

THE EQUITY LEADERS ACTION NETWORK



Ripple Effects



Background

In 2014-2015, BUILD staff members Drs. Sherri Killins Stewart and Aisha Ray designed the Equity Leaders Action Network (ELAN) fellowship to support state- and county-level early childhood leaders committed to advancing toward racial equity. They created the ELAN in response to four challenges reflected in early childhood programs, entities, and organizations: racism, fragmented early childhood systems, lack of community and beneficiary voices, and a dearth of policy leadership intentionally committed to racial equity. The ELAN supported the Fellows in identifying and addressing inequities, disproportionality, discrimination, and bias based on race, ethnicity, and social class present in early childhood systems, programs, services, and institutions.

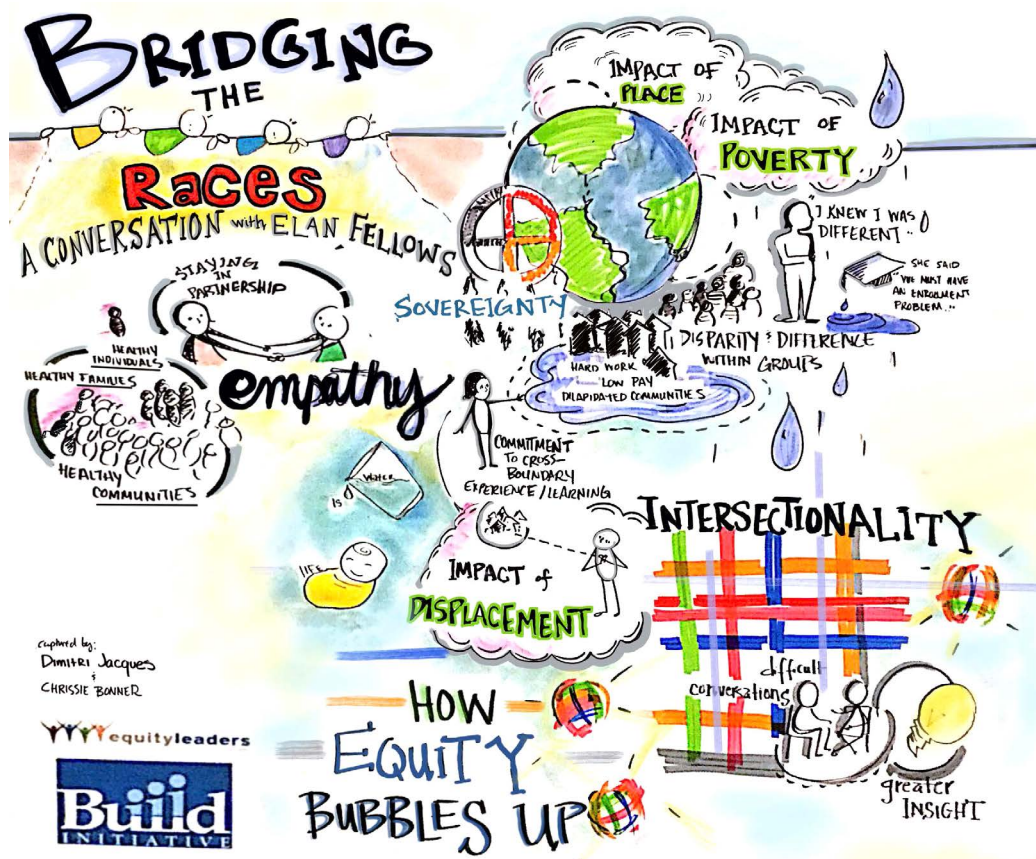
From the outset, the ELAN faculty had a concept of what it would take for these accomplished and emerging early childhood leaders to put race at the center of their systemic change efforts. The ELAN supports the following processes:

- Knowledge-building.
- Reflection and critical analysis.
- Thinking and acting strategically.
- Network building within and outside one's own sector.
- Development and execution of actions to advance racial equity both within the supportive ELAN and outside that environment.

The faculty sought to foster these five racial equity leadership practices:

1. Understanding the root causes of inequity in early childhood systems.
2. Identifying and acting on strategies to address root causes of inequities.
3. Working with people, programs, and structures to advance toward racial equity by shifting policy, legislation, programs, and practice.
4. Using qualitative and quantitative data for planning, decision making, and monitoring.
5. Applying racial equity knowledge and influence in our day-to-day roles and responsibilities as leaders.

This brief summarizes the ripple effects of the project.



