



Meet the Candidates

ALLEGHENY INTERMEDIATE UNIT BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Election 2024

The Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU) provides an array of high-quality, cost-effective educational services and supports for learners of all ages in Allegheny County. The AIU is one of the largest of the Commonwealth's 29 intermediate units and is led by a 13-member board elected by the school directors from the 42 suburban school districts in the county.

Seven members from district school boards within the AIU have submitted the required documentation for candidacy for the four, three-year board positions, July 2024 to June 2027; the one, two-year position, July 2024 to June 2026; the one, one-year position, July 2024 to June 2025. The top four vote getters will receive the four three-year positions; the number five vote getter will take the one two-year position; and the number six vote getter will get the one one-year position. AIU Board members are responsible to all suburban school districts in Allegheny County; therefore, the 378 school directors from these districts are eligible to elect candidates to the AIU Board.

The following bios and photos (listed alphabetically) were submitted by each candidate.



JACKIE BLAKEY-TATE – Penn Hills School District

I was recently reelected to my second term as a Penn Hills School Director; I currently serve as Board Vice-President. Prior to retirement as a high school administrator with Pittsburgh Public Schools I worked in student services Pre-K-12. Much of my career was in alternative education. As a retiree I felt the need to share my knowledge and talents to continue advocating for systems which provide quality educational opportunities for all students. It is the responsibility of school districts to ensure that students reach their greatest potential and become contributing members to society. Additionally, we must provide educators with professional development and support necessary to equip them to meet the needs of today's students and their families. My early education was in the Pittsburgh and Wilkesburg Public School systems, I later obtained a B.A. in Sociology and Secondary Education, Certifications as a Home and School Visitor (School Social Worker) and as a Secondary Principal, and a M.Ed. in Counselor Education. I remain involved and volunteer with current and retired educator organizations.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

I was recently elected to fill an open seat on the AIU Board. I was intrigued by the AIU theme "Serving Every Learner". The more involved I became in meeting colleagues from other districts and backgrounds with genuine interest in all students and families energized me even more. Penn Hills, as others are, is a struggling district both financially and academically. My election to the AIU Board would allow me to participate and connect with others from surrounding districts. Sharing services, best practices and ideas provides a diverse experience which would benefit my school district as well as all surrounding districts. The vision and mission of the AIU align with the ideal of creating a culture of lifelong learners.

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FRANK CORTAZZO – South Allegheny School District

Frank Cortazzo has been a dedicated public official for the past 18 years. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for the South Allegheny School District, where he is the chairperson of the Finance/Contracted Services Committee and the district SHASDA representative. Frank received his bachelor's degree in secondary education and taught in public schools for six years. Additionally, he has coached a variety of high school sports for the past 40 years. Frank became involved in law enforcement and is currently a police sergeant at Duquesne University. He has served on the board of directors for both the Allegheny County Borough Association as well as the Pennsylvania Association of Boroughs. Frank has been an advocate for special education, participating in a number of programs through St. Anthony's School as well as the Best Buddies Program at Duquesne University.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

I believe we cannot operate on an island as separate school districts and that we must all work together for the good of all students throughout the region. The Allegheny Intermediate Unit is an integral part of the education system and as a member of one of the smaller school districts, I feel it would be an opportunity to present those small school needs to the AIU. I will bring to the table the multi-faceted experience I possess, to learn and grow as a part of the AIU team to provide the best experiences for all students. This is an exciting time for the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, and it would be an honor to be a part of it.



RIKELL FORD – Clairton City School District

Dr. Rikell S. Ford is a lifelong resident of the Mon Valley. Growing up in the City of Clairton she attended Clairton City School District from grades K-12, studied Criminal Justice at Edinboro University, completed a Master of Arts in Criminal Justice Administration at California University of Pennsylvania (2009), achieved a Master of Social Work with a certificate in Child Welfare from the University of Pittsburgh (2017), and a Doctorate in Community Engagement from Point Park University (2022). As a Licensed Social Worker, she has spent over 12 years in many roles with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services-Children, Youth, and Families; her current role is Casework Supervisor. She is an adjunct professor at Point Park University in the Community Engagement Department, and a mental health therapist who provides therapeutic intervention to individuals who have experienced complex trauma.

