



Meet the Decision Makers
Key Advisors
Monday, December 13, 2021

Dr. Zakiya Smith Ellis
Chief Policy Advisor to the Governor

Zakiya Smith Ellis serves as Chief Policy Advisor to Governor Phil Murphy where she is responsible for developing and directing the Governor's policy initiatives in coordination with the Cabinet.

Previously Dr. Ellis served as New Jersey's Secretary of Higher Education, where she was responsible for policy development and coordination of higher education activities for the state. In this role, she led the development of a student-focused state plan for higher education featuring a vision for a student bill of rights, the reform of the state's funding methodology for public institutions of higher education, and the design of the state's efforts to expand college affordability through tuition-free promises to low-income students.

Prior to her work in New Jersey state government, she led the DC office of Lumina Foundation, the nation's largest foundation focused solely on higher education. At Lumina she led work to advance federal policy to increase attainment and funded projects to develop new postsecondary finance models, focusing on issues of affordability.

Dr. Ellis has also worked in the Obama administration as a Senior Advisor for Education at the White House Domestic Policy Council and as a senior adviser at the U. S. Department of Education. Earlier in her career she authored reports on the ability of low- and moderate- income students to access, afford, and complete college while on staff at the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.

Dr. Ellis holds a bachelor's degree in political science and secondary education from Vanderbilt University, a master's degree in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a doctorate in higher education management from the University of Pennsylvania, where she graduated with distinction for both written dissertation and oral defense.