Ripple Effects

The most obvious ripple effects were the extensions of the Fellows' individual work in their organization, county, and/or state. Not only were the Fellows changed as individuals, but they also went on to build networks of leaders for equity, changing their practice as well as the practices of others. Sandy DeLeon, for example, is currently the executive director of the Early Learning Workforce Scholarship Program at the City Colleges of **Chicago**. The scholarship program is designed to support equity for immigrant women and women of color who are currently working in or wish to work in early childhood care and education programs (e.g., child care, preschool). It actively attempts to remove barriers (e.g., cost, dearth of academic support, language) so that participants can access higher education and succeed. Sandy developed this work as an ELAN Fellow and was supported by fellowship faculty to pursue higher education partners (e.g., University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago City Colleges Early Childhood faculty) and other supports. Another fellow, Neva Bandelow, along with Dr. LaWanda Wesley, developed an 18-month **California** leadership cohort project, Emerging Leaders for Racial Equity. They recently completed work with a second 12-month cohort of learners. Their goal has been to lift and prepare early childhood leaders to have the skill, will, and knowledge to lead California's early learning programs through an equity lens and to prepare more leaders of color to lead these programs.

ELAN Fellows from **Minnesota** and now **New York** created state-specific adaptations of the fellowship. In Minnesota, Fellows engaged state, county, and tribal leadership in addressing and remediating racial disparities. They employed strategies central to the ELAN, including hearing directly from and engaging in policy development those individuals and communities furthest from opportunity and tailoring resources for individuals and groups who experience disparities (historically and currently).

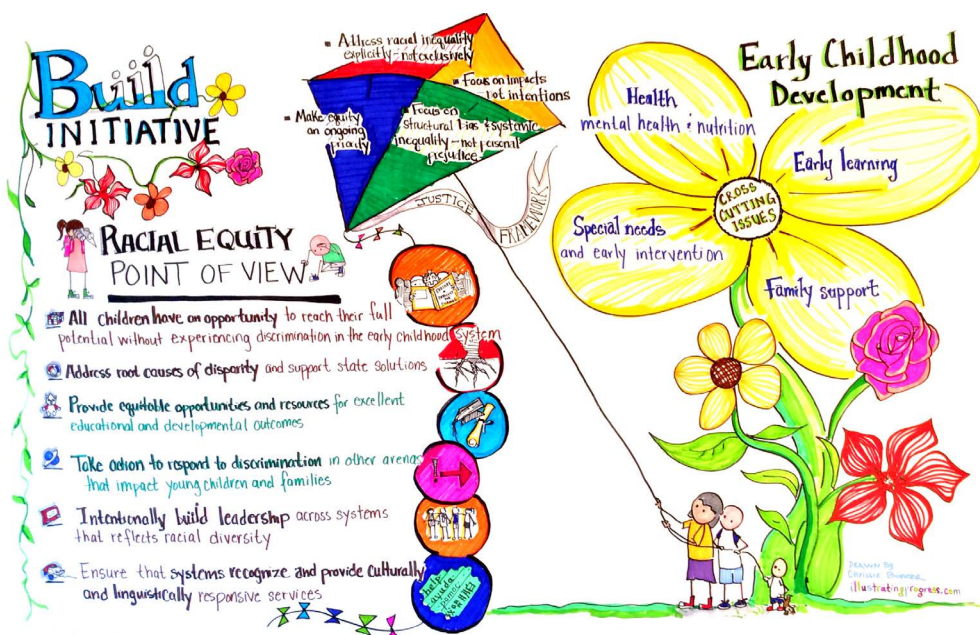
One project team updated contract language to include specific standardized national expectations regarding equity into the over 800 contracts the behavioral health division holds. This effort sought to ensure that the division would better listen to clients and provide more targeted resources because of doing focus groups, listening sessions, and culturally responsive trainings. Another project team strove to coordinate eligibility and services across agencies so that families are not needlessly burdened by having to apply several times for a variety of programs and services, which can be a barrier to access.

The ELAN left its mark on the faculty and BUILD's entire staff. BUILD is now acutely aware, for instance, of the gap between leaders' expressed commitment to community voice and family leadership and consistent, ongoing actions focused on listening to

and engaging the intended beneficiaries of the programs, services, and policies they manage or oversee. In 2017, BUILD launched the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded Project HOPE with an explicit focus on fostering two-way communication and ongoing feedback loops between state systems leaders and communities far from the opportunities that promote child- and family-wellbeing. "[Beneficiary Voice Site Visits](#)" have been a hallmark of this health and racial equity project.

In **California**, BUILD has supported developing ongoing communications

“When racial equity was not being talked about, we were the ones who brought it up. And, it has a ripple effect.”



between tribal leaders working on early care and education and state agency leaders to improve relationships at the state and local levels, change how quality is assessed to consider different cultures and languages, and address the disparities so evident in Native American communities.

In **New Jersey**, state officials we have supported through HOPE are moving to address lack of summer childcare, limited employment opportunities for residents with past involvement in the criminal justice and/or child welfare system, and limited access to fresh food and food banks. These issues were raised and amplified during site visits with parents, community leaders, and social service providers in Atlantic City and Bridgeton. In **Alabama**, state leaders are working to connect families to services in Macon and Montgomery counties after parents and health providers shared perspectives.

In addition to previously mentioned efforts, BUILD is working with leadership at **Minnesota's** Child Safety and Permanency Unit and Early Childhood Division to shift the culture to be more inclusive and diversify hiring and retention of Black and Native American staff.