Dr. Rikell is the proud founder of Kindred C.U.L.T.U.R.E., a non-profit focused on serving communities in the Mon Valley area, and can be found with her youth program Clairton Healthy Adolescence Moving into Power and Service (C.H.A.M.P.S.) working with teenagers to change the narrative of the youth in Clairton. She is past Vice President of Foundation of HOPE Board of Directors, current President of Clairton City School District Board, and a board member of Focus on Renewal. She has served in local and statewide positions with Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. including state mental health coordinator. Rikell serves as advisor to Clairton Cares, led the CommUNITY Day since 2014, is Secretary to the Western PA Youth Athlete Association, and can often be found stepping in as a cheer coach utilizing the opportunity to mentor young girls. Dr. Ford was inducted into The New Pittsburgh Courier's Class of 2022 Feb 40 Under 40 and is a participant in Leadership Pittsburgh.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

I aspire to contribute as a board member to advocate for equitable representation of all students within the districts served by the AIU. I firmly believe that every student deserves a voice to express their perspectives on a larger scale. If granted a position on the AIU Board, I am committed to upholding and enhancing the AIU's programs while ensuring they are viewed through the lenses of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Drawing from my seven-year tenure as a board member of the Clairton City School District, I have acquired the requisite skills, knowledge, and experience in navigating the public education system. I have consistently evolved as a staunch supporter of public education, further solidifying my advocacy for the system.

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KRISTINE MINNICK – Deer Lakes School District

Kristi Minnick has been an elected member of the Deer Lakes School Board since 2017 where she has served in several different capacities as Chairperson of the Technology, Athletics, and Policy committees, and the Legislative Outreach (PSBA) Chairperson and Liaison. For the past two years, she has served as Board Treasurer. She has been an AIU Board member since 2021 and currently holds the office of Board Secretary. Kristi attended Highlands School District and later received her bachelor's degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Professionally, Kristi has over 30 years' experience in the areas of IT and Finance as a Senior Director in a Fortune 200 Company with its headquarters in Pittsburgh, PA. As a product of public education, a career with a public company, and serving the community as an elected official, Kristi has spent a lifetime in the public sector. She enjoys amateur sports photography and is a common fixture along the glass of her son's hockey games. She volunteers her time and talents photographing all levels of the Deer Lakes Hockey Club (K-12) and sharing the pictures with players and families. Although she is proud of her personal accomplishments, she is more proud of the achievements of Deer Lakes School District and the AIU during the last several years. The ability to collaborate, foster consensus, and have the uncomfortable conversations are all necessary to govern effectively. These are the ingredients that have provided the foundation for significant local and county wide success.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

Kristi is seeking a second term on the AIU Board because although much has been accomplished there is more work to be done! The breadth and depth of educational and support services provided by the AIU comes with a steep learning curve. Kristi can provide a much-needed veteran presence on the board and provide continuity while mentoring new board members. Although she resides in a small, rural district, Kristi recognizes that regardless of size, we are all faced with the same challenges. Rising costs, gaps in funding, mental health needs, staff shortages (teachers, paraprofessional, social workers, and bus drivers) and unfunded mandates are challenges in any district. As an AIU board member, she will continue to support, advocate, and promote the AIU services that can provide relief to these pressures. **All children** deserve the best public education no matter their socio-economic background, home situation, size of their school district, or their zip code. With this premise as her "True North", it is with great enthusiasm that Kristi asks for your support and vote for AIU Board of Directors.



ANTONIO PARIS – Riverview School District

Antonio Paris was first appointed to the Riverview School District Board in 2022 and reelected in November 2023. He currently serves as the Board's Vice President. For over 20 years, Antonio has been a resident of Oakmont, a small town about 20 minutes outside of Pittsburgh, and was a graduate of Riverview School District. While a student at Riverview Antonio was very active and engaged in a rigorous course of academics and extracurriculars such as cheerleading, musical, Pennsylvania's Junior Academy of Science, track and field, model UN, and more. Mr. Paris attended Baldwin Wallace University near Cleveland, Ohio, where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts in both Sociology and Anthropology, followed by a Master of Studies in Law from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law and, most recently a Juris Doctorate from Ave Maria School of Law at the end of 2021. During his time at Ave Maria, Mr. Paris was a two-term President for BLSA, which allowed him to be a champion for all black law students at Ave Maria and to create 1L review programs for success on midterms and finals.

