

KIPP:NEW JERSEY

Be the  **Change**

**KIPP SPARK ACADEMY  
FOUNDER BIOS**



# Diane Adams-White

Diane Adams-White is the Chief College & Career Officer for KIPP TEAM & Family. She began her career in education in 2005 at Newark Public Schools before joining KIPP SPARK Academy as a founding kindergarten teacher. Diane spent seven years helping build the early foundation of SPARK before transitioning to KIPP Through College (now KIPP Forward). Over the years, she has had the unique privilege of supporting students across their entire KIPP journey—from kindergarten classrooms to college campuses and into their careers—and remains deeply committed to ensuring every KIPP student has the support and opportunity to pursue a thriving future.



# Ms. Barrino

Ms. Barrino was born and raised in Paterson, N.J. She graduated from Caldwell College now named Caldwell University. She began her journey with KIPP SPARK Academy in 2010 as a paraprofessional, initially supporting one exceptional scholar but quickly expanding her impact to serve many. During her time, she held every culture role prior to becoming the Dean of Students, where she partnered with Tamika Killins to build and strengthen culture systems that remain in practice today. Her leadership and dedication were recognized in 2015 when she was named a Kid Focus finalist and earned the SPARK MVP award. Ms. Barrino's influence extends far beyond SPARK. Many of the teammates she has coached have gone on to become teachers and members of school leadership teams, a testament to her mentorship and commitment to developing others.



# Jackie Beer (Eustis)

Jackie was a part of the founding 1st grade class at KIPP SPARK Academy and went on to support the school as Director of School Operations as they moved to their downtown location in Teachers Village. Prior to joining the KIPP NJ team, she was a teacher in the Teach for America program in the Bronx. After SPARK, she earned her MBA and went on to pursue a career in healthcare operations at various private equity-backed companies. She is forever grateful for all that she learned at SPARK and the high bar it set for how organizations should run. She lives in New York City with her husband and three boys.



## KeLee Brown

KeLee Brown is a dedicated educational leader with 23 years of experience in early childhood and elementary education. She currently serves as the Director of the Division of Early Childhood Education, where she oversees preschool programming across multiple provider sites and leads initiatives focused on curriculum, instruction, equity, and organizational growth. She is passionate about developing future leaders, strengthening instructional practices, and creating high-quality learning experiences for children and families. KeLee holds advanced degrees in educational leadership and is currently pursuing her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy at Seton Hall University.



# Ms. Burwell

Ms. Burwell is a seasoned operations leader with over 13 years of experience at KIPP New Jersey. She began her career in 2013 as an Office Manager at KIPP SPARK Academy and has grown alongside the organization ever since. Ms. Burwell became a School Operations Manager in 2017 and was promoted to Associate Director of Operations in 2023. In 2025, she stepped into the role of Director of School Operations at KIPP Life Academy. Throughout her tenure, Ms. Burwell has been committed to building strong systems, supporting staff, and ensuring schools operate safely, joyfully, and efficiently for students and families. She is known for her ability to build trusting relationships and lead operational excellence that allows schools to focus on what matters most, student success.



# Jessica Boston Davis

## Part 1

Dr. Jessica Boston Davis is an educator committed to equity with a variety of experiences in traditional public school districts, charter schools, philanthropy, higher education, and international education. Jessica is currently the Assistant Superintendent of Academics in the Somerville Public Schools in Somerville, Massachusetts. Prior to that, Jessica was the inaugural Director for Equity and Excellence at the Somerville Public Schools. She was also adjunct faculty at Lesley University. Jessica is a 2019 graduate of the Doctor of Education Leadership (EdLD) program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. While at Harvard, Jessica served as the president of the Black Student Union. She was awarded with the Harvard University Certificate of Distinction in Teaching for her work as a teaching fellow at Harvard College. She was also awarded with the Torch Bearer Award for Excellence in Leadership within the Black community at Harvard.



