



COMMUNITY STORY

Striving for Racial Equity in Tarrant County, Texas



By Julie Pratt, THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT

[The Early Learning Alliance \(ELA\)](#) supports organizations working together to help all children in Tarrant County, Texas, achieve success in school and in life. Its work is guided by the belief that race, ethnicity, income, and gender impact opportunities for children to succeed and that concerted efforts must be made to eliminate disparities that undermine child well-being.

Established in 2016, the ELA has more than 50 partner organizations, including a wide range of nonprofit organizations, businesses, educators, and government leaders in the Fort Worth area. Its leadership team is comprised of 19 heads of agencies.

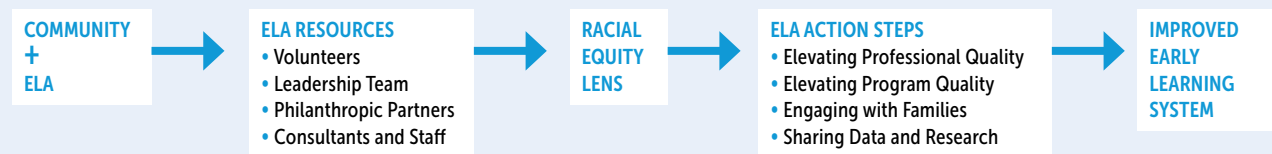
All four Model Convening Project partner organizations are involved with the ELA. One of the ELA's founding members is the Early Childhood Services Division of My Health My Resources (MHMR), which

includes Family Connects, ZERO TO THREE's HealthySteps, and Help Me Grow. MHMR is also a member of ELA's leadership team, as is Tarrant County Public Health, which administers the Nurse-Family Partnership.

ELA's Approach to Racial Equity

The ELA views itself as a "movement," guided by strategic plans updated every two to three years. It approaches racial equity not as a particular initiative but as a lens through which all its initiatives are planned and implemented (see graphic). The ELA's Racial Equity Guidance Council works across initiatives to support this effort.

ELA is focused on creating an early learning system with equality for all children.



The racial equity work is rooted in the history of the area and informed by current data on the circumstances of Tarrant County's children and families. One of the ELA's early actions was to co-sponsor an all-day event in Spring 2016 around the release of *State of Texas Children: Race and Equity in Fort Worth* by the Texas KIDS COUNT Project of the Center on Public Policy Priorities, since renamed Every Texan. (See excerpt on next page.)

Children of color represent the majority of the child population in Tarrant County. The racial disparities presented in the 2016 report persist today. Examples include the following:

- One-third of Hispanic and Black children live in poverty.
- Black infants are at highest risk for premature births, low birthweight, and death.



Place, Race and Poverty in Fort Worth

Like many Texas cities, Fort Worth has a history of segregating places where children live, play and learn. During the 1950s, when Black families tried to purchase homes in all-White neighborhoods, they experienced violence, intimidation and threats. Officials built highways through Black neighborhoods, destroying homes, decreasing property values and isolating neighborhoods. Public spaces like the Fort Worth Zoo, municipal golf courses and parks were available to Black residents only one day a year, for Juneteenth celebrations. When Black residents advocated for access to municipal pools, public outcry was so great that the city council offered to build additional pools for Black residents in exchange for their agreement to not use "White" pools.

The Fort Worth area is also home to early resistance against school desegregation efforts. When the Mansfield School District outside the city was ordered by a federal court to allow Black students to enroll, groups of White citizens violently protested and prevented the students from enrolling. Schools remained segregated long after *Brown vs Board of Education*, with conflicts around the implementation of busing, magnet programs and other integration efforts continuing for decades.

This history has had cumulative effects, in both the educational and economic benefits and disadvantages that can be passed on from generation to generation. These policies and practices may be from Fort Worth's past, but they still have a profound effect on the present. Current policies and practices do not undo past injustices, and barriers in housing, employment and education contribute to far too many children living in poverty and troubling disparities by race and ethnicity.

Source: [State of Texas Children 2016: Race and Equity in Fort Worth](#)

Every Texan (formerly Center for Public Policy Priorities)/Texas KIDS COUNT Project

- Hispanic and Black students are more likely to be enrolled in low-income school districts and less likely to graduate from high school.

"We're five years into our 10-year movement, with racial equity at the center of the work," said Michelle Buckley, ELA Director from 2017-2020. "I think this year has really been a moment for us as a coalition to think through what it means to be an antiracist organization because that's not language that we use as an alliance. Each one of our partner organizations is in a very different place in their journey."

The ELA has hired an outside group to work with its leadership team and members on how to best respond to the current challenges and take advantage of opportunities for change. "I think we've been very good at looking at what the data says," said Buckley. "The question is what do we need to do to have more racial equity really embedded in our strategies."

Strategies to Advance Racial Equity

The ELA has employed a variety of methods to support collaboration in general and to boost racial equity in particular. These include developing strong partnerships, providing training and guidance, and early childhood system building.

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

Strong local partnerships are the foundation of the ELA and essential for creating an equitable early childhood system. Member organizations sign a letter of commitment and pay dues. Members include government agencies, early child care providers, faith-based organizations, educators, school district administrators, training organizations, nonprofit service providers, health and mental health providers, private foundations, the United Way of Tarrant County, Workforce Solutions of Tarrant County, and the City of Fort Worth.

