

IEA Awesome Podcast

Episode 9 – IEA President Kathi Griffin

- 00:00 *Kelsey:* Welcome to the Awesome IEA Podcast brought to you by the Illinois Education Association.
- 00:05 *Diana:* The podcast for curious, well-informed Association members.
- 00:08 *Kelsey:* I am one of your hosts, Kelsey Harms, a Computer Specialist from the IEA Program Development Department.
- 00:13 *Diana:* And, I'm Diana Zaleksi, one of your Instructional and Professional Development Directors from IEA Teaching and Learning.
- 00:18 *Kelsey:* The goal of this podcast is to educate our members about important new educational policy initiatives in a brief and, hopefully, entertaining format.
- 00:26 *Diana:* Today, we're going to with IEA President Kathi Griffin. Kathi, thanks so much for being with us today.
- 00:31 *Kathi:* Well, thanks so much for having me. I delighted to be here.
- 00:34 *Diana:* Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became president of the Illinois Education Association.
- 00:39 *Kathi:* Oh my goodness, well, I grew up in a union family and by that I mean my Grandpa Calihan immigrated from Ireland to America and he ended up having sponsors in Chicago and he ended up being a glazer. And, unlike my fifth graders who asked what time he would have to get up to care of the donuts, a glazer actually installs glass. Any kind of glass anywhere.
- 01:00 So, grandpa was part of the Glazers Union Local 27 in Chicago. My dad then also was part of the Glazers Union and as my dad got up in his career he become a local business agent for his union.
- 01:11 And, then he was also on the Chicago Building Trades. As a matter of fact, when my dad passed, Richard Daley at the time, the second one, we have, all of us kids, I'm the middle child of five, we have a resolution from the city council of Chicago recognizing my dad's work in labor for the city of Chicago. It was kind of cool.
- 01:28 And, then I became a member. Actually I started teaching in 1981 and I immediately joined the union because I just figured that's just what you do, and I became a building rep the first year because that's what you do.
- 01:40 When I was probably about in my tenth year, there was an ad in our SEA newsletter, the Schaumburg Education Association, and it said if you're interested, let me know. And I was one of those people that actually responded to the little newspaper and said I'd like to help if I can and I became the curriculum liaison on our executive team.

- 01:58 And, so from then on I just continued to have different roles. I was voted in as secretary. I did the treasurer and membership duties because of a different situation that was going on. And, then ran for president, local president, of Schaumburg EA. I won.
- 02:12 From then I was on, I was a vice chair in IEA, the chair got a job as an administrator so I then became region chair. Then I ran for NEA Director. Then I ran for Vice President for IEA and President for IEA.
- 02:25 Never at all when I was going to school did I ever think I was going to have leadership in a union. I knew I would always be part of a union because that's just what you did. As a matter of fact, it wasn't until I went to junior that I realized people weren't part of a union because everything around my life was union.
- 02:42 For example, when I was born in Chicago, we moved to Elk Grove when I was three months old. And, back then, my parents didn't have a lot of money but with my dad being in the trades, the folks that bought land, they traded their labor. So, my dad would pay for, for example, they would pay for the supplies to pour the concrete for the foundation. But his buddy who did that for a living would supervise to make sure it was done right.
- 03:05 And, when his buddy was building his house, my dad would go in and install all the glass. So, back in the day, that's how a lot of laborers were able to get nice homes for their families because they traded labor and were able to afford it a way that they otherwise would not have been able to. But all our friends, a lot of their family were all union. And, so I was surprised when I realized that wasn't the way it was everywhere.
- 03:28 *Diana:* Yeah, that's a really interesting story. Thanks for sharing it with us.
- 03:31 *Kelsey:* So, Kathi, we know that you obviously bleed union. Can you help us understand some more about what is the role of president of the IEA? What is your favorite part? Kind of, what keeps you motivated and inspired?
- 03:43 *Kathi:* Well, to be honest with you, I have always reflected on a career path. And, while I said being president wasn't part of my initial career path, I feel so blessed because even though there are days in the morning where I'd like to roll over and sleep longer, when I went to work I was so happy to be there.
- 03:59 The joy that I got from teaching kids was just amazing. It makes my life filled. When I continued to move on to more leadership roles, and I didn't have that connection with the students, I had that connection but only with adults.
- 04:12 I still go into schools and my daughter who is a second grade teacher and an IEA member, I go into her classroom a lot because it's easy. I'm not going there as the IEA President, I going there as, "Oh, my mom is coming to read to my kid today." So, it's really, it's really fun for me. So, I still get to see what's going in a classroom and what she's doing.