# Jessica Boston Davis

## Part 2

Prior to studying at Harvard, Jessica was the founding principal of Life Academy Upper, a turn-around school in Newark, New Jersey. While Jessica served as principal, Life Academy was recognized as a “proof-point for an effective restart” and Life Academy was profiled by the Wall Street Journal for the academic growth made by students. Prior to becoming a principal, Jessica taught in Newark, New Jersey and Brooklyn, New York. Internationally, Jessica has worked in schools in Johannesburg, South Africa and Nairobi, Kenya. She earned an Ed.M. in Education Policy and Management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Jessica also earned a M.S. in Teaching at Hunter College. Jessica is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Spelman College. She is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. In her free time, Jessica loves to spend time with her husband Justin, and their three children, Daniel, Darius, and Adela.



## Samantha Davis (Crockett)

Samantha Davis (Crockett), Braven's Executive Director of New Jersey, has dedicated nearly two decades to education, primarily serving students in Newark. Her career began in 2007 with Teach for America in the Bronx, followed by a role as a founding teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy in Newark. In 2014, she founded KIPP Life Academy as principal and later contributed to KIPP Forward, developing career initiatives for high school and college alumni. Elected to the Orange, NJ, School Board in 2020 and now in her second term, Samantha is active on multiple committees and serves on the inaugural board of the Rutgers BOLD Women's Leadership Network. Since joining Braven in 2023, she has tripled the number of students served at Rutgers University-Newark to over 500 annually and improved post-college outcomes for Fellows. She is also focused on expanding Braven's reach across New Jersey and will be launching Braven at Kean University & NJCU this year.



# Ashford Duffy

Ashford Duffy was a founding Kindergarten co-teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy in 2009. From there, she followed SPARK class of 2022 as second grade interventionist and music teacher, then third grade teacher. After spending a few years as 3rd grade level chair, she transitioned to Assistant Principal of Instruction at SPARK, then filled the same role at Rocky Mountain Prep Elementary in Denver, Colorado. In 2019, she moved into the education non-profit and educator professional development space, working for MindSpark Learning then Engaging Schools. She currently works as Content Strategist at Ed2Market, a marketing agency specializing in K-12 education vendor marketing. Today, she's still in Denver with her husband Josh, five-year old Willa, and is awaiting the arrival of a baby girl in June 2026.



# Lisa Rivera Galarza

Lisa Rivera Galarza is an experienced educator with over 20 years in elementary education, specializing in literacy and math intervention, ESL instruction, and instructional leadership. Lisa is passionate about creating equitable, student-centered learning environments and empowering multilingual learners to thrive. Her work focuses on data-driven instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and supporting both students and educators in reaching their full potential.



# Melodie Hodge

Melodie Hodge is an educator and instructional leader who spent nearly a decade at KIPP SPARK Academy as both a teacher and Assistant Principal. Being part of SPARK's founding community remains one of the most meaningful experiences of her career. Today, Melodie continues her work in education as a special education teacher in Plainfield, New Jersey, where she is committed to ensuring all students feel seen, supported, and capable of success



## Matt Iversen

Matt was born and raised in Montclair, New Jersey. He graduated from Connecticut College with a double major in Government and Spanish. After college he worked on Al Gore's presidential campaign and then in Washington DC. He completed a yearlong Coro policy fellowship in New York City. In 2003 he joined Teach For America. He was placed at PS 170 in the Bronx, and taught elementary school for six years. During his time teaching in the Bronx he completed a Masters in Education at Pace University. Then in 2009 he came back to New Jersey to help found the first NJ KIPP elementary school KIPP SPARK Academy. He taught for six years at SPARK before making a career change to banking in 2015. Matt is now a Financial Advisor with a Wealth Management practice at Wells Fargo Advisors. He currently lives in New Jersey with his wife and two children.



