10th Cohort Compendium
2017-2018
Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program Review
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MESSAGE FROM THE CO-DIRECTORS

It is an interesting and complex time to be a leader in early childhood. On the one hand, we are experiencing unprecedented policy attention in early childhood. More and more policy-makers, business leaders, and families now understand and talk about the importance of this period in a child's life and the benefits that early learning and family support programs can have for children, families, and society. On the other hand, we are experiencing a time when more and more families are experiencing increasing toxic stress, economic insecurity, and threats of deportation. This is set against a backdrop of uncertain funding, a shortage of early childhood professionals, and gaps in policies and access to programs that children and their families in Colorado need to thrive. The 10th Cohort of the Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program began this year knowing that leadership is needed to solve these complex issues that are barriers to children's growth and learning and barriers to the efforts of the families and professionals who are committed to their success.

Through their coursework and the strong relationships that they have built with faculty, peers, and other professionals in the field as a result of the BECLP, Fellows have learned about theory-driven and evidence-based models to support child learning and development, transformative leadership theories and practices, skills for developing professionals in an organization, and advocating for more equitable and socially just policies for the early childhood field.

Fellows' Capstone projects, described in the pages that follow, demonstrate how Fellows have integrated their new leadership learning from the six courses they have completed in the BECLP with principles of community-based action research to engage and carefully listen to all those impacted by a critical issue in their work – families, teachers, school administrators, community organizations, and policy makers - to illuminate and facilitate creative problem-solving. Their critical issues range from school choice, to practices that ensure inclusion of all children, to improving access to home-visiting programs to name a few.

In this work, we have been inspired watching the Fellows live into the core principles of “leading from any chair” and “living in the realm of possibility” to move from their vision for creating equity, opportunity, and educational excellence for all young children and families to small acts that will be the seeds of change. They are leaving with a deeper understanding of the issues in the field and new and refined leadership skills and tools to craft effective solutions. They will be joining an active Alumni Network already involved as early childhood leaders in classrooms, schools, neighborhoods, and agencies across Colorado. Perhaps unsure of what their role could be as change agents when they began the BECLP journey, they step into their future with the expertise, voice, courage, and connections to be dynamic and adaptive leaders ready to take on the challenges of the field.

“I will cherish this experience for years to come - I'm sad about it ending!”

10th Cohort Buell Fellow
2017-2018 Staff and Faculty. Back Left: Susan Steele, Sara VanDyke, Diana Schaack, Becky Keigan, Rebecca Vlasin, Wendy Allen; Bottom Left: Alissa Rausch, Charlotte Brantley, Lori Ryan, Joanne Dalton, Lynn Andrews, Elmer Harris

**TEAMS**

**FACULTY**

Diana Schaack, Ph.D.  
Co-Director  
University of Colorado Denver

Joanne Dalton, MA.  
Faculty  
Clayton Early Learning

Wendy Allen, Ph.D.  
Co-Director  
Clayton Early Learning

Lorin Ryan, Ph.D.  
Faculty  
University of Colorado Denver

Lynn Andrews, MS.  
Co-Faculty  
Clayton Early Learning

Rebecca Vlasin, Ed.D.  
Faculty,  
Clayton Early Learning

Alissa Rausch, Ed.D.  
Faculty  
University of Colorado Denver

Pamela Harris, Ph.D.  
Instructor  
Mile High Montessori

Elmer Harris, Ed.D.  
Instructor  
Colorado Springs School District 11

**STAFF & MANAGEMENT TEAM**

Susan Steele  
Executive Director  
The Buell Foundation

Charlotte Brantley  
President & CEO  
Clayton Early Learning

Rebecca Kantor, Ed.D.  
Dean, School of Education and Human Development  
University of Colorado Denver

Shannon Hagerman, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Continuing and Professional Education  
University of Colorado Denver

Laura Carlson  
Director of Programs  
The Buell Foundation

Rebecca Keigan  
Buell Early Childhood Leaders  
Network Director, Clayton Early Learning

Sara Van Dyke  
BECLP Program Coordinator,  
University of Colorado Denver
The 10th cohort of BECLP Fellows engaged in six graduate courses, which culminated in their community-based action research Capstone project. Courses focused on fostering different aspects of their leadership, and included:

Child Development: Theory to Leadership Practices
Taught by Joanne Dalton and Diana Schaack
This course provided an interdisciplinary introduction to theories that undergird child development and explored how theories are used to shape program models to support young children, their families, and communities.

Introduction to Transformational Leadership
Taught by Lynn Andrews and Rebecca Vaslin
This course outlined the evolution of leadership theory and immersed students in an exploration of the values, leadership capacities, and practices that define transformational leadership as they apply to effecting change to support the success and well-being of young children, families, and communities.

Leading Learning Organizations
Taught by Lori Ryan and Joanne Dalton
This course explored leadership practices needed to create an adaptive, flexible learning organization well positioned for delivering effective and sustainable programs and services on behalf of young children and families.

Leadership for Equity
Taught by Alissa Rausch and Elmer Harris
This course explored issues of power, privilege and equity present in the current early childhood system and how they affect young children, families, and communities.

Policy and Advocacy
Taught by Diana Schaack, Alissa Rausch and Pamela Harris
This course examined the political landscape of services for young children nationally and in Colorado and Fellows’ explored tools to advocate for more equitable policies for children and families in Colorado.

Participatory Action Research
Taught by Wendy Allen and Lori Ryan
Fellows learned about the action research process and facilitated their own action-research project to help address a challenging early childhood issue faced by children and families in their community.

I am more mindful about leadership being a group process rather than something any one individual can do. This is an important mindset in order to best serve our programs and communities. We have to continually ask ourselves, whose voice is not being heard?

