D., Educational Leadership, Nova Southeastern University, 2005

CEC Membership Information:

Years of CEC Membership: 6 years

Division Membership(s):

Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)
Georgia Council of Administrators of Special Education (GCASE)

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