- 04:30 But, with IEA, as being IEA President, the role is a little bit different and I look at the role as I am here to support IEA members in any way I can. I reach out to presidents that might be in need. We'd problem solve. If there's something going on, we support them.
- 04:45 And, members who might just have a question. You know, we're there to answer those questions. We're there to support you in any way so that your experience is one that is positive. And anything we can do about that whether it's solving a problem in your local, whether it's providing professional development, whether it is connecting you to resources. And, we have so many of them.
- 05:04 Whether it's point out have you, let me walk you through our website, show you exactly what's out there that can really help you become a even better educator than you already are.
- 05:14 And, then of course we have the political side. And, that, I have always been involved in politics my whole life. As a matter of fact, it started with the encouragement from a teacher I had when I was in high school. And, Mr. Cherico was my political science teacher and high school at that time didn't have air conditioning.
- 05:30 But, Mr. Cherico had a wall unit which made being in his classroom even better when it was warm out. But, he got me engaged in politics. We were doing some work that we had to volunteer when we were in high school. I was a poll watcher even though I couldn't vote yet.
- 05:45 The first campaign I worked on was, which believe it, I know I'm going to date myself here but it was when Ronald Reagan was against Jimmy Carter. I didn't like either candidate and worked for the independent, John Anderson.
- 05:56 And, I have worked on every single campaign since then because I think that it is our responsibility to our kids to make sure that the right people are in office. Because they all went to school, so they all think they know what they should do. But, they only see it through the lens of a student, instead of the lens of a teacher.
- 6:14 Teachers see it through the lens of both being a student and a teacher, or a support personnel or the many different ESPs that we have, our cooks, our bus drivers, all of those, see things through a different lens because you've got the student and the professional lens to look it through.
- 06:29 But, our, our elected officials don't. I want to be engaged in every race I can possible be engaged in so that we get the right people in positions of government that are making decisions hopefully in the best interest of our children and not in the best interest of a special interest group that doesn't have children at their core.
- 06:48 And, I just want people to know if you think you're having a bad with your kids, think about how fun it is to have that conversation with members of the General Assembly. The kids listen a whole lot better.
- 06:59 *Kelsey*: That is a really great political philosophy to have. I want to loop back a little bit. Can you tell us what you taught when you were teaching?