## Carrie Jolley

Carrie Jolley began her career in education with Teach For America in Newark, New Jersey as a 1st grade teacher. After working for Teach For America in New York City, she returned to Newark in 2009 to help found KIPP New Jersey's KIPP SPARK Academy as a Kindergarten teacher. Carrie remained at SPARK for seven years, serving as an interventionist, Dean of Instruction, Assistant Principal and School Leader. After moving to Philadelphia in 2016, Carrie joined KIPP Philadelphia Public Schools, serving as the Head of Schools and Managing Director of Academics for five years. In her current role, Carrie serves as the Chief Schools Officer for KIPP Columbus in Columbus, Ohio. Carrie holds a Masters in Education, Professional Development from Seton Hall University and graduated Magna Cum Laude with BAs in Political Science and Gender Studies from the University of Southern California.



# Tamika Killins

Tamika Killins is a dedicated educator and school leader with over 25 years of experience. After 17 years in the classroom, she transitioned into leadership, serving as a Dean, Assistant Principal, and now Principal of KIPP SPARK Academy for the past six years. In addition to leading the school, she is the cheer coach for the SPARKlers cheer team and a mentor within KIPP NJ. She also supports an Assistant Principal of culture as a Director of Student Experience by partnering with her to strengthen student culture within her elementary school. Beyond her professional work, Tamika is a proud mother of two. A 14-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son who attends SPARK Academy. Tamika is also a dedicated cheer, Girl Scout, Cub Scout, and basketball mom. Tamika's work is rooted in service, leadership, and a deep commitment to helping students, families, and educators thrive.



# Michaelle Larracuenta

Michaelle Larracuenta is an educational leader and life strategist committed to building spaces where individuals and communities can thrive with purpose and alignment. As the Principal of Equitas Academy #4 in Los Angeles, she brings a student-centered, equity-driven approach grounded in strong culture systems, instructional excellence, and authentic community partnership. With a background in teaching, coaching, and school leadership, Michaelle is known for her ability to translate vision into actionable systems that drive both academic outcomes and deep human connection.

Her career has been profoundly shaped by her time within the KIPP New Jersey community—a foundation that made her leadership journey possible. There, she had the honor of founding both second and fourth grade classrooms, experiences that remain among the most meaningful of her life. She is deeply grateful to Joanna Belcher, Matt Iverson, and the many extraordinary teachers and leaders she worked alongside while helping to build one of the most impactful school communities she has ever been part of.



## Jessica Gersh Leff

Jessica Leff began her career in education as a 2008 Teach For America corps member, where she developed a deep commitment to expanding opportunity for students. She went on to teach kindergarten at KIPP Spark Academy and later joined the KIPP Through College team, supporting students on their path to and through higher education. Jess subsequently worked in development at the Center for Early Education in Los Angeles, further deepening her engagement in educational communities. She remains actively involved with a number of organizations, including the Hammer Museum, LACMA, Gabriella Chart Schools, Our Big Kitchen Los Angeles, and Step Up Tutoring. Jess lives in Los Angeles with her family, including her six-year-old daughter and three-year-old son.



# Lindsey Morgan Lorehn

Lindsey Lorehn (aka “Ms. Morgan”) was a founding SPARKster from 2012–2013, where she learned the power of high expectations, strong teams, and—most importantly—deep, trusting relationships with students and families. After KIPP SPARK Academy, she went on to found KIPP Colorado’s first elementary school, bringing beloved SPARK traditions like Family Meeting, family events, and “Picture Me Tomorrow” to life in building a joyful PK4–4th grade community in Denver. Across her work as a Principal Supervisor, Leadership Coach, and School Design Partner, Lindsey has continued to seek knowledge, pursue justice, and reach for excellence in service of students and educators. Some of her most cherished professional moments include watching the SPARK Class of 2023 graduate high school and visiting former SPARKsters now thriving in college—experiences that reflect the lasting impact of a community she is proud to have helped build.



# Farida Mallah

Farida Mallah holds a Bachelor's degree in History and Middle Eastern Studies with a minor in Political Science from Rutgers University, and a Master's degree in Teaching Students with Disabilities from Relay Graduate School of Education. Farida began her career in education at KIPP SPARK Academy as a paraprofessional and a learning specialist. She then taught K-4 Elementary Special Education and intervention at both SPARK and LIFE Academy. Additionally, Farida has served as an instructional coach, culture coordinator, and program coordinator. Farida is currently taking some time away from teaching to take care of her four kids.



