



Build
INITIATIVE

Conference 2021

Reinvent Early Care and Education Quality
Improvement to Advance Racial Equity

JULY 20-22, 2021

NATIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT



Executive Summary

Beginning with the very first gathering in 2008, BUILD's annual National Conference has focused on helping state and local government leaders, advocates, educators, and providers put equitable, high-quality early care and education quality improvement systems in place to help all young children thrive regardless of race, place, or family income.

BUILD 2021: Reinvent Early Care and Education Quality Improvement to Advance Racial Equity emphasized the importance of maintaining that focus, particularly in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cracks it exposed in our system of early child services, the racial inequities it exacerbated, the economic downturn it brought, and the crippling effect it had on the field. The meeting stressed how these events have further heightened the need for policy leaders, providers, advocates, and families to work together to build new foundations for marginalized children, prenatal to age five, across early care and education, family support, maternal and child health, and other family-focused services.

But the meeting also highlighted a new way forward offered by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which provides significant federal funding for early childhood care and education. In small group learning and conference plenary sessions, participants were urged to seize the moment and take action to:

- Rebuild child care and reinvent quality improvement strategies by including in discussions the voices of families that have been marginalized and ensuring the growing number of multilingual, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children are represented in program design, development, implementation, and monitoring. The closing plenary session with Anna Deavere Smith, based on *Notes from the Field*, her award-winning play and HBO series, highlighted how family and community voice can help disrupt structural inequities rooted in racism and poverty by bringing history, context, and urgency to this work.

- Maintain a well-compensated early childhood workforce that represents the racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity of young children, supported by effective and responsive professional development, quality coaching/mentoring, and increased access to two- and four-year higher education degree and certificate programs. The plenary session with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, author of the best-selling *How to Be An Anti-Racist*, underscored that through racial justice research, practice, and policy, we must challenge and change the narratives that have marginalized early childhood educators and credentialing systems that have excluded providers and women of color.
- Use federal relief and stimulus dollars to build a stable early care and education system, address workforce compensation and access issues, and continuously improve program quality and cross-sector connections in ways that are supportive of diverse US families and the national workforce. A panel of state and federal early childhood policy experts urged that the White House Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities and ARPA funding for early childhood be leveraged to combat systemic barriers that prevent the targeting of resources to and access to opportunity by marginalized children, families, communities, and providers.



BUILD 2021 BY THE NUMBERS

Participants
1247

States represented **46**
(3 largest groups are CA, PA, WA)

47 **Learning opportunities**
(including plenaries,
pre-conferences,
learning sessions)

8
SESSIONS
INTERPRETED
OR CAPTIONED IN SPANISH

Racial Breakdown of Participants (%)

American Indian/Alaska Native	>	3
Asian	>	3
Black/African American	>	23
Latinx/Hispanic	>	8.5
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	>	.5
White	>	62

- The virtual conference drew 1200 participants—on par with in-person gatherings in 2018 and 2019. This is significant given the web-weariness created by the many virtual meetings and events the pandemic has necessitated. Attendees were from 46 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. Almost half were Black, Latinx, Asian American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.
- More than 60 percent of participants attended the conference for the first time.
- All conference sessions were rated by attendees at four stars or higher—the best yet for a BUILD conference.
- Learning sessions on home-based child care were recorded and captioned in Spanish, and the conference's three plenary sessions offered live Spanish language interpretation. All 40 of the pre-conference and small group sessions were recorded so participants can access them throughout the year.
- Video roundtables allowed conference sponsors such as the Branagh Group, TCC Software Solutions, Teachstone, Brookes Publishing, Cognia, Kapan Early Learning Company, NAEYC, Start Early, ZERO TO THREE, WELS Systems Foundations, LENA, Public Consulting Group, Pro Solutions Training, and Frog Street to preview early childhood system quality improvement, professional development and data integration tools, and other resources interactively with conference attendees.

What Participants Said

Many participants attended the conference for the first time. Attendees said:

Organizations make decisions on who they can send to the conference based on resources and it takes more resources to travel, so it creates a barrier, especially for staff who do not hold higher positions in the hierarchy. With a virtual conference, more people can attend and more professional development can happen.

My agency struggles to pay for me to attend in person, and this was the first year I was able to participate because it was virtual.

Anecdotal data gathered by BUILD staff showed that participants appreciated how the meeting platform and virtual menu gave them a big picture of conference offerings and freedom to choose from a wide range of topics.

Evaluation Responses

Participants appreciated that racial equity and quality improvement themes were threaded through pre-conference, plenary, and learning sessions:

I needed a broader perspective, to hear the thinking, research, experiences, and voices of the rest of the country. I was simply blown away by the fresh, brilliant, deep, powerful work that is being done and was shared at this conference. I immediately began to make changes in my practice and thinking.