My knowledge has grown in learning that the landscape of early childhood is more vast than I thought. Also, although there are many sectors, there is usually overlap. Therefore, there is strength in networking, building partnerships, and working collaboratively between organizations.
Fellows were also joined by a number of guest speakers throughout their courses who helped deepen their knowledge, leadership, and advocacy practices. This year’s guest speaker line-up included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jenna Augustine*</td>
<td>Assuring Better Child Health &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Kathy Anthes</td>
<td>Colorado Commissioner of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucinda Burns*</td>
<td>Early Childhood Options</td>
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<td>Rep. James Coleman</td>
<td>House District 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brain Conly*</td>
<td>Colorado Department of Human Services</td>
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<td>Rep. Crisanta Duran</td>
<td>House District 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Freemire*</td>
<td>Save the Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna Jo Haynes</td>
<td>Mile High Early Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khadija Haynes</td>
<td>K-Solutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill Jaeger</td>
<td>Colorado Children's Campaign</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Jackie Joseph</td>
<td>CU Denver/Anschutz Medical Campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Leslie Katch</td>
<td>National Louis University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Lorraine Kubiceck</td>
<td>JFK Partners, CU Denver/Anschutz Medical Campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Jon Korfmacher</td>
<td>Erikson Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jennifer Landrum</td>
<td>Denver Preschool Program</td>
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<td>Dr. Peter Mangione</td>
<td>WestEd Center for Children &amp; Families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Diana Romaro Campbell*</td>
<td>Mile High United Way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Jennifer Stedron</td>
<td>Early Milestones Colorado</td>
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<td>Dr. Eva Maria Shivers</td>
<td>Indigo Cultural Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Phil Strain</td>
<td>CU Denver/Anschutz Medical Campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Gerrit Westervelt</td>
<td>WestEd Center for Children &amp; Families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roxanne White</td>
<td>Aspen Institute</td>
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*Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program Alumni

“I know so much more about child development; child and family resiliency, brain development, attachment theory and I can use this knowledge when interacting with communities in a more focused and intentional way. I understand more about how communities, and ECE in particular, interact with each other and are impacted by state and local policies. I am more aware of how different ECE leaders are involved in advocacy and impact children and families. The field of ECE is so much broader than I was aware of before this program.”
Beginning the first phase of inquiry in January called “LOOK”, Fellows framed an inquiry question around an issue they were observing in context. The question guided their initial search of relevant literature and interviews with three people experiencing the issue on a daily basis.

By March, initial insights from “LOOK” informed each Fellow in the next phase of the inquiry process called “LOOK/THINK” in which three different types of data in their community were gathered including a more extensive literature search. Group and individual interviews, surveys, community artifacts, and observations were all forms of data collection used to inform understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives. This process in turn created opportunities to THINK about the issue more deeply.

In May, Fellows began their final phase of the process called “THINK/ACT”. Fellows shared their initial interpretation of their research with a group in their community to generate next steps together and identify recommendations for action. Next, each Fellow identified a public place to share their inquiry process and recommendations for action within their community. They culminated their process by creating an interactive presentation of their inquiry journey and writing the brief included in this document for the benefit of Buell Faculty, Buell Alumni, and the broader community.

COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION RESEARCH

What is Action Research?

Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. It uses continuous cycles of investigation designed to reveal possible solutions to issues and problems experienced in specific situations and localized settings. The action researcher seeks to build a body of knowledge that enhances professional and community practices and works to increase the wellbeing of the people involved (Stringer, 2014, p.1).

Why Use Action Research for the Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program Capstone Projects?

- We believe in authentic inquiry processes designed to uncover both the assets and challenges embedded in the leader’s community context relevant to complex social issues.
- We believe diverse programs and populations call for local solutions.
- We believe people affected by the issues need to be part of the solution.

How did the 10th Cohort of Buell Fellows engage in the Action Research process?

Beginning the first phase of inquiry in January called “LOOK”, Fellows framed an inquiry question around an issue they were observing in context. The question guided their initial search of relevant literature and interviews with three people experiencing the issue on a daily basis.

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The process of Action Research can be defined as “self-generated solutions to complex issues” and it follows a U Process beginning with “wondering to relationships to understanding to the emerging future”. Action research looks and feels like the above image.

**COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION RESEARCH**

**What was the lived experience of the 10th Cohort as Community-Based Action Researchers?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The highlights of doing this kind of inquiry...</strong></th>
<th><strong>The challenge of doing this kind of inquiry...</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The new and strengthened connections with others in their community.</td>
<td>Gaining access and building trust with community members closest to the issue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The support experienced as a Buell Fellow engaged in the work.</td>
<td>Finding the time to do the work of engaging the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The access to new information, conversations, and experiences.</td>
<td>Staying focused on the inquiry question or being overwhelmed by the complexity.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding limited research literature relevant to the issue.</td>
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The process of Action Research can be defined as “self-generated solutions to complex issues” and it follows a U Process beginning with “wondering to relationships to understanding to the emerging future”. Action research looks and feels like the above image.
The role of a researcher is to ask strong questions, encourage elaboration, closely listen and watch, be patient, allow for folks to process, and really look deeply for what the issues and challenges are.

“I am learning that people that I share this information with are becoming partners in the action research process. I am learning that the networking that happens with the research is creating a space for me to get to know other teachers and what their core beliefs about teaching are. This is inspiring.”

“I’m learning that the role of an action researcher is also fluid. The more you explore and learn, the more other components become evident.”

Being open to surprises! The issue is complex or different than anticipated

Not having the answers… must slow down and ask more questions

Learning from, listening with, and opening to community perspectives

Being an Action Researcher Means...

An infinity loop of action and knowledge

A cyclical storm of ideas
Outdoor Experiences of Families of Color with Young Children

Inquiry Question:
How do families of color with young children engage in outdoor experiences?

Defining the Issue
Being an outdoor enthusiast, I realized a lack of diversity when I was out in the mountains enjoying the typical Colorado lifestyle such as camping and hiking. This lack of diversity wasn’t just in the backcountry, but it was also missing in the media and advertisements promoting outdoor experiences. I pondered at why there was a diversity gap in outdoor recreation and I wondered specifically about its impact on children of color. I was interested in how the recently recognized nature deficit disorder (Louv, 2005) might affect young children from marginalized backgrounds. In addition, I was interested in the impact of early exposure to nature and how it can inspire children to be stewards of the planet. Knowing that outdoor exposure is vital to child development, I was interested to see if young children of color were more vulnerable to nature deficit disorder.
Engaging Community Voice

When researching outdoor experiences for families of color with young children I searched for authentic data collection methods to ensure that I was getting first hand accounts from families. I used a Photovoice approach to gather photos of what families of color currently do and how they engage in outdoor recreation. I invited families from my early learning center to share photos of a time when they are outdoors as a family. After I gathered the photos, I created a Photovoice gallery in the school so that parents could engage in dialogue about what they view and experience as outdoor recreation.

