



2019

QRIS National Conference Report

June 25-27 • New Orleans, LA



Build
INITIATIVE
Strong Foundations For
Our Youngest Children

QRIS 
National Learning Network

Plenary session on Wednesday, July 26, 2019:

A Conversation with Nikole Hannah-Jones and Sherri Killins Stewart



More than 1,200 early childhood professionals from 48 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories attended BUILD's 2019 QRIS National Conference. The meeting, held in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 25-27, focused on quality improvement in early learning and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs). The yearly conference is a highlight of BUILD's 50-state Learning Community dedicated to advancing high-quality, equitable, culturally competent, affordable, and accessible early learning opportunities for each and every young child. As one of the few national conferences that brings a cross-systems perspective to the study of quality in early childhood, it aims to provide opportunities that inform and improve the practices of the attending professionals while emphasizing cross-system and cross-sector approaches to meeting the needs of the whole child, the promotion of equity, and engagement of families, providers, and stakeholders.

This year, BUILD once again attracted a broad audience including state child care administrators, QRIS administrators, technical assistance providers, local and state early childhood leaders, early learning providers, national experts, philanthropists, and other key decision makers related to quality early learning. As in years past, most of the program's 150+ sessions were selected through a competitive RFP process that leads us to the most current thinking by experts from around the country on a wide variety of early childhood quality topics.

“What We Heard

One of the best conferences out there in the ECE world! ... The structure and choices of the breakouts were amazing. ... [I enjoyed] being able to network and discuss ideas with national researchers and peers. The consultations sessions were also very helpful. ... The Plenary sessions truly made me think. ... Several of my sessions were extremely relevant to my work. ... The most useful thing was all of the group discussions that were allowed to happen in the workshops. I loved learning what others were doing as they related it to what the presenters brought forth. ... I was glad to have the in-state team time to get to know other leaders and share the separate focus of presentations we had attended. I also really enjoyed the pre-conference partnership for legislators.

Post-meeting surveys (answered by about 30 percent of the participants) and 1,700 responses in the Rate and Review sections of our meeting App showed that participants appreciated the wide range of topics covered in the sessions and found the meeting energizing, inspiring, and a unique and valuable professional development experience.

Attendees said that the plenary sessions were a highlight of the meeting. The keynote speaker (photo at top of page two), Nikole Hannah-Jones, award-winning investigative reporter for the *New York Times Magazine*, spoke about her work on racial segregation in housing and education and shared lessons learned about the impact of racial inequities on children, families, and communities. Participants found her conversation with BUILD's Sherri Killins Stewart "powerful" and "provocative." One respondent wrote, "After her talk, I felt challenged and uncomfortable, but in a good way." Others cited the rich information on workforce issues in the opening panel and the follow-up workshop: "The plenary discussions were extremely helpful for me. One regarding career pathways and the other about systemic oppression led to very insightful discussions for my team during our reflections." The conference ended with a closing plenary—a Town Hall complete with a New Orleans Jazz band—in which participants celebrated their successes to date and reflected on their current challenges in building effective quality improvement strategies.

Regarding aspects of the meeting that had the greatest impact, respondents cited a wide variety of takeaways. For some it was specific tools and resources: "Practical tools to take back to our programs, particularly The Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework: Key Indicators of High-Quality Family Engagement, and the Inclusion Indicators draft document. These are tools that will be useful in implementing QRIS Quality programming." For others, it was the overall choice of sessions and speakers. One person noted the "high-quality presenters" and "wide-ranging conference that was managed extremely well."

Several applauded the focus on equity as an integrated aspect of all of our work: "This is an area of great strength for BUILD. Nothing approaches the level of quality in advancing awareness of issues around race, equity and systemic and institutional racism." Access to research was also important to many participants: "I followed several of the research offerings. These are always helpful to better understand the landscape and promising research-based practices that support QRIS, licensing, workforce topics, and practices." Many



appreciated the opportunity to network and learn from peers from around the country. They valued: "ideas from other states," "research from leaders in the field," "stories about what is going well and what is not," and "challenges to our thinking."

The conference theme, *Expanding Reach, Enhancing Impact and Advancing Equity*, speaks to the challenging work state leaders are doing to increase quality and access to high-quality early learning opportunities for young children and their families. BUILD is encouraged by the strong positive response to the quality improvement/QRIS conference we get each year and the affirmation that participants find both fresh ideas to move their work forward and the inspiration to re-ignite their passion for their work. We plan to build on this year's successes in creating timely and useful content for next year's conference in Orlando, Florida July 8-10.

Survey Says

A significant majority of the survey respondents—**94 percent**—agreed or strongly agreed: "The meeting was helpful in advancing the knowledge and practice underway in (their) state/region..."

Eighty-five percent said "There were opportunities to learn about cutting-edge ideas for the next generation of quality improvement and early childhood."

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