- 07:05 *Kathi:* Yeah, I started, when I graduated I had my degree in both elementary education and my minor was in music. I originally went to school as a music major. Voice was my focus. But, then I switched because that wasn't a good fit for me.
- 07:18 And I also had my certificate in early childhood so I thought I was going to work with the little kids because I just loved the little kids. When I was interviewed I thought it was going to be for a first grade position and at the end of the interview they offered me a fifth grade position. Well, teaching jobs when I was getting out of college were a little tight and so of course I'm going to say yes.
- 07:38 *Kelsey:* Yes, anything, please, yes (laughter).
- 07:40 Um, yes, so I taught fifth grade for a number of years. I taught five six multi age. I taught sixth grade. And then I went into the library media center and in Schaumburg at the time I had that position, the library media center, what we did was we provided plan time for all of our teachers in the classroom.
- 07:57 So, I was able to meet with every class for an hour a week. And, that was, we had Pre K through sixth grade and every lesson that I did I either planned with the grade levels or the different teachers if they were doing different things. Often time enhancing the curriculum to areas that they weren't able to do in the classroom.
- 08:16 I succinctly remember the fifth grade who had to teach Canada and there were just no time in the year for them to teach Canada when they were trying to teach U.S. History. I used to teach Canada.
- 08:25 Or, we would do research and I would have fun with it because you know the research can be so boring. So what we did was we created a theme park according to different genre of music. And they had to do the research on the time, the clothes, you know, everything that was going on.
- 08:42 And then there were even back then were great computer programs that you could use to enhance a lot of higher level thinking. I remember using Ancient Civilizations with kids and there was one that we had that you landed another planet that we used with fifth graders all about colonization and they got a totally different viewpoint because they were the one sponsoring people to colonize like the British were to America.
- 09:06 And then the colonists wanted all this freedom and they were like wait a second. It was really nice for them to see a different perspective but those engaging higher level activities we were able to do and it was, it was great. But, I had the opportunity to work with the preschoolers mostly just with reading to them and helping them find good books to working with sixth graders and doing a lot of different things.
- 09:26 And every single grade level I worked with I adored because they're all different, they all have their strengths, and you just embrace the amazing personalities that are there and how you can work with all the kids. It was wonderful.
- 09:38 *Kelsey:* That sounds super fun.

- 09:39 *Diana:* So, can you tell us a little bit about the IEA Board of Directors? Who is on the board, how often do they meet, and what kind of work they do?
- 09:46 *Kathi:* Sure, the IEA Board of Directors is made up of 67 regions as well as sectional reps that represent ESPs, Higher Education, and ethnic minority members. The 67 regions are located throughout the state of Illinois and its based primarily on how many people are in the area of the state.
- 10:07 They are elected to represent the people in their region and the regions have at least two to seven other regions in their regional office. The board reflects on not only things that are going on, keep them updated because things are changing so much, especially now.
- 10:26 Preparing for the future is what we were working on with our strategic goals. In addition to that, we highlight some of the cool things that are happening around the state to celebrate the great work that is out there. We also make sure that they are aware of the different conferences and the different opportunities for people to take advantage, especially with the professional development as well as our trauma-informed training.
- 10:48 We also have the opportunity for the board members to come up with new ideas, bringing up what's going on in their area that might be a concern. And, a lot of the time is also spent on legislative updates so everybody knows what's going on with our General Assembly members and what they're moving forward because if they're going to do something that's not good for kids, not good for our members, we want to make sure everybody understands as best they can so when they go back to their members, they have a good understanding of why we're advocating for them, to advocate for their members and their kids.
- 11:19 *Diana:* Can you tell us a little bit more about how the board members are elected? Are they elected to their positions? How do they get those roles?
- 11:26 *Kathi:* They put in a nomination form in for their region. And all of the members in the region have the opportunity to vote. Whoever gets the most votes is on the board.
- 11:35 *Diana:* Great. So, they don't have to be a local president or region chair?
- 11:38 *Kathi:* Oh, no. It can be any member at all that is interested. We also have elections for vice chair of the region and that position is very important. As I indicated earlier, I was vice chair when my region chair got a different position and so to have somebody right there to fill that responsibility is really needed because we have 135,000 members.
- 11:59 We have to somehow have some system in place so that they all know what's going on and they don't have to rely secondhanded on what somebody else heard and instead are able to get the information as well as to access the resources that are available through IEA.
- 12:12 *Diana:* Great. That's very helpful
- 12:13 *Kelsey:* And, can you, can you tell us how long the term is for a board member?

12:17 *Kathi:* Sure.

12:18 *Kelsey:* I know it turns over quite frequently. Can you give us...