Powerful Insights

The stories that we tell about the outdoors have an impact on people’s perception of the outdoors and their place in it. My assumption was that most of these families of color did not have many outdoor experiences because of systemic, financial, historical and social barriers. What I didn’t know was that many of the families I interviewed had been camping, hiking and experiencing nature through a program called Balarat. The Balarat Outdoor Education program provides Denver Public School students with an opportunity to explore the natural world and to link those experiences to their classroom based learning. I found that people connect to the outdoors every day, in many ways, but sometimes the ways that they connect are excluded from the greater dialogue. Through PhotoVoice, families of color were able to share the many ways they engage in outdoor recreation. Children of color are outdoors almost every weekend and families of color do value outdoor time and outdoor recreation as a family.

Recommendations for Community Action

The Clayton families of color have provided two very insightful recommendations about children of color outdoors.

1. Clayton families would enjoy outdoor activities such as baseball camps, soccer camps, and basketball camps to be hosted at the school as a part of free or reduced cost extra curricular outdoor activities. Bringing resources to the school would allow outdoor activities that many families already engage in to be more accessible and at a lower cost.

2. With the success and enjoyment of programs such as Balarat, families of color at Clayton want to see a weeklong summer camp in the mountains that would be available to families with young children. Their vision is to have family summer camps in the woods so that they, as a family, can learn how to classify fauna, learn to fish, enjoy nature, make campfires and enjoy S’mores.
Inquiry Question:
How are all voices included in the early childhood public policy making process throughout Colorado?

Defining the Issue
Including a diverse set of voices in the public policy process is important as Colorado experiences major growth and shifts in the demographics and viewpoints of people in the state. The importance of involving all voices is especially true in the early childhood field, where budget and policy decisions made at the local, state, and federal level have deep impacts on the day to day work of providers, teachers, early childhood councils, and other early childhood professionals. As someone who works in public policy and a native Coloradan, it’s especially important to me to include as many voices in the process as possible in order to make sound policy that truly fits the needs of the early childhood system.

My action research focused on the inquiry question: how are all voices included in the early childhood public policy making process throughout Colorado, and if they are not, why not?

“There are entities/organizations in our early childhood system who have more opportunities than others to move public policy. They could be more engaging of diverse partners in order to best prioritize and advocate for public policy needs. We need to be more aligned—yet I think those with the leadership opportunities don’t do enough to include instead of just inform.”

“Informing myself about issues and getting better understanding of the policy making process is a good start—can’t get to the other activities without having a better understanding of how things work.”
Engaging Community Voice

For my action research process, I wanted to get a better understanding of how EC professionals across the state in different kinds of positions felt about public policy. Did they trust their elected officials? Do they feel like policy is important to their work? How should I engage diverse voices in the public policy process?

My primary tool for data collection was a survey of these very questions. I distributed the online survey through email, newsletters, and Facebook to professionals across the state and received over 50 responses. I also reviewed what other states were doing to ensure statewide engagement in public policy on issues similar to early childhood. I examined the early childhood coalitions in other states, as well as statewide coalitions for related human services and education issues, to get a better sense of what components lead to a successful coalition to influence policy, funding, and public opinion. I also looked into the frames to communicate ECE concepts more clearly.

Once my initial data had been gathered, I put together a data map to share with a group of EC professionals to get feedback on how they felt the data did or did not match their individual experiences. I also plan to share this data map with all who participated in the survey so they can see the outcome of their work.

Powerful Insights

There were several very clear themes in my action research that made an impact on how I view public policy and how I hope to engage all voices in my work going forward. Overall, there were common barriers to EC professionals getting involved in the public policy process including not having enough time, feeling like they didn’t have the expertise, and feeling like the language of public policy and the process overall is not friendly or accessible.

From my review of other states’ work and the literature, it was also apparent where our statewide coalition could increase advocacy for EC funding and positive policy could grow. Primarily, advocates for the early childhood system in Colorado need to consider how to be more accountable in the process, so that our coalition of EC advocates can have the resources, evaluation, and overall support it needs to be truly effective in the policy world.

Recommendations for Community Action

- Adjust language used to talk about public policy: I often heard in my research that the language used to talk about public policy and its impacts can be isolating to those that do not work in that field. To be more inclusive, it is important for actors in policy to try to reframe the way we talk about policy and its effects to be more accessible. And additional communication about how the issues will impact the children and families early childhood professionals serve.

- Create more customized advocacy opportunities: Too often advocacy events and trainings are not accessible to EC professionals across the state or are not tailored to be regionally specific. Advocacy groups should be intentional when planning events regarding where events and trainings are held, what incentives can be offered to make them easier to attend for busy EC professionals (e.g. childcare), and how to best tailor the content to fit the unique political dynamic in different regions.
How do small communities engage families with young children not enrolled in formal programs in early development and learning?

**Defining the Issue**

There are many young children ages 0-5 enrolled in formal, center-based programs in early learning and education. However, there are a significant number of children not in formal programs, especially those from small communities with more limited opportunities. Who are they and how do communities engage with them around early child development and learning?

As a member of an Early Child Care Coalition and a Ready for Kindergarten Action Team in the Roaring Fork Valley, I was struck by the challenges that communities face in trying to locate and serve families of young children not in formal early education programs. As I began engaging with the small mountain communities of Basalt and El Jebel, I explored how families of young children are provided opportunities to learn about early child development and learning, recognizing that not all are enrolled in formal programs. In some places, these families are referred to as “isolated.”

I then investigated how communities such as these reach families with young children. Families in these communities often lack formal connections to services, such as public schools, libraries and recreation centers. My primary question was how to find families and provide them with information about early child development and learning.

**Engaging Community Voice**

I interviewed non-profit directors in the region whose organizations provide information and services to families. I wanted to know how organizations find and connect with families whose children are not enrolled in early education programs.

I also went to public spaces to attempt to understand how parents or caregivers of young children might connect with organizations in the region. I photographed and collected print materials regarding opportunities for early learning.

Lastly, I met with a community group to hear its members’ perspectives on how to reach families of young children not in formal care. The group represented non-profits, education and government agencies. As most of the group members work directly with young children and families, they were quick to engage and were able to synthesize and make recommendations using quotes taken from the interviews through a data placemat activity.
**Powerful Insights**

I discovered that a sizable number of families across the country and in these small towns have their young children cared for by family, friends and neighbors (FFN). Families use FFN supports for many reasons. In the region of my investigation, many use this form of care because of non-traditional work hours, accessibility (both cost and space), and cultural reasons. One non-profit director stated, “[the] Latino culture doesn’t understand why you would leave your child with someone you didn’t know or take them somewhere other than your neighborhood.” This led me to understand that not all families want their children to attend a formal early education center, an important finding.