In Antonio's everyday life, he works as an Attorney practicing family law. Prior to this, Antonio worked for a year at Burns White for the railroad practice group and before that, a yearlong internship at the Federal Public Defender's office. When not working or going to school, he is involved with his fraternity and serves as the Chapter Advisor to his collegiate fraternity at Carnegie Mellon University.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

My working with students has always been ingrained in me. Being an orientation leader in college, being an advisor working with my fraternity at CMU, or even chairing recent model UN and mock trial competitions, all shows my dedication to youth. Being younger and much closer to the age of the students, I can relate to and advocate for them in a way that other directors may not be able. The AIU's efforts in recent years have been really great and with my background and willingness to think outside of the box, my experiences and knowledge would be a great asset to the AIU board and the school boards of Allegheny County.



OUR MISSION

We are an educational community that advocates and advances equitable opportunities for every learner.

OUR VISION

Through equitable access, all learners achieve their full potential.

- Allegheny Valley
- Avonworth
- Baldwin-Whitehall
- Bethel Park
- Brentwood Borough
- Carlynton
- Chartiers Valley
- Clairton City
- Cornell
- Deer Lakes
- Duquesne City
- East Allegheny
- Elizabeth Forward
- Fox Chapel Area
- Gateway
- Hampton Township
- Highlands
- Keystone Oaks
- McKeesport Area
- Montour
- Moon Area
- Mt. Lebanon
- North Allegheny
- North Hills
- Northgate
- Penn Hills
- Pine-Richland
- Plum Borough
- Quaker Valley
- Riverview
- Shaler Area
- South Allegheny
- South Fayette Township
- South Park
- Steel Valley
- Sto-Rox
- Upper St. Clair
- West Allegheny
- West Jefferson Hills
- West Mifflin Area
- Wilkinsburg Borough
- Woodland Hills

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MANDAL SINGH – Gateway School District

I was born in Gorakhpur (UP) India and obtained a PhD in biology from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1974. I had a career in scientific research and education with many peer-reviewed publications and was on the faculty in the Department of Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, 2007-2013. I served on the board of the Monroeville Public Library 2016-2021 and joined the Gateway School Board in 2021. As a chairman of the negotiations committee, I successfully completed an early extension of the teachers’ contract in 2023. I also serve on the equity committee and have regularly provided my input in board meetings and deliberations. My letter to the editor was published in May 4, 2023 in the

Post Gazette. In addition, this month my poem ‘RAIN DANCE’ was accepted for inclusion in an anthology ‘The Gulph Tower Predicts Rain’, City of Asylum Press, Pittsburgh.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

I am a product of public education starting from K-12 to graduate school. Both of our children graduated from the San Diego Unified School District. I am a first-generation immigrant and can potentially bring diversity to the board. In combination with my background and experience with the Gateway School Board, I think that I will be a useful candidate for the AIU board. Being an admirer of the AIU's motto for providing equitable opportunities for every learner, I will use my position on the AIU board to further these goals.



MICHELLE STEPNIK – Plum Borough School District

Michelle has spent her life and career finding ways to positively impact children and their education. Currently, she is serving in her third term on the Plum Borough School Board. In January 2023, she was recently appointed to fill a vacancy on the AIU board. Michelle has represented Plum Borough School District on the state level with PSBA for seven out of the eight years she has served her community. With this came participating in the Plan Con committee process when the state was changing regulations as well as participating in as many PSBA meetings that occur, hence expanding her network of colleagues throughout Pennsylvania. She is the CEO of an entrepreneurial company focused on international development that works

with divisions of the US government and local governments throughout Latin America and the Caribbean working to identify economic development opportunities. Michelle has a BA in Sociology from Eastern Connecticut State University and in 2009, went back to school to earn a degree in Social Studies Education from the University of Pittsburgh.

Why I want to serve on the AIU Board

One of the many discussions we have in our district is how we coordinate the many services needed for our students from the AIU. I also have found, in previous years, the wealth of knowledge the AIU can provide as we navigate much of the business our district conducts with the crucial part of helping to serve our most needy students. Our districts in our IU collaborate well together in a variety of meaningful ways and it would be my goal to work with all of you to constantly see opportunities where we can continue to strengthen those relationships and services. I have spent my years serving as a board member taking pride in being a voice for our students and would be honored to continue to expand that voice for all of our districts in the AIU.

ALLEGHENY INTERMEDIATE UNIT

475 East Waterfront Drive | Homestead, PA 15120
412-394-5700 | Fx: 412-394-5706 | aiu3.net