The ELA pays attention not only to who is at the table but also how the people and their organizations work together toward a common vision and goals.

"The question is what do we need to do to have more racial equity really embedded in our strategies."

—Michelle Buckley, Past Director of ELA

Marnie Stone, Senior Director of Early Childhood Connections at MHMR, worked for many years in a neighboring county until joining MHMR five years ago. "I drive 45 minutes to be a part of this community in my professional life because of the collaborative nature in Tarrant County," she said. "I think that's something that needs to be named and encouraged."

Funding is one of the areas where collaboration is actively encouraged. "We're very careful to come around the table and make decisions ahead of time," said Laura Kender, Chief of Early Childhood Services at MHMR and past ELA Chair. "When a grant comes across my desk, the first thing I do is call partners to find out who has an interest in these grants because we want to partner, not compete with each other."

The ELA also tries to maximize cross-sector collaboration in its work. "We've learned that we have to develop our subcommittees to be cross sector to the extent that even our co-chairs have to be cross sector," said Kender. "Whether you're talking about family engagement, provider support, or racial equity, you're talking about the whole system."

TRAINING AND GUIDANCE

For the past five years, the Racial Equity and Leadership (REAL) initiative of the National League of Cities (NLC) has been an important resource as the ELA deepened its racial equity work. The REAL initiative has conducted two on-site trainings in Tarrant County. The first was an introductory training in late 2015 for ELA members, partners, and community leaders. The second was a two-day workshop with community leaders held in early 2017.

In 2018, the ELA hosted four racial equity trainings, involving 17 organizations. In addition, eight ELA

members engaged in strategic visioning sessions to identify ways to address racial inequity and unconscious bias within their organizations.

In 2019, the ELA and the City of Fort Worth received a grant to collaborate with members of the ELA Racial Equity Task Force and the Tarrant County Infant and Toddler Developmental Screening Initiative (ITDSI) to systematically disaggregate and analyze data by race to inform planning and appropriate allocation of resources and services. They are also working with a consultant on conducting organizational self-assessments and adopting racial equity policies that support equity in child well-being. The grant was provided by the Pritzker Children's Initiative, in partnership with the National League of Cities and National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers (NCIT).

ELA has also developed useful tools for its members and the community. Links to the following tools are provided at <https://earlylearningntx.org/our-work/racial-equity/>:

- The "Racial and Ethnic Equity Process for Designing Programs That Improve Child Well-Being" applies a racial equity lens to improving indicators of child well-being.
- The "Equity Toolkit" provides resources for early learning programs serving racial and ethnic

minority children. The most current version was released in January 2021.

Kender credits ELA for helping position their community to respond to the racial justice concerns that were amplified in 2020. "One thing that the ELA has done over the years is provide opportunities for partner agencies to receive some really rich training on racial equity. We would not have been in a position to dive into that conversation had we not had that background training."

SYSTEM BUILDING

In September 2019, Help Me Grow North Texas was launched under the auspices of the Early Childhood Services Division of MHMR. Help Me Grow is an evidence-based system framework aimed at helping communities identify vulnerable children, link families to community-based services, and empower families to support their children's healthy development. The framework includes four components: a centralized access point, family and community outreach, child health care provider outreach, and data collection and analysis.

Equity is a central feature of Help Me Grow, nationally and in North Texas. Faith Rivera, a Community Alignment Coordinator at Help Me Grow North Texas, provided context in an interview for [NCIT Spotlight](#).



Dallas/Fort Worth is a very, very diverse community with a lot of different languages, immigration statuses, and family needs. We want to ensure, through the lens of Help Me Grow, that our approach is universal. All families can benefit from support. We want to make sure we still have those very targeted programs and marketing strategies for the families that are very much in need of what we're doing. We also want to ensure that those families who are hardest hit by COVID and by the racial inequities in our system are able to access this system.

Help Me Grow has played a pivotal role in Tarrant County's ability to support vulnerable families during the pandemic. MHMR accelerated the development of Help Me Grow's centralized access point in order to launch the call center and website in Spring of 2020. As a Help Me Grow site, Tarrant County was also able to apply for emergency assistance for families. As a result, eight local partner organizations have been able to distribute \$49,000 worth of diapers and wipes to families in need.

While Kender remains deeply concerned about racial disparities in Tarrant County, she is hopeful that the ELA will continue to move the needle toward equity.

As an entity, I would not have envisioned the ELA being at the place we are today, where we have teams that can sit around the table and have race be as much a part of the conversation. It's still challenging, but we now have equity mentors that have gone through specific training and are supporting teams as they have conversations about individual families and children. And do we

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—Faith Rivera, Community Alignment Specialist at Help Me Grow North Texas

still have a ways to go? Of course, but I'm very thankful we had some things in the works in 2020 that allowed us to lean quickly into both COVID-19 and racial equity when we needed to.

ABOUT THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT

Four national early childhood models—Family Connects, HealthySteps, Help Me Grow, and Nurse-Family Partnership—are exploring ways to have a greater impact on young children and their families in communities where their programs overlap. The project is a multi-year initiative, with leadership and facilitation from [ZERO TO THREE](#) and funding from the [Pritzker Children's Initiative](#). While the four models were the starting point for the project, their local experiences reveal a broad range of community partners who play important roles in early childhood collaboration. For links to additional stories and briefs from the Model Convening Project, see the [Hand in Hand Directory](#).

Published May 2021