Another significant finding was that “families with young children are hard to find” if they are not in formal programs. This idea was expressed by many leaders in local non-profits. However, on the contrary, the organizations that are successful in connecting to families in their communities use neighborhood canvassing (door-to-door) and places of worship to find and connect with families. I found that it is not impossible to find these families; rather, the right strategies are not always utilized. I’ve discovered that, while research-based home visiting programs are effective in educating families, they are voluntary. Therefore, if organizations are waiting for families to come to them, this strategy is not ideal in small communities. In addition, based on my observational research, I found that most written materials were only written in English. Consequently, these materials were ineffective in reaching most new families to the region, most of whom are recent immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries.

**Recommendations for Community Action**

In the Roaring Fork community two non-profits have been able to identify and engage with families of young children not otherwise in formal programs. They use door-to-door canvassing of neighborhoods and connect with the faith community to identify families and help communicate messages about child development and learning.

Moving forward, community stakeholders have suggested that using other media such as radio, might be an avenue for reaching families. In the Roaring Fork Valley, a Spanish radio station reaches a wide listener population that non-profits and other organizations could use to attract and educate parents of opportunities available to them. This is a valuable resource for the Latino culture, one that will be pursued further to expand the engagement of families and caregivers of young children in the valley. Additionally, providing print resources in Spanish would be an easy and much more effective way to advertise in public places.
How does the system respond to families’ diverse characteristics and unique needs?

Defining the Issue

The purpose of this action research was to explore some of the different variables that influence families’ experiences while accessing the child care system, more specifically child care subsidy in Arapahoe County. The goal is to identify the variables of accessibility, to analyze them, and identify whether or not there are significant barriers or inequities and accessibility for families accessing the child care system in Arapahoe County.

I became increasingly interested in child care subsidy and families’ accessibility to child care when more and more families were sharing their personal stories with me throughout Arapahoe County. Furthermore, I really became interested when I noticed the barriers and challenges the system was creating for families’ unique needs to access child care subsidy. I believe all children deserve access to high-quality child care. Children depend on adults to protect and govern their rights to a great start. However, our current system creates unequitable opportunities and racial disparities for families and their children when accessing child care subsidy. Accessibility to child care is a civil and human rights matter! As James Baldwin stated, “For these are all our children, we will all profit by or pay for what they become.”

Knowing that all children benefit from high quality early childhood education, I could not ignore that poor families and families of color find it increasingly difficult to access high quality early childhood programs (Bassok & Galdo, 2015). Nationally, African American children attend the lowest quality early childhood programs (Hillemeier, et al., 2013). Similarly, in Arapahoe County I have observed similar trends to poor families and children of color. This is all due to a complex system and process that families are experiencing in Arapahoe County to access child care subsidy. It is my hope through this action research that the voices of families in need are amplified so that no longer shall the system present barriers for children’s basic need for high quality early childhood education.

Arapahoe county measures 72 miles (116 kilometers) east to west and 4 to 12 miles (6 to 19 kilometers) south to north.

One location to service the entire Arapahoe County.

“It only makes sense to have multiple offices throughout the County.”
- A Family
Engaging Community Voice

The action research methods I used to collect community voices included a survey distributed to approximately 50 providers and families, family interviews, individual interviews with employees in the Arapahoe County Child Care Assistance Program, artifact collection, and a community forum of families.

Overall my action research process showed a difference in attitude between providers that accept child care subsidy versus those that do not. Providers that accept families utilizing child care assistance believe that their programs benefit from the subsidy because it increases access to multiple funding opportunities. In comparison, those that do not accept child care assistance believe they do not need child care assistance program because they have private paying families. Furthermore, they believe it is a lot of paperwork to process and their business does not benefit financially. For me, the difference in attitude about the child care subsidy highlights the disparities in access for families.

Families shared through a review of the data I collected that it is difficult to know where and how to find the resources or were unaware of the resources that were available to assist with accessing the subsidy. Furthermore, families shared that the process is overwhelmingly complicated, long, and a breach of privacy. One family shared, 'applying for my passport, social security card, and employment requires less time and documentation… I would prefer my employer not to know that I am trying to qualify for CCAP.' Families shared that the data should be shared among the rule makers, legislators, and bring more awareness to other families’ unique needs to accessing the system.

Recommendations for Community Action

High quality early childhood programs have been proven to enhance the overall development of young children, cognitively, emotionally, and socially (Bruner, 2002). As a community we must begin to dialogue with families that need and utilize child care subsidy. Policy makers and the child care subsidy staff must hear, learn, and respond by putting culturally responsive systems into place that increase accessibility to subsidy for low income families that respond to their unique and diverse needs. Furthermore, we must begin to challenge the assumptions and perceptions providers hold with accepting families that utilize child care assistance to increase overall accessibility. We must also develop policies and processes that eliminate unnecessary barriers and challenges. Children who attend high quality programs are more likely to graduate from high school, avoid criminal activity, and attend college (Kendall, 2013). The overall outcomes of poor children are enhanced when they attend high quality early childhood programs (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). Accessibility to child care is a civil and human rights matter!

Powerful Insights

The most powerful insight I learned through this process is the extreme disconnect between the child care assistance programs complex rules and process and the actual realities of families unique and diverse needs. Through this process, the action research highlighted that families were unfamiliar with the availability of resources to navigate the system and unaware of the professional jargon we use, such as “high quality child care.” Through this action research I observed that the barriers and challenges families experience is a direct result of a system that is not responsive to their needs. Furthermore, I observed how these patterns of concern are widening the gap for inequitable and racial disparities in Arapahoe County. Lastly, as a leader, I have learned through this process of inquiry to continue to ask questions and acknowledge whose voice must be heard.
How school choice in Denver Public Schools is experienced and how the current process influences perspectives and the experience of integration in our schools?

Defining the Issue

Park Hill is a historically African American neighborhood facing gentrification in Denver, CO. There is a long history of fighting for equity in education in Park Hill, including the Keyes case that led to mandated bussing to desegregate schools starting in 1974. However, there is currently a large disparity of resources and increased segregation by race, economics, and school ratings within the four neighborhood elementary schools in this community. Park Hill Neighbors for Equity in Education (PHNEE), a community organization, is aiming to “raise awareness around the benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our neighborhood elementary schools.” Many parents and community members feel that the choice system is lending to the re-segregation and inequitable resourcing of our schools. While serving on a recruitment and retention committee at Stedman Elementary, it became increasingly obvious that we were running up against systemic injustices in the school choice system. Specifically, the choice system, although touted as one of the best in the nation, is a market driven system operating as a public service (education). The end result is a disproportionate allocation of resources in low performing schools and the re-segregation of our public schools to rates similar to the 1960s before bussing. This inequity influenced me to research what drives families to make the choices they make for their children’s schooling and how this “open market” of choice is contributing to the re-segregation of our schools, especially in a community where equity and diversity are expressed values and interest among neighbors.
Engaging Community Voice

Stakeholders including school board members, leaders of collective impact efforts, members of PHNEE and parents were all engaged through interviews, an online survey, artifact retrieval, and large community dialogue meetings. The online survey yielded sixty responses with the following Wordle representing the major words expressed about parent’s experience of the choice system.

