



Karen W. Ponder, Distinguished Fellow, BUILD Initiative

Karen W. Ponder is a Distinguished Fellow of the BUILD Initiative and an early childhood consultant who has worked on early childhood systems building in 48 states. Her work focuses on building strong community coalitions and assisting states in building and sustaining strong and effective early childhood systems. Karen is the former President of the North Carolina Partnership for Children where she helped to create Smart Start, a statewide system of community coalitions, and administered Smart Start for its first 15 years. During her presidency, Smart Start's National Technical Assistance Center was created to assist other states in developing comprehensive early childhood efforts. Prior to Smart Start, Karen worked for the NC Division of Child Development where she oversaw the agency's efforts on behalf of children with special needs and was the Smart Start Manager.

Her earlier career included teaching kindergarten and preschool and directing early childhood programs. Karen graduated Summa Cum Laude from North Carolina State University (BA). She was a fellow in the inaugural class of the National Early Childhood Policy Forum. Currently she is a member of the Advisory Board of the McCormick-Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership at St. Louis University and the Frank Porter Graham Executive Leadership Board at the University of North Carolina. She also serves on the Board of Reach Out and Read of the Carolinas, and the Wake County (NC) Project Enlightenment Advisory Board. Formerly, she served on the Governing Boards of the United Way of North Carolina and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Recently she led the Power to the Profession Task Force in a two-year process to create the framework for an early childhood profession.