12:20 *Kathi:* It does. Approximately a third of the board will be replaced each year. This year, we have a very small class coming in but sometimes people in the middle of their terms, either they retire or something happens in their life personally that they need to attend to and they have to step down and the vice chair comes up. We don't always have that third, third, third ideal.

12:39 You can serve two terms and each term is three years. So, the max you can have is six years in a row. Sometimes people take some time off and they run again. If they get elected, they can serve again. You just can't have, serve six years and then right away serve six years again.

12:55 *Kelsey:* That a really large board.

12:57 *Kathi:* It is.

12:57 *Kelsey:* Do you have any other supports in place if there were to be a decision that needs to be made between board meetings? How does, how does that work?

13:06 *Kathi:* Well, it's, I'm glad that you asked because a very important group is our Executive Committee. The Executive Committee is made up of 10 people that were elected by the board because they are board members themselves. And, that election takes place in May at our May Board meeting. We get our systems in place for the upcoming year.

13:23 So, those 10 people along with the three officers, which is Tom Tully as our secretary-treasurer, Al Llorens our vice president and me. All the 13 of us meet and in between meetings if something has to happen or a quick decision needs to be made. It's up to the Executive Committee to make that. We also have a staff support of our Executive Director, Audrey Soglin, who is also on that group and meets with us.

13:48 Usually it's conversations, a lot of it is what we're going to be talking about at the board meeting because we want to make sure we are being relevant at our board meetings. And, if there's something that they find out because our executive committee, they're all over the state, if there is something that they here is going on or a concern that they hear, we then have the opportunity to think about that and perhaps address it at the board meeting.

14:09 The Executive Committee also approves all of our regions' budgets. So, each region has a certain amount, it's by formula according to our bylaws, they have a certain amount of money that they are able to use in their to provide support to the members in their region because, quite honestly, with 135,000 members across the entire state, it would be next to impossible to try to figure out what is going to work best for someone in Rockford as well as somebody in Carterville. Because the needs are so different in different areas.

- 14:40 So the regions are responsible for putting together office trainings, for funding their members to go to different conferences, our representatives assemblies and the Executive Committee will be looking at each of those budgets to make sure that they are indeed being used in the best interest of our members.
- 14:54 *Kelsey*: Fantastic
- 14:55 *Diana*: Finally, can you help us understand IPACE Executive Committee? How does that fit into the big picture?
- 15:01 *Kathi*: Well, the IPACE Executive Committee is a really important arm of the IEA. IPACE, which is the Illinois Political Action Committee for Educators, the members on that committee are elected also by the board of directors. However, the rules that we have right are that you cannot have more than three people per congressional district. And, the officers don't count.
- 15:26 We try to get people from different congressional districts because that makes sure that you have representation across the state of Illinois. Sometimes, in, in highly dense areas of the state, you might have more than one person who lives in that congressional district that wants to run.
- 15:42 So, what we do first of all when we have those elections is, once again in May, from the board of directors, we elect 14 people to serve on the committee. They serve for three years. We have elections every year because of the staggered terms. And, these are much more staggered that we have for the IEA Board of Directors.
- 16:02 So, we try to make sure that we have people from as many congressional districts as possible. Sometimes, when you might have two openings, and the only people interested in running happen to come from a congressional district that already has someone sitting on it, if you only have two openings and you only have two members, we can then have a mulit., another person from a certain congressional district.
- 16:25 This often happens in our regions that our north because there are, it's such a more densely populated area than the south that we sometimes have multiple people in the same congressional district. But, we try to make sure and encourage everybody to run that's interested from all over the state.
- 16:43 And, what the IPACE Executive Committee does is, we are the ones that interview and recommend to the board of directors who we would like to support and recommend in the election. For example, this year we have brought to the board J.B. Pritzker for governor.
- 16:58 Well, the Executive Committee of IPACE can't say that is who we are going to support until we have approval from the board of directors. So, there's always that second step to make sure that you don't have a small group of people going rouge on you. We need to make sure we have the membership supporting that and as a matter of fact, when we brought forth J.B.'s name, it was unanimous approval by the board of directors which was, was wonderful to know.