One common concern in our community that surfaced in the survey was the shortage of ECE seats available. Many parents reported no success with the choice system for their preschool student because they did not get any of their choices due to limited availability. PHNEE became a very important platform to engage the community voice not only via interviews and community conversations, but also in forming next steps moving forward. In January, 2018, over 100 concerned community members and educators came together to dialogue and create a common language around the current issue.

On June 6, 2018 committees were formed to start working towards actionable steps such as resource sharing, policy recommendations, and further community engagement. In these committee meetings, I have been able to share my findings and move forward with the community in forming actionable steps.

Powerful Insights

Action research became the unfolding of a new story with a different ending as I engaged the community around the issue of school choice. When stakeholders began to unite and genuine dialogue took place, the energy in our community spread. PHNEE is now attracting other localities and journalists documenting the efforts as a unique process of collectively solving a complex issue in community. At every step of the process, I had to ask myself whose voice was at the table and whose voice should be at the table and is not.

Recommendations for Community Action

I am hoping to continue to engage with my community around this issue and am planning to move forward with exploring the following action steps

- Share survey findings through PHNEE and bring to DPS administration’s attention.
- Provide more public preschool classrooms in Park Hill as the severe shortage is exacerbating the equitable access to quality preschool for all students in the neighborhood.
- Engage with PHNEE to inform parents, educators, and neighbors about the current system and work towards policy recommendations and other creative solutions.
- Continue the discourse that the four neighborhood schools in Park Hill care about each other’s success and find ways to share resources with the end goal being equitable distribution.
Inquiry Question:
What does it look like for refugee families to feel valued and included in their child’s education?

Defining the Issue
I work in a Denver public school with a designated newcomer program. The newcomer program is designed to provide ongoing academic and language acquisition support for refugee students as they progress through elementary school. Over the three years that I have worked in the newcomer program teaching English language learning (ELL) students, I have experienced that it can be a struggle for both parents and teachers to have clear and effective communication with each other. I have also noticed that, although our school team has spent a lot of time problem-solving ways to improve our program and services for families, we have not incorporated the parent perspective about how our program recognizes their families unique characteristics and/or meets their families’ needs; how they see their role as participants; or what would help them to feel welcome, valued and included in their child’s education.

Through this research process, it was my goal to include the voices of all stakeholders: parents, students, teachers and community navigators (interpreters who help support the school and families) in this conversation, to gain a deeper understanding of the successes and shortcomings of our newcomer program, and work together to build a stronger, more inclusive community.
Engaging Community Voice

I began the process by interviewing the community navigators who play an important role in creating a bridge between families and the school. They understand the school system, and are also members of the communities that our families belong to, and therefore have insights into their communities’ values, expectations and needs related to education. Next I facilitated discussions with Kindergarten and 1st grade students about inclusion, and invited them to draw their representations of the places where their families lived before coming to the United States. I then facilitated focus groups with parents from our two largest language communities - Karen and Burmese. These focus groups took place in their community with an interpreter. Finally, I conducted a survey with teachers in my school around inclusive classroom practices for refugee students and families.

Powerful Insights

A powerful insight to come out of this process was that, from every stakeholder position, communication was key. For everyone, the lack of shared language created some amount of fear and discomfort engaging with others, and contributed to a feeling of disconnection. However, people from every stakeholder position also provided examples of meaningful connections they made when they pushed through those initial feelings of discomfort.

The difficulty with communication led to misunderstandings and assumptions on all sides. Parents expressed that they felt intimidated, and didn’t feel they had the tools to help their children. Teachers grappled with the assumption that parents were not interested in engaging or that they (the teachers) didn’t have the time to invest in making connections. Some students shared that they spoke more English than their home language, but that their parents did not speak English.

Finally, parents were very appreciative of the education their children were receiving and though they experienced challenges, they were hesitant to be critical of the school.

Recommendations for Community Action

It became clear through this research process that:

- Teachers would benefit greatly by hearing the voices of parents and from knowing the resources available to them (i.e. community navigators, phone interpretation) to make connections. My first step is to design a presentation to share this information with teachers.

- Our school needs to prioritize hiring staff from the communities that are represented in our school. The number one thing that would help families to feel welcome and comfortable would be people in the building who they can communicate with.

- Per the suggestion of the navigators, shift our community meetings to be more responsive to parent interests/concerns, and for those meetings to focus on cultivating parent leadership and utilizing parent funds of knowledge and skills.
Defining the Issue

I am a preschool teacher in a school that serves preschool through 8th grade. Throughout the year, I have conversations with teachers from higher grades and an ongoing topic of conversation is the lack of self-regulation among older students. When preschool teachers attend mandatory district professional development sessions on supporting challenging behaviors, a common takeaway is, “Yes, we are already doing this.” I sensed a growing frustration within early childhood educators that our expertise in SEL was not appreciated within our school communities. Based on these interactions and observations, I wanted to research how preschool teachers could be leaders in promoting a social emotional curriculum within our school community.

My research question, “How can the SEL practices of preschool be more visible in my school?” is grounded in the following:

- SEL is defined as learning that promotes in children the skills and competencies that lead to self regulation. It is the understanding of feelings and how feelings influence behaviors and how behaviors impact others.

- Preschool teachers spend a lot of their time teaching SEL skills. After preschool, teachers and students are shifting suddenly from SEL to more academic skills.

“What if....... preschool ideas and the implementation of social and emotional learning was pushed up instead of the higher grade ideas pushed down?”

TC
Engaging Community Voice

I began with initial interviews of district preschool teachers and ECE directors that informed an electronic survey distributed to a broader community of preschool through 8th grade teachers. Simultaneously, I completed a literature review that revealed the benefits of SEL for teachers and students, evaluated current approaches to SEL and investigated the current level of collaboration within schools. As the preschool representative for a positive behavior intervention initiative in my school, I listened and contributed to how we might develop a culture within the school as it relates to behavior supports. The literature review, as well as conversations with members of my community, showed and reinforced that SEL has multiple benefits for children and for school communities.