In these and other HOPE communities, the voices and experience of parents, community leaders, and providers were combined with quantitative data to help state leaders analyze and solve problems related to inequitable access to services, supports, and initiatives families need to thrive and succeed.

In **Illinois**, BUILD directly supports the mission and work of the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development through ongoing work with the Early Learning Council (ELC). BUILD has been an essential resource to its Early Learning Council's Executive Committee on racial equity issues and strategies. Most recently, BUILD has participated in equity reviews of both the ELC's proposed governance reforms and the Governor's Early Childhood Funding Commission's work on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding. BUILD participated in analyzing the Commission's recommendations, developing guidance and recommendations on how to inject accountability into implementation of the recommendations, and helping to build a foundation for future and more in-depth equity analyses within state-level early childhood policy making.

In **Oregon**, most recently, we presented a racial equity briefing to the Early Learning Council to provide an overview and guidance on the beneficiary voice visits with key communities that will occur this summer. We also supported leaders' efforts to ensure that the COVID-related modifications of regulations reflected their commitment to racial equity by increasing families' access to economic supports and early care and education using waivers, streamlined eligibility, and online applications. BUILD's effort to support Oregon's racial equity framework has also resulted in centering race and culture in the design of a new statewide model of early childhood mental health consultation.

In 2019, through the National Center for Early Childhood Quality Assurance, BUILD supported leaders in **Idaho** to establish a shared vision and plan related to developing a racially equitable early childhood system. BUILD drew on its ELAN experience in emphasizing data (qualitative and quantitative), establishing universal goals and tailored strategies, using readings to promote analytical thinking, fostering the networks necessary to work collaboratively across systems, and generally building leadership confidence and capacity. In addition, the Center tapped BUILD to create a three-part train-the-trainer series on Advancing Opportunities for Children, Families, and Communities: Equity, Leadership, and Early Childhood Systems Development for child care administrators across the country.



Other federal technical assistance centers have also reached out to BUILD to support their knowledge- and skill-building related to racial equity, including the Child Care State Capacity Building Center, the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, and the National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. With this last center, we particularly focused on the practice of listening to those most directly impacted by policy and program decisions, as equitable access begins with listening. The National Institute for Children's Health Quality also asked BUILD to deliver a webinar on racial equity and systems change.

In 2020, the Alliance for Early Success asked BUILD to organize a training and site visit to programs in Clarkston, Georgia for its advocacy grantees and then to work with select grantees to incorporate listening sessions to inform their work. After **Wisconsin** advocacy leaders worked with Sherri Killins Stewart through BUILD's Alliance project, and with other BUILD staff through the NCIT Hub, they asked BUILD to support the Governor's Leadership Council on the Early Years and their Early Childhood Advisory Council to make sure that racial equity and inclusion are front and center in their early childhood policy agenda.

Ohio leaders have also reached out to BUILD to ensure that their newest effort to address disproportionality in Black infant mortality rates would benefit from the organization's expertise in supporting state leaders to take meaningful action to advance toward racial equity. Along with the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs and the Kirwan Institute, BUILD is providing strategic planning and facilitation to agency staff. BUILD also held a racial equity training for Ohio's largest child advocacy organization, Groundwork, and is now working with Groundwork on the launch of its family engagement center.

BUILD continues to emphasize the core practices of leading for racial equity in all our work: building knowledge of institutional and systemic racism and our country's past, using qualitative and quantitative data, identifying tailored strategies to achieve universal goals, centering the voices of families and communities furthest from opportunity, and building networks across the child- and family-serving systems. These are central to our approach to state services.

Through this prenatal-to-three support Hub, BUILD is now launching an **Equity Leadership Action Initiative** to foster increased attention to the racial impact of coalition strategies and to increase the coalition leaders' knowledge and skills to lead for equity. BUILD will intensively work with **NC, NE, NY, SC,** and **WI**.

Related Organizational History

From its inception, BUILD recognized the barriers that racism posed to family and young child well-being, but it was not until its fourth year (2006) that BUILD staff recognized that a commitment to comprehensive early childhood systems that delivered programs and services that were of high quality did not adequately address the disparities in well-being indicators that result from institutional and structural racism. BUILD staff initiated work with partner state leaders to identify and address racial disparities using the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race Matters Toolkit. Since then, BUILD's understanding and efforts to identify and address institutional and structural racism have increased.

Although the W.K. Kellogg Foundation began supporting BUILD's racial equity work in 2010, it was not until 2013-2014 that Kellogg funding pushed BUILD to think more deeply about how to become an organization leading for equity. BUILD had also grown and diversified its staff by 2013 and had hired Sherri Killins (now Killins Stewart) to lead its systems alignment and integration efforts. BUILD's organizational development work deepened our commitment to racial equity and expanded staff member understanding of each individual's capacity to lead for equity regardless of her/his role in BUILD. In 2015, BUILD requested and received three-year funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to launch the Equity Leaders Action Network; BUILD selected the second cohort of ELAN Fellows in early 2021.

