The Equity Leaders Action Network (ELAN) works to advance racial equity in early childhood systems. Launched in 2015, the three-year BUILD Initiative project focuses its efforts across twenty states, the District of Columbia and Guam. BUILD’s vision is of a comprehensive, racially equitable, high-quality early childhood system that ensures all children have an opportunity to develop and reach their full potential without experiencing discrimination or bias. According to Sherri Killins Stewart, Director of the ELAN, when BUILD refers to its equity goal, “We mean that race should not be a predictor of health status, education, birth outcomes or the community conditions for young children and their families.”

Starting with the first ELAN meeting in 2015, 38 fellows with responsibility at the state or county level worked with each other and the ELAN faculty to identify, address and take action on inequities based on race, ethnicity, language and culture. More specifically, the now 34-member group has sought to promote equity in the areas of health, early learning and/or family support as well as to influence state-level policy.

**Meet The Faculty**

Composed of equity and early childhood leaders, the faculty includes: Sherri Killins Ed.D, BUILD’s Director of State Systems Alignment and Integration; Aisha Ray, an Erikson Institute faculty member for over twenty years; Miriam Calderon, senior advisor for early learning at the Bainum Family Foundation and partner to BUILD on projects related to dual language learners; Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, President for the National Alliance for Hispanic Families (NAHF); Brenda Jones, a pediatric nurse surveyor for The Joint Commission, where she performs analysis and evaluation of hospital delivery systems across the country; and Michelle Stover Wright, BUILD’s Research and Evaluation Manager. As fellow Pamela Hollingsworth noted in an interview, “The power of their leadership cannot be underestimated,” and the time she has spent with them has “catapulted her ability.” More information about the ELAN faculty can be found [here](#).

**Activities**

The ELAN seeks to achieve its aims by providing peer support and mentoring from faculty members via the following activities:

- **Bi-monthly Communities of Practice (COPs)**
  
  COPs are intended to help fellows refine and implement their projects, and deepen their understanding and skills in racial equity leadership. Fellows are expected to lead in the development of their community of practice by contributing to its design, planning and execution.

- **Bi-monthly Discussion/Webinars Calls**
  
  Fellows engage in an online discussion group with faculty members and other fellows that focuses on a topic, question or issue relevant to the ELAN curriculum. These discussions may be linked to an article or other tools, such as videos. Fellows are expected to lead in the design and development of the discussion calls by contributing to designing, planning and execution.
Networking and Relationship Building

Fellows are expected to reach beyond their current network and develop productive and sustainable relationships which increase understanding of equity and inequities and/or advance policies and practices which lead to equity. These relationships focus on helping fellows develop critical self-reflective skills necessary for leading on racial equity; new knowledge regarding critical content related to their work (e.g., the complex nature of leadership; early childhood science and racial inequities); and effective practice to advance racial equity in their early childhood systems work.

Journaling

Fellows are expected to keep a journal in which they reflect on what they are learning during their ELAN journey. These reflections do not need to be submitted but may be used during the COP, in conversations with faculty and fellows, in preparing for an evaluation interview, and in other ELAN settings in which fellows are asked to share their insights about their own professional journey.

Readings and Resources

Every annual meeting, discussion section, and many COPs make resources (readings, videos) available to the learning community. In discussion calls, particular readings or videos are assigned and fellows and faculty discuss them in order to reach a deeper understanding of them and to figure out ways to use the information to take action related to early childhood systems development.

The Project

Key to the ELAN experience is the fellows’ design and execution of a work-embedded project which must: be designed to address racial disparities related to young children (birth to age five); involve two or more early childhood systems (e.g., early learning, early health, family support) within the state or county in which the fellow works; and use data to assess the problem the proposal addresses, to explain and describe the desired changes sought, and to assess the effectiveness of the effort. The purposes of the project (the summaries of which can be found here) are to:

- Support the development of each fellow’s ability to question personal assumptions, institutional and structural policies and practices, and to promote early childhood systems that are explicitly and measurably equitable and excellent;
- Develop new knowledge, skills, and self-awareness to be more effective in advancing racial equity; and
- Actively promote change to ensure that children are not disadvantaged by race, ethnicity, and social class.

The ELAN fellows and faculty seek to increase equity by making change that increases equity for young children and their families in the policies, procedures and practices of institutions and between state, federal and local policies and practices that reduce inequities between institutions at the structural level. However, we recognize that the pathway to those changes include addressing issues including personal bias and privilege and interpersonal connections.
It’s Working

There is proof that the ELAN is meeting its aims. In an October 2016 survey of the project, 95% of fellows indicated they have learned skills and strategies through the ELAN that will help them better lead on racial equity and early childhood. In addition to gaining knowledge from the wealth of information and materials provided, participants have noted the support, encouragement and validation they receive from what many of them refer to as the “family” of faculty and fellows. When fellow Neva Bandelow was asked to reflect on outcomes of her participation, she said:

The project I’m leading in the county of Alameda is in emerging leaders for racial equity and is focusing on lead teachers who have lacked the opportunity to move into an administrative role...I could not have started this program without ELAN’s support. The knowledge, the opportunities and the structure of ELAN is what have provided me with the knowledge I needed to launch a program like this.

When Aaliyah Samuel was asked how she would rate herself on a scale of 1 – 5 in terms of being ready to lead on racial equity at the start of the ELAN as compared to now, she offered:

In the beginning, I would rate myself as a 2 or 3. My talking points and ability to articulate came only from my personal experiences. Many would probably see me only as a black woman bringing her experiences, her issues, and her realities. Now I think I am a 4 or 5 because I can articulate more globally. I can be very open with educators and speak to them with more intentionality.

Now in its second year, the focus of the ELAN remains unchanged - to design efforts and activities which develop a cadre of racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse early childhood leaders prepared to take action which leads to racial equity in state early childhood systems and services. As the fellows continue to take action to reduce disparities through the choices and decisions they make, BUILD will continue to learn from these actions and share the learning, policies and practices throughout the early childhood field.