Powerful Insights

1. **There is a general feeling that SEL skills are eroding.** Higher grade educators were able to define SEL, but had few examples of how they included SEL in daily instruction.

2. **Teachers would like to incorporate more SEL throughout their day, but feel they are not given the time.** There is a sense of increasing demands for academic achievement and test results and pressure for teachers to prioritize academic skills in their lesson planning.

3. **Current SEL education is approached in as top-down method while it could be much more impactful to be approached from preschool up through higher grades.** Instead of preschool teachers being told what to do to prepare children for higher grades, preschool teachers would feel more empowered for their expertise and how it could improve school-wide outcomes.

4. **Preschool teachers are not included enough in school-wide professional development.** Including a teacher from every grade level would be valuable for sharing information and ideas and promoting a more positive school culture and continuity among staff and students.

Recommendations for Community Action

1. Preschool teachers can develop a list of SEL practices within their classrooms to ensure a systematic approach among the preschool team and one that can be shared and modified for higher grade levels.

2. Adopt a ladder system to embed these priorities in every grade starting with preschool and then moving up through higher grades. Included in this framework might be specific keywords that would promote a common and familiar language from the early grades and continued as students progress through the school.

3. Develop a SEL professional development series to be delivered by preschool staff at staff meetings in PK-8.

4. Design collaboration time across grades! Administrators would ensure they prioritize collaboration among all grades, even when schedules seemingly conflict and include a preschool teacher in all school committees.
Defining the Issue

Despite all the effort that has been put into building awareness around mental health, there continues to be stigma associated with utilizing mental health resources. In my studies and in my work as an early childhood mental health professional, I began wondering about the ways we inadvertently perpetuate the stigma we are working so hard to reduce. How do our practices, our language, and our outreach to families unconsciously connate a deficit-based approach, and what would happen if we turned the tables?

I was curious to research this topic in Adams County where I have been working on early childhood mental health systems-building for the past five years. As a county, we are known for the strength of our coordination efforts and have seen tremendous progress; however according to Kids Count data, Adams County continues to rank in the bottom four in terms of children living in poverty and maternal risk factors. I think that the time is ripe for examining our work with a critical lens, to see how we might be missing opportunities to adjust our practices. In order to enhance the work, it feels important to explore both our strengths and potential areas for change.

The literature highlights the ways the mental health field uses labels and categories such as “at-risk” to classify individuals based on risk rather than protective factors. It also highlights that this perpetuation of stigma can be combated through increased collaboration, family involvement, and reframing to gain broader perspectives on individual achievement and strengths.
Engaging Community Voice

Data collection strategies occurred in a variety of ways and were intentionally chosen to gain a better understanding of experiences from those receiving, referring to, and providing services. Data collection included a review of materials utilized in treatment provision, as well as a literature review.

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<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Online Survey</th>
<th>Artifacts</th>
<th>Literature Review</th>
<th>Data Gallery and Dialogue</th>
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<td>1 parent,</td>
<td>3 intake assessments completed by therapists (in</td>
<td>16 participants (33% response rate) from various early childhood health</td>
<td>Intake and new client forms, engagement policy, consumer handbook</td>
<td>10 articles looking at labels and the perpetuation of stigma; collaboration to</td>
<td>Opportunity for partners to review data</td>
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<td>1 referral source,</td>
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<td>reduce stigma, and reframing to an asset-based approach</td>
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Powerful Insights

I was pleasantly surprised by the positive results of the data and the feedback from the community that our services were, in fact, strengths-focused and de-stigmatizing. Although there was some important feedback around communicating our service availability to community partners, those who accessed services felt they were offered in a strengths-based, non-judgmental way. I was impressed by the response from my agency’s Early Childhood team when I shared with them the results of the data; they became invigorated by the findings and were excited to use it to continue to improve both our services and our collaboration with the community. As a leader and researcher, I learned about the importance of adaptability, as well as the need to create a safe, trusting space conducive to dialogue. The research project also highlighted the importance of maintaining an open, curious mind, as the results are not always what the researcher expects.

Recommendations for Community Action

Early childhood mental health colleagues invited into the process of enriching the data recommended:

1. Interviews with non-English speakers and with children would strengthen this research and add multidimensionality to the results, perhaps even changing it dramatically.

2. Present these study findings to community partners and families, as well as to other mental health teams at Community Reach Center.

3. To maintain a sustainable focus on strengths and resiliency in our early childhood mental health services, consider how this frame could be interwoven into all of Adams County’s early childhood work currently focusing on equity, family engagement, and social-emotional literacy.
Inquiry Question:
How do refugee families experience early childhood opportunities before and after resettlement?

Defining the Issue
Inequality exists in our country’s current Early Childhood Education (ECE) system. For example, research demonstrates that second-generation immigrants and refugees have a higher risk of developing academic and mental health difficulties (Kupzyk, Banks, & Chadwell, 2016) and yet these families are underrepresented in early learning schools and programs. Refugee families, including children, may have unique stressors and trauma related to the experiences of their displacement and the migration process. These families experience additional obstacles of learning a new language and adapting to living in a new culture. Research indicates that refugee and immigrant families benefit by participating in early childhood programs and that access is limited due to cultural and linguistic differences, as well as other barriers like transportation and lack of information. As a home visitor I discovered we were not serving many of the refugee families in our community. My desire to understand the causes and potential solutions to this inequality of service led me to my research question, “How do refugee families experience early childhood opportunities before and after resettlement?” Instead of focusing only on childcare, I chose to look at this issue of access and inequity more broadly and explored all early childhood opportunities such as home visiting programs, parent toddler play groups, story times, and outdoor activities.
Engaging Community Voice
Initially I interviewed professionals serving refugee families including school founders, coordinators of a parent/toddler group, and service workers from resettlement agencies. A literature review offered insight into early childhood approaches serving refugee families. With interpreters, I held two focus groups. The first with Burmese mothers of young children and the second with mothers and fathers representing six different countries: Somalia, Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. I also distributed an electronic survey to organizations working with refugee families to understand the frequency of their referral of families, where they referred them to, and their thoughts about their level of responsibility in providing families with information about early childhood opportunities.

