

Rochester

Education Fellowship

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact

media@rochestereducationfellowship.org

Rochester Education Fellowship Announces Rochester Native Dr. Shanai Lee as Two-Year Fellow

The RCSD public schools graduate brings 15 years experience in Rochester schools to engage local community, transform public education for families and students



ROCHESTER, NEW YORK — (September 23, 2021) — The [Rochester Education Fellowship](#), led by a coalition of local child and family advocates, today announced Shanai Lee MBA, EdD as the recipient of its two-year fellowship to co-create and build a new community-centered vision for bold, transformational change for Rochester’s public school systems. Lee will use her 15 years of experience working in Rochester schools to address the long standing, dynamic challenges currently facing Rochester’s youth in the pursuit of a quality education — many of which were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Growing up in Rochester and being educated in the Rochester City School District, my personal experiences have shaped how I will approach this unique opportunity to secure a brighter future for Rochester’s children,” said **Dr. Shanai Lee, the Rochester Education Fellow**. “I am committed to my community and I know the importance of having a high-quality

education. I look forward to working with families and stakeholders to create real change in our education system that will have a lasting effect on our current students and parents as well as future generations.”

Lee has extensive experience working in urban education and local government, holding leadership positions both in the Rochester City School District as well as a local charter network. She most recently worked as Regional Senior Director of Uncommon Schools and previously held several positions within the RCSD for over 13 years including District Clerk, Assistant to the Chief Financial Officer and Director of Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprises Program.

Lee received an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Administration, Master’s Degree in Educational Policy and MBA in Finance and Public Accounting from the University of Rochester and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from Cornell University.

The Rochester Education Fellowship Selection Committee, co-chaired by Jerome Underwood, President and CEO of Action for a Better Community (ABC) and Holli Budd, Executive Director of the Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation (Farash Foundation), led the extensive search and selection process for the Fellow beginning in January, and will provide support for the duration of the two-year Fellowship.

Additional Selection Committee members included:

- Angelica Perez-Delgado, The IBERO American Action League
- LaShunda Leslie-Smith, Connected Communities
- Dirk Hightower, The Children’s Institute
- Mellanye Nesmith, ABC’s Policy Council and local parent
- Rick DeJesus-Rueff, Community member
- Reenah Golden, Avenue Blackbox Theatre
- Dr. Rita Gaither, Retired Rochester educator, Founder Pearl Resources, Inc
- Sekou Biddle, UNCF
- David Harris, formerly the City Fund

About The Selection Process

In [January 2021](#), the Farash Foundation, in collaboration with the Selection Committee, partnered with The Mind Trust, an education nonprofit organization, to lead the recruitment and selection process for the Rochester Education Fellowship. The goal of this process was to identify candidates with a deep understanding of the needs of the Rochester community, experience navigating existing political systems and structures, and the ability to build momentum and a coalition for a partnership with the local community. The Committee received robust feedback from the Rochester community around the key qualities and experiences to take into account during the search.

Over 75% of the candidates self-identified as people of color, and 60% of the candidate pool was local to Rochester. All the finalists had executive level leadership across public education and nonprofit sectors.

About The Fellowship and Challenges Facing Rochester

The Rochester Education Fellowship was established to find a talented leader to create a movement of bold, systemic change for Rochester students. Students in Rochester face many obstacles to successful academic and life outcomes. Currently, 44% of students under the age of 18 in Rochester are living in poverty. Student achievement is among the lowest of any urban district in the country, with only 8% of students in grades 3-8 mastering math and reading on grade level, compared to the state average of 40% in both subjects.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the challenges of educating Rochester's most vulnerable families, with the digital divide heightening inequities. While many are working to support students in the city, the Rochester Education Fellowship Selection Committee believes transformative leadership is needed now to create a movement of bold, systemic change for Rochester students.

Through her Fellowship, Dr. Lee will have access to a wide variety of support from both local and national partners, including leadership development, personalized executive coaching and a commitment of support and collaboration from anchor Rochester organizations.