Participants value the resources that particular sessions offer:

The session 'Rebuilding Early Childhood Systems for Black and Latinx Children with Racial Equity and Quality at the Forefront' was EXTREMELY impactful! The resources that were shared and the panelists were so incredibly helpful! I am most excited to review the resources they shared, especially the report about Black and Brown families during the pandemic.

Participants want support in pressing for systems change:

Our state is currently in the process of rolling out a new QRIS system and not allowing any additional changes. While some of the changes are good, I still think there are components and criteria in the new system that aren't up to the equitable quality discussed in many of the sessions both in this year's conference and in previous years as well. I would be interested in ideas to promote and advocate for a system that has some of these holes. We want our programs to participate because it will increase their quality in some ways, but advocating for the entire system can feel challenging.

PLENARY SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

What Does the Biden Administration's Racial Equity Executive Order Mean for Quality and Equity in Child Care? Reflections from a Federal Early Childhood Official and Early Childhood Experts.



Aisha Ray
Distinguished Fellow
BUILD Initiative
and Erikson Institute



Katie Hamm
Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Early Childhood
Development
Office of Early Childhood
Development (ECD)



Sylvia Puente
President and CEO
Latino Policy Forum



Ann McClain Terrell
Board Member, NAEYC

The White House Executive Order calls on federal agencies to review their programs' funding, policy, and practice to address the barriers underserved communities and families, marginalized by racism and the resulting poverty, face when they try to access government services and supports intended to benefit them.

The ARPA, passed by Congress last spring, provides \$39 billion in federal relief funding to help child care providers and families recover from the COVID-19 shutdowns and stabilize the early learning sector long term.

Katie Hamm, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development at the Department of Health and Human Services, noted: [States can use those dollars to bring pay parity to early childhood educators and staff with their peers in the K-12 system,"](#) said. Through increased subsidies, the funding also can help move child care away from a "pay-to-play" system that gives children access only to the programs their families can afford.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The Executive Order could be a call to action for the early childhood field, but state and community leaders must take it up and make it real. Despite good intentions embedded in the Executive Order and new federal dollars, a range of systemic barriers—including lack of data, funding barriers, limited access to higher education, and program fragmentation—panelists said it will be hard to target those resources and ensure children, families, communities, and providers furthest from opportunity actually benefit.

To Keep in Mind as You Plan Use of the Funds

- 1. The process that federal officials use to designate and/or renew funding for Head Start programs across the country continues to privilege grantees with the capacity to compete for resources.**

As Sylvia Puente, President and CEO of the Latino Policy Forum, noted: There is an inherent bias in the re-competition process that does not consider equity—grants are scored by who has the best writers and it does not look at where the greatest need is. And they can only come from places where there are existing providers. The process does not look at gaps in places where no one can even write proposals...this RFP process that we have had in place for decades does not look at equitable distribution of resources for kids most in need.

- 2. Increasing early childhood teacher pay will require acknowledgment of the historic marginalization of those who provide early care and education.**

Ann McClain Terrell, a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) Board of Directors and former executive director of the Milwaukee Public Schools Foundation, said: We have subsidized the cost of child-care, but educators are getting poverty wages while they do essential work. Poor compensation is disproportionately experienced by women of color.

Puente added: Pay parity for early childhood educators with their K-12 peers depends on access to credentials and degrees, but pipelines to colleges and universities remain clogged for men and women of color. In 2019, all of Illinois' major public universities graduated fewer than 100 Latino and 50 Black students with undergraduate degrees in education.

- 3. Data is needed on where marginalized children and families live and work to target the places in greatest need of early childhood system resources.**

Puente noted: More than 25 percent of Black and Latino children and 200,000 Native American children live in poverty in the United States. But it is difficult for local and state governments to disaggregate that data by children under the age of five. Current federal, state, and local data also is insufficient for identifying immigrant populations or children who need bilingual early care and education, especially in the Deep South and Northwest.

Terrell added: Starting the data system locally will push our state to think more and do more around data and look at services as the Executive Order states. How do we serve all eligible individuals— [we must look] at the who, the where, and what services.

Hamm noted: The executive order specifically focused on disaggregating data. Too often, when we get information, it's looking at the population as a whole, and it masks some of the differential impacts we might see on different racial or ethnic groups. It's really important that when we're analyzing information and making decisions, we're seeing how different populations of people are impacted, whether that's race ethnicity, immigration status, or disability. We need to look at how our policies are impacting people of all backgrounds.