Powerful Insights
My research showed that there is little data collected about refugees in regards to early childhood. The two focus groups revealed different information. Results from the first focus group showed the potential to influence families and bring awareness to the importance of early childhood learning and development. The second focus group showed how families desire bi-cultural and bi-lingual childcare options. Despite these differences, both groups of families shared that they had not received information and resources about early childhood opportunities upon arrival to the U.S. The survey of organizations serving refugee families demonstrated that professionals are aware of the importance of early childhood development and desire to provide more early childhood opportunities referrals, and need more information in order to support families.

Recommendations for Community Action
There are two actions with great potential for impact on the issue of how refugee families experience early childhood opportunities before and after resettlement: one increasing access to information and the other facilitating collaborations.

Information: Most surveyed organizations agreed that having more knowledge and information about early childhood opportunities would help them in their referral of refugee families. A comprehensive list or database that is updated regularly could address this need. This list could include resources for a childcare search and other early childhood opportunities available for families such as home visiting programs, play groups, and library information.

Partnerships: Collaboration is key is supporting refugee families. Like other states, Colorado has the opportunity to foster the relationship between our resettlement agencies and Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Additionally, organizations serving refugees could benefit from regular meetings with early childhood professionals or other professionals knowledgeable about early childhood opportunities.
Inquiry Question:
How could home visitation programs best understand the experiences of families living in unstable housing and what are the ways that home visitors can honor the unique characteristics of these families?

Defining the Issue
In 2015, the state of Colorado had a population of 405,279 children under the age of 6 years old, 22,124 of whom experienced homelessness. This is concerning from an early childhood perspective because housing instability for young children has been associated with delays in language, literacy, and social-emotional development. In addition, the achievement gap found in elementary school aged children who experience housing instability, in comparison to low-income families who had stable housing, is usually present and may widen. Brain research shows that development during the early years from birth to age three is critical and rapid, with a child’s brain producing more than a million neural connections each second. Children who experience trauma, often associated with unstable housing, are at risk for less rapid brain development than children who do not have these experiences.

Home visitation program services could be advantageous to the community of families who experience unstable housing, as home visitation offers a range of services including education, health/mental health and safety. My study looked at the possibility of home visitation programs strategically making modifications, shifts and adjustments to better provide services, perhaps in a different format, without compromising the fidelity of their programs to support the development of children and their families.
**Engaging Community Voice**

My action research project was supported by several different data collection methods. I initially reached out to fellow Buell alumni who had completed Capstone projects related to homelessness in some capacity. I conducted individual interviews with program personnel at homeless shelters and transitional housing facilities, completed tours, and volunteered. I distributed surveys to families, community organizations, and home visitation programs. In addition, I conducted a silent chalk talk with a group of Buell alumni, legislators, and administrative professionals in system-level positions engaged with the oversight/fidelity of programs designed to support and serve the homeless community. I was also fortunate enough to establish relationships with some new community allies who helped create opportunities for me to take this process to a different level. I gained access to families, to stakeholders through expanded networking, and to several venues to speak to community leaders about my findings.

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**Powerful Insights**

Homelessness is not interpreted the same by individuals and organizations providing services to our community of families. Families living in homelessness, transitional, or unstable housing settings are a very cohesive, inclusive, and protected community. Parents love their children, and want what is best for them. Education, healthcare, and other services that home visitation services provide is important to these families, but is secondary to having their basic needs of shelter, safety, and food secured first. This community faces many challenges, making it difficult for home visitation services to occur. Children experience a level of trauma that other communities do not experience. Although many home visitation programs provide services to this community through Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funding, services are being provided to families staying with a friend or relative, rather than providing services to families in shelters or transitional housing settings.

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**Recommendations for Community Action**

It is important to shine a light on the challenges associated with providing services to young children and their families who live in unstable housing and who do not have access to services that could be provided through home visitation. Communicating this challenge and opportunity is essential and can be achieved through presentations to community leadership, utilization of social media outlets including radio and television, and advocacy with our legislators. Home visitation programs need to establish collaborations and partnerships with other home visitation programs that offer different services, and with other types of community organizations to provide wrap-around support to families. Working relationships need to be developed with existing programming structures that some shelters and transitional housing organizations currently have (i.e. required classes, etc.) to better access families and to provide services and education in a different format. Working together to serve the community of families who experience unstable housing could positively impact the future, including funding opportunities and innovation approaches to this community challenge.
Inquiry Question:
How do the people in my community define effective family engagement and how do we get better at it?

Defining the Issue
Very few families attended my school’s final parent event of the 2016-2017 school year. This was extremely discouraging to the staff at my school. They had put in a great deal of effort preparing for the event and felt the information they presented was important for families to hear and understand. Throughout the school year, staff held quarterly “Parent University” evenings to educate parents in what we were doing at school and to share activities they could do at home to help their children learn. We had good attendance at first, but that dwindled to having very few families show up for our subsequent events.

My school district was experiencing a similar trend. Hoping to have community discussion around a new student data management system, they mailed over three hundred invitations to attend a community meeting. Only one parent showed up. Our district leadership team and our school board began to discuss why there is so little parental interest in attending school events. We knew we needed to do something, but were unsure of where to begin. My own School Advisory Team decided that family engagement would be where they would focus their improvement efforts this school year.

Engaging Community Voice
I gathered the bulk of information from my community stakeholders through mostly individual interviews and group surveys. I also interviewed small groups of students during their lunch breaks. In addition, our School Advisory Team, consisting of parents, teachers and representatives from various community support groups, held monthly discussions centered on our school’s family engagement concerns, goals and efforts.
Powerful Insights

I am so appreciative of the parents I spoke with, especially those who serve on our School Advisory Team, for their courageously honest insights related to our school processes. I learned that our big, all-school, crowded events are intimidating for many of our parents. What parents really want is to develop a relationship with their child’s teacher and to have opportunities to get to know the parents of their child’s friends in class. The three big themes that continually resurfaced were developing relationships, feeling comfortable and having good communication.

One parent told me that our “Parent Universities”, where we brought parents in to teach what we know and what we do, felt a bit demeaning to her and some of her friends. She thought it seemed like the educators have all the answers and it was the parents’ job to learn from them. Although we were well intentioned, we have always expected parents to come to us, on our terms, with our agenda, understand our acronyms and school vocabulary, and then do what we suggest. What our parents really want most is to get to know the people who care for their children for the greater part of the day. They want us to learn as much from them as we want them to learn from us.

Another insight is that educators tend to narrowly define engagement. Colleagues in my school district feel that we had no parent engagement because of the poor attendance at decision-making meetings. I now understand the multiple ways parents are engaged in their children’s school, with one of the most powerful ways helping their children understand the importance of education.