Community Leaders and Selection Committee Members Applaud Selection

"After a rigorous community-focused search, we're excited to announce Shanai as Rochester's Education Fellow and believe she has the ideal background to bring transformational change to our educational systems in the City of Rochester," **Jerome Underwood, President and CEO of Action for a Better Community and Selection Committee Co-Chair.** "The challenges that students and families in Rochester face are both unique and reflective of the inequities present in our nation, many of which were exacerbated by the pandemic. This is an opportune time to start this community-centered effort."

"Rochester students face many obstacles to academic success and one of those notable obstacles is poverty, with 44 percent of students under 18 years old living in poverty," **said LaShunda Leslie-Smith, Executive Director, Connected Communities.** "Connected Communities is dedicated to breaking this cycle of poverty and education is one avenue to that. The Fellowship and Shanai will bring us one step closer to uniting our community and ending this vicious cycle in Rochester."

"The Farash Foundation is committed to the long-term health and wellbeing of Rochester's children and catalyzing a city-wide effort to transform Rochester's education system through this two-year fellowship," **said Holli Budd, Executive Director of the Farash Foundation and Selection Committee Co-Chair.** "We're extremely happy to continue partnering with local leaders and organizations in support of Shanai as she begins the Rochester Education Fellowship."

"The current challenges facing Black, brown, and economically marginalized families and students are deeply embedded in the design of the systems and structures of our nation and city," **said Angelica Perez-Delgado, President and CEO of Ibero-American Action League.**

“Shanai Lee is the perfect selection to help address how to make the current education system better for our communities but also transform the system for the future.”

“At The Children’s Institute we prioritize support for the whole child and there are many factors that uniquely impact children in Rochester,” said **A. Dirk Hightower, Ph.D., Senior Associate, Children’s Institute**. “This Fellowship creates a new vision for how we can transform a new education ecosystem to ensure Rochester children have access to high-quality education for generations to come. We are extremely happy to have chosen Shanai to lead this effort as the Rochester Education Fellow.”

“I was proud to serve on the Rochester Education Fellowship Selection Committee and select Shanai Lee as the fellow to lead the way to building a new collective vision for education in Rochester,” said **Reenah Golden, Community Activist and Founder, Avenue Blackbox Theatre**. “As someone who was born and raised in Rochester, I know the struggles that children face here. This Fellowship has the potential to realize meaningful change in Rochester’s public school system that transforms lives and the way we think of education in our community.”

“Our children have faced deep and interconnected challenges from poverty and segregation to high leadership turnover, and the Fellowship provides an innovative vision to address these challenges,” said **Rick DeJesus-Rueff, Ed.D., Academic Director, First Generation Scholars Program at St. John Fisher College and longtime Rochester resident**. “I believe transformative leadership is needed now to catalyze bold, systemic change for Rochester students and Shanai brings the expertise and commitment to the long-lasting work needed to deliver high-quality education to Rochester students,”

“The Rochester Education Fellowship is a very thoughtfully designed solution to a complex challenge,” said **Dr. Rita Gaither, Retired Rochester educator, Founder Pearl Resources, Inc.** “Over the next two years, Shanai will help ensure our children and their education are at the center of transformative change in our community.”

“I was pleased by the amount of listening and feedback that went into the choice of Shanai as the Rochester Education Fellow. As a parent, I’m looking forward to the positive transformation that can come out of this effort for our children and families in Rochester,” said **Mellanye Nesmith, Former ABC Policy Council and local parent**.

“The Rochester Education Fellowship is creating transformational change that is Rochester from the ground up and improving outcomes for our Black, Brown and economically marginalized families and students,” said **Sekou Biddle, Vice President, Advocacy and Programs, UNCF**. “The Fellowship and Shanai will help address the systems and structures designed to produce inequitable outcomes for people of color and change the life trajectory for so many students.”

“As a member of the Selection Committee, I’m so excited Shanai is the recipient of the Rochester Education Fellowship,” said **David Harris, Former Partner, the City Fund**. “She has the ideal background needed to create long-lasting change in Rochester education through this fellowship.”

###