- 17:22 The other thing we do is we are technically in charge our Grassroots Political Activists program, the GPA. So, we are working on a plan to make sure that we have a GPA in every single one of our regions so that they can not only be trained but we'll also have that political person there who takes the responsibility of being politically engaged in not only our general elections but most importantly to many of members are school board elections and that's coming up right around the corner.
- 17:50 As a matter of fact, the November election is the General Election and petitions for the school boards start the exact next month in December. So, we have to make sure we're training our GPAs on that as well and we have great support from the government relations staff. Our lobbyists who train our GPAs and then they are able to take that training and push it forward to their areas.
- 18:11 But, you know, there's a lot, there's a hot issue going on when we, a few years back with the whole pension issue, a lot of what we were going to do moving forward was discussed at the IPACE level and then it was brought to the board to figure out what would be the best step forward for all of our members.
- 18:29 So, they are a very important committee and I would encourage anyone who is on the board of directors to run for it because it's an enlightening experience and it allows you to look at issues as well as candidates in a way that you may not otherwise have the opportunity to do so.
- 18:45 There are many ways that members who are not on the board can get engaged in making differences to IEA. We have what we call ad hoc committees. And, let me just tell you what they are. They are Bylaws and Resolutions. We have the CAPE Committee, which is the Committee to Advance Public Education. We have an Early Career Teachers Committee that we're really focusing on our members who have five years or less of experience. It doesn't mean you have to be in your twenties, it just means your experience is five years or less.
- 19:18 We do have an Elections Committee. We have a Human and Civil Rights Committee. We have a Legislative Committee. We have a Leadership Training Institute which helps plan our conferences. We have a Presidents Support Team. We have a Secretary-Treasurer Support Team. A Special Education Committee. We also have a Strategic Financial Planning Committee as well as a Teacher Leader and National Board Outreach Committee.
- 19:48 So, these are, these committees are designed to encourage our rank and file members to be part of a committee that can offer suggestions and ideas that we can then implement within IEA that will be better supports to our members as well as allow us to be better at our craft.
- 20:07 We also have opportunities for people to run to be on a council. We have an ESP Council. We have a Higher Ed Council, and we have a Retired Council. And any ESP member, higher ed member, or retired member can run to be part of these councils

which then shape the focus of their work on what's best for the needs of those particular categories of members.

- 20:30 They put together the ONE conference that's held each fall. Right now, it's usually being held in Oak Brook and they plan that conference based on the needs of they see of their members so they can offer them professional development and other sessions that will allow them to have the opportunity to do their job even better than they already are.
- 20:49 *Diana:* Very important information. Thanks for sharing.
- 20:51 *Kelsey:* Yeah, I'm so excited to hear so many different opportunities for members to get engaged and really plugged in and connected with our organization. So, Kathi, is there anything else you'd like to share with our members?
- 21:01 *Kathi:* I'm hoping that everybody found a little of information in our conversation today that encourages them to be engaged and be involved because I think what's so important about the union and the IEA is that we are advocates, yes for our members, but most importantly, our students.
- 21:16 And, I think if we want to make sure public education remains, we have to be advocates for that because, quite honestly, there are so many outside sources that are trying to change what public education looks like. We need to make sure that we advocate for what we think is best for our kids, because we are the practioners, we know what works, we know what doesn't work and we need to make sure that we as a union use our collective voice to make sure that we do what's right for public education.
- 21:47 *Kelsey:* Thanks so much, Kathi. If you have any questions, comments, or feedback, please check out the contact section on the podcast page of the IEA website.
- 21:54 *Diana:* Special thanks to Mark for the audio help, Amanda for the transcription, and Dan for the website. As always, thanks so much for being a member and thanks for joining us.
- 22:02 End