# Jenna Pollack Marcus

Jenna Pollack Marcus is a proud founding kindergarten co-teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy. During her 11 years at SPARK, Jenna served as Kindergarten Grade Level Chair, founding 4th Grade Level Chair, Assistant Principal, and School Leader. For the past six years, she has served as Head of Schools for Newark's elementary schools, including SPARK Academy (although she promises she doesn't play favorites!)

She has a 1st grade and 3rd grade scholar of her own now.



# Wendy McAdams-Flores

I'm Wendy McAdams-Flores, formerly Ms. Gooch, I'm driven by a purpose that originated in Newark, NJ in 2009, where my heart belonged to the Class of 2022. After moving to Hope Mills, NC in 2011, I continued to nurture my bond with the class of 2022, fostering lasting relationships with students and families.

During my years with the Cumberland County Schools Systems here in NC, I remained committed to supporting students until my retirement in September 2021. Following the loss of my brother, Newark Detective Brian McAdams, who tragically succumbed to COVID in 2021, I transformed my grief into a mission-driven endeavor, "Brian's Love" LLC, dedicated to amplifying kindness and support for title one schools and children in need locally. With profound appreciation for KIPP's impactful work in nurturing families, I'm dedicated to building on this foundation to create positive change.



# Melissa McNamara (Glynn)

Melissa McNamara is a founding member of the KIPP SPARK Academy staff, teaching third grade from 2013 - 2015 under Joanna Belcher and Carrie Jolley. She started her journey with KIPP NJ after two years teaching in Houston, TX as part of the 2011 Teach for America Corps Program. Melissa graduated with her MA in International Education from George Washington University and worked abroad with UNESCO in Bangkok, Thailand before joining the KIPP NYC recruitment team in 2017. She worked with KIPP NYC for over seven years ending her tenure in July 2024 as Senior Director of Talent, Recruitment and Retention. Melissa currently works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a Senior HR Project Manager supporting critical projects across all HR functions. She currently lives in Manhattan and in her free time enjoys spending time with her one year old son, Mickey.



# Alayna Miller

Alayna Miller is an Achievement Director of Elementary Math at KIPP New Jersey, supporting K-4 instruction across several schools within the network. She leads the development of school leaders and teachers to deliver rigorous, conceptually driven math instruction that centers student thinking, discourse, and deep understanding. Through her leadership, schools have strengthened data-driven practices, improved instructional coherence, and built systems that ensure all students have access to high-quality math experiences. Prior to this role, Alayna served as an Assistant Principal and classroom teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy, where she developed a deep love for the community and built strong, lasting relationships with students and families while maintaining high expectations for all learners. Her work is grounded in the belief that all students can achieve at high levels when instruction is purposeful, responsive, and rooted in a deep understanding of content. She is especially passionate about developing educators and creating classrooms where students see themselves as confident, capable mathematicians.



# Toni O'Sullivan

Antonia “Toni” O’Sullivan is a seasoned leadership coach, organizational leader, and proud mom of three. With more than 20 years of experience developing people and teams, she has built a reputation for empowering leaders to grow with clarity, confidence, and authenticity. Most recently, Toni served as a Head of Schools with KIPP NJ, where she coached and supervised school leaders, guided organizational strategy, and built systems to drive excellence across multiple teams. Her leadership journey has taken her from founding and scaling new schools (as a teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy and the School Leader of KIPP Seek Academy) to coaching both senior and rising leaders, always with a focus on equity, empowerment, and sustainable impact. Born and raised in Jamaica, Queens, Toni holds dual degrees in History and Human Development from SUNY Binghamton, along with a Master’s in Leadership and Management from Seton Hall University. She brings curiosity, warmth, and a deep commitment to helping leaders unlock their potential—whether they are just stepping into leadership or leading at scale.