A Conversation with Ibram X. Kendi

Dr. Kendi, author of the New York Times bestseller, *How to Be An Anti-Racist*, and founding director of Boston University's Center for Antiracist Research, joined Dr. Sherri Killins Stewart, BUILD's Director of Systems Integration and Alignment and Co-Director of State Services, for a discussion on how state and local leaders can work to increase opportunity, reduce barriers, and distribute resources in ways that benefit racially diverse children and their families.



Dr. Ibram X. Kendi



Dr. Sherri Killins Stewart

KEY TAKEAWAY

Anti-racist practice is rooted in common sense, common cause, and common good. But it requires new ways of thinking and working on policy, research, advocacy, and narrative.

1. Teach Anti-Racism in Early Childhood

In response to Dr. Killins Stewart's question to Kendi about why he wrote *Anti-Racist Baby*, a children's version of his 2020 bestseller, and how parents and early care and education providers can use it, he said: Studies show newborns and infants begin to understand different skin colors in their first three to nine months of life. By three years old, they can get racist ideas of who they play with based on skin color. What we need to encourage those babies to do is to see all the different skin colors as equal. Convey the human rainbow. At the age of one, a child can see the skin colors as connected and beautiful and they can see themselves on the rainbow. By three to four years old, we have to actively teach Black boys that nothing is wrong with you, and that White girl is special when she is nice but not because of the color of her skin.

2. If You Want to Change the Policy, You Have to Change the Narrative

A conference participant noted that early childhood educator pay inequities are rooted in enslaved Black women working as the first child care providers in this country, and questioned whether credentialing the early care and education workforce at K-12 levels is the right approach.

Kendi asked conference attendees to change the frame: Changing narratives must come before changing policy. How you frame the problem determines how you imagine a potential solution. [When reformers wanted to fix a problem], they looked at fixing families and cultures and parents, but what if nothing was wrong with them and the narrative was that there was something wrong with our society? What in the environment is causing that?

When a participant noted that credentialing the early childhood workforce to increase pay could drive out Black, Latinx, and Indigenous teachers just as credentialing the K-12 workforce has, Kendi responded: When what is considered a credential leads to a disparity in who is getting in, then there is something wrong with the credential if there is nothing wrong with educators of color. So, credentials are the problem. When there are test score gaps, either there is something wrong with kids or with the test. We have to think that way.

Anna Deavere Smith: Blending Art and Social Commentary

Through a series of learning sessions, BUILD 2021 encouraged early childhood system leaders to: 1) develop ways to hear firsthand from families and include them in decisions about their children's care and education, and 2) work with providers to remove barriers to resources and supports and improve program quality. Smith's presentation, based on her award-winning play and HBO series, underscored how personal stories can add history, context, urgency, and humanity to the work leaders do to reduce system inequities. Following her presentation, BUILD Consultant Jennifer Park moderated a question-and-answer session with Smith.



Anna Deavere Smith



Jennifer Park

KEY TAKEAWAY

Notes from the Field is part of Smith's *Pipeline Project*, which calls attention to the generational cycle of incarceration in the United States. Through vignettes she performed based on interviews with more than 250 people impacted by every part of the school-to-prison pipeline, including parents, teachers, judges, community leaders, advocates and others, Smith illustrated how poverty and racism keep the cycle going, and how humility and compassion can help stop it.

Smith played various roles to make various points: In just one example, she portrayed Stephanie Williams, an elementary school emotional support teacher who tells the story of an 11-year-old whose rage is misunderstood and who, worse than not being helped by the system, has been hurt by it. Her compassion helped him to let down his guard: I had a student who was in foster care...he was sick as a baby and he was being molested at a foster home, and he had fits. Complete rage. Zero to a million in a second. An 11-year-old. And he pulled a tree out of the ground. It was a small tree, but still! He turned over a full table. I heard a scream. I saw people running through the hall and he had got himself so worked up. He is dripping sweat and throwing stuff. I just followed him. And we met up on the first floor. I did not know what to do. I just grabbed him in the tightest hug and held him. It was a hold but like a hug until he just relaxed. And he started crying and crying and crying.

Asked during a question-and-answer session how people who work with families in trauma can avoid burnout, Smith acknowledged the exhaustion early care and education providers face. And then, echoing Kendi, she suggested they change the narrative: See it as a privilege to come close and find the link of compassion, to grow the size of your heart and muscles of compassion, to replenish yourself. You have to breathe it in.

OUR HOPES

BUILD 2021 occurred at a particular moment in history—a time of despair, hope, chaos—and a potential new order, one that includes funded opportunities to build on and create early learning systems that serve all families. We hope that attendees, and those who have viewed the conference recordings, have taken time to breathe in that moment. As challenging a time as it has been, we hope the encouragement many of the conference sessions offered have inspired you to work to change the narrative, reduce system inequities, and create a future filled with opportunities for every one of our children.