# Emilie Raczek (Ronallo)

Emilie is currently in her 21st year in education, with 17 of those years as a teacher and literacy leader at KIPP. As Senior Director of Literacy for the KIPP Foundation, Emilie led the early literacy priority, supporting regions with reimagining their K-2 foundational skills systems. Originally from Pittsburgh, Emilie is a proud first-gen college grad living in Asheville, NC with her husband Garrett and two kids. She loves reading, learning (especially languages), desserts, and the power of community.



# Lakeesha Ramdhanie

Lakeesha Ramdhanie began her career with KIPP over 17 years ago as a founding Kindergarten teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy in Newark, NJ. She has since served in a range of leadership roles across KIPP Atlanta Schools, including founding Assistant Principal, Principal, Chief Schools Officer, and now Chief of Staff. In her current role, she leads cross-functional strategy, board governance, and organizational initiatives that drive student outcomes and operational excellence. Lakeesha is deeply committed to advancing educational equity and ensuring that every child has access to a high-quality, joyful learning experience. She holds a BA in Psychology from Spelman College and a Master's in Organizational Leadership from Columbia University.



# Sha'kea L. Robinson-Merilan

Sha'kea L. Robinson-Merilan has proudly served at KIPP SPARK Academy for the past 16 years. She began her journey as a classroom teacher, where she developed a deep commitment to instructional excellence and building strong, lasting relationships with scholars and families. While continuing to teach, she also served as a Teacher in Residence Coach and New Teacher Network Coordinator, supporting and developing educators. Sha'kea currently serves as an Assistant Principal at SPARK Academy, where she continues her dedication to academic achievement and teacher development. One of the greatest blessings and honors of her career was teaching SPARK's founding Class of 2022 when they were first graders. Watching their journey come full circle and celebrating their accomplishments has been incredibly meaningful. Sha'kea feels truly blessed to be part of a movement that is deeply committed to seeing students to and through college. It has been both a privilege and an honor for her to contribute to this work and to witness firsthand the lasting impact it has on scholars and their futures.



# Shameka (Edmond) Smith

Shameka (Edmond) Smith is a dedicated educator, wife, and proud mother of two, whose work is rooted in a deep commitment to nurturing the whole child. She began her journey as a founding 3rd and 4th grade teacher at KIPP SPARK Academy, where she helped create a joyful, structured, and affirming experience for students and families.

Throughout her career, Shameka has focused on building learning environments where students feel seen, supported, and challenged, with a belief that education should develop not only strong academics, but also confidence, curiosity, and a sense of identity. She currently serves as a Principal in Residence and is preparing to open her own school, where she will continue this work in service of students and their communities.



# Rubén Restrepo Suárez

Ruben Restrepo began his teaching career at SPARK Academy in 2009, a community that inspired him and contributed greatly to his growth as an educator. He currently lives and works in Madrid, Spain, where he teaches at International College Spain in the IB Primary Years Program and serves as a Social Impact Lead. He is also pursuing a Master's degree in International Education through King's College London. He remains very grateful to SPARK Academy for the foundation and inspiration it provided at the beginning of his journey in education.



# Melissa Wellikoff

Melissa Wellikoff founded the Visual Arts program and Specials Department at KIPP SPARK Academy, leading both from 2010 to 2016. A graduate of Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Melissa brought a deep passion for creative problem-solving and design thinking to the scholars and staff of KIPP: New Jersey. She credits SPARK Academy and the KIPP School Leadership Programs with providing the skills and confidence necessary to transform ambitious ideas into action. For the past eight years, Melissa has resided in Vermont, where she leads social-emotional learning and student engagement initiatives. During this time, she and her husband, Jeffrey, welcomed their daughters, Raina and Eliana. Always eager for a new challenge, Melissa is currently planning her family's next big adventure.



# Glenn Wright

Glenn Wright is an educator and school leader currently serving as Assistant Principal at KIPP SPARK Academy in Newark, New Jersey. He has dedicated 14 years to SPARK Academy, beginning his career there as a classroom teacher before transitioning into school leadership. Passionate about literacy and math, student growth, and building strong school communities, Glenn works closely with teachers, scholars, and families to create an environment where every child can succeed.