Recommendations for Community Action

My school team has decided to make the following changes:

1. Limit large whole school events. Teachers would instead invite families monthly to engage in an authentic classroom activity to foster relationship with the classroom teacher as well as with other families in the classroom.

2. Increase positive communication with “kudos” calls home to parents when a child has met a learning goal or has done something well.

3. Expand our communication efforts. In addition to our regular newsletters, we will expand our school website and use of other social media. We will install a large neon menu board in our school lobby to update parents regularly.

4. Invite parents to monthly coffee meetings with the principal. These talks are informal and centered around topics suggested by the parents.
How do family child care providers experience licensing rules and regulations in their daily practice?

Defining the Issue
A recent survey of the early childhood workforce in Colorado found, above compensation and little access to benefits, the top two leading sources of job frustration for family child care (FCC) providers are licensing rules and regulations (35%) and policies that make FCC homes more like centers (27%) (Schaack, 2017). FCC providers’ frustration may lead to higher levels of occupational burnout, which could affect the quality of care the children receive, and potentially deter unlicensed care providers from becoming licensed (Schaack, 2017). These data suggest licensing rules, regulations, and policies aimed at FCC providers could be improved to better suit the practice of family child care providers in their unique settings. Additional research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how FCC providers actually experience licensing rules and regulations in their day-to-day practice, their specific causes of frustration, and potential amendments to current rules, policies, and practices that could ease the tension felt by family child care providers. As access to affordable early care and education is becoming increasingly difficult for families, we must work to retain those committed to serving children and families in all settings by improving the delivery methods of oversight and regulation to ensure Colorado’s children in family child care homes are happy, healthy, and thriving.

Engaging Community Voice
In March 2018, I conducted interviews with 25 licensed FCC providers who educate and care for young children in Adams, Alamosa, Denver, El Paso, Pueblo, Rio Grande, and Teller counties. I set out to elevate the voices of FCC providers in the field to more clearly understand the challenges, motivations, frustrations, and experiences with the intention of sharing the information with state-level leaders and explore potential strategies that could alleviate frustration of FCC providers without compromising quality or the safety of children. I shadowed two FCC providers in their homes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their daily experiences. In May 2018, I conducted a small focus group of FCC providers in Denver to discuss themes from the interviews and brainstorm strategies that could better support FCC providers.

“I have strong ties to my community. I love my kids, and they love me. Many still visit me from time to time. Now, I am taking care of one of my former kid’s kid so I have been doing this for a while.”

FCC provider from Alamosa County
**Powerful Insights**

After interviewing FCC providers, I quickly realized that a handful of policies or rules are not causing frustration, but rather a complex constellation of issues stemming from a variety of oversight systems. Frustration is amplified by 70-hour work weeks, feeling undervalued and isolated, and public misperceptions about FCC work. As many FCC providers described their work with children, their responses indicated that they built structure and routines into their programs to ensure the children in their care are safe; moreover, many utilize academic curricula so that children in their care are ready for school and incorporate social-emotional well-being into their practice. Overwhelmingly, the FCC providers interviewed were highly dedicated to serving children and families in their community and were extremely passionate about working with young children. Frustrated and overwhelmed with some aspects of the career that pull their attention away from children, many indicated the sole reason they remain in the profession is to continue working with children and provide access for working families in their community.

“\[It seems as if the state wants to get rid of family child care homes altogether and just have children in centers. It just keeps getting harder and harder to stay in business and do what we love, provide care and education to the kids in our communities.\]”

– FCC provider in Denver

**Recommendations for Community Action**

- Conduct additional research, interviews, and focus groups to obtain information from a representative sample of family child care providers across Colorado
- Urge state licensing to consider relationship-based licensing models as a mechanism for building stronger, more productive and responsive provider-licensing relationships
- Include licensed family child care providers in statewide messaging about the importance of the early care and education field and the importance of their roles in children’s lives
- Tailor existing trainings to the unique settings of FCC homes in a co-creative process so that trainings feel more relevant to their contexts
- Provide financial assistance and/or substitutes to FCC providers to attend policy trainings like Speak Up for Kids or to attend meetings to provide feedback on rules or policies that affect them
- Build stronger communication systems to better inform FCC providers of rule or regulation changes before changes are implemented
Callan Quiram
Early Education Academic Partner
Denver Public Schools

Understanding How School Communities Define “Kindergarten Readiness”

Inquiry Question:
How are concepts of kindergarten readiness constructed?

Defining the Issue
Kindergarten marks, for some children, the entrance to formal education, and is recognized as a critical year in establishing a child’s relationship with school. Given the national focus on kindergarten readiness, I wished to explore what the concept of “kindergarten readiness” meant, and how school communities defined that concept. In my work, I see many different schools, and participate in many different conversations around what it means to be ready for kindergarten. Without fail, every year, I hear some teachers (both preschool and kindergarten) describe students as not “ready” to go to kindergarten. When I look at kindergarten students, or think about the role of kindergarten in our education system, it became very hard to conceptualize a child who wasn’t ready. This sparked my wonderings… What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten? How was that decided? Who decides what it means to be ready for kindergarten? What information is used to determine readiness? By examining this concept of readiness, I hoped to gain an understanding of how kindergarten readiness as a concept is constructed by the communities with whom I worked.
Engaging Community Voice

I initially interviewed school members (teachers and school leaders) at one school, an early childhood center in Denver Public Schools, about their understandings of what it meant to be ready for kindergarten. My questions focused on what readiness meant, as well as what a child would look like if they were “not ready.” I assumed in asking these questions that, if such a thing as kindergarten readiness could be conceptualized, then a child NOT ready for kindergarten could also be defined.

The teachers I talked with also struggled to name why children would not be ready for kindergarten. School leaders were able to name what conditions would make a child “not ready.” To see if this pattern continued, I distributed a survey widely to central office staff, school leaders, teachers, and paraprofessionals. The survey responses were inconsistent with patterns that emerged in my interviews, and a large array of understandings about kindergarten readiness appeared. Simultaneously, I examined artifacts from schools, mostly flyers or materials for parents, that demonstrated each school’s messaging about kindergarten readiness, and found them to be extremely varied as well.

Powerful Insights

Kindergarten readiness is defined at the school level. Teachers and administrators stressed the importance of social-emotional learning, and paraprofessionals felt that readiness focused around skills like letter and number knowledge. Viewing this through an ecological model helps me, as a researcher, see that every person of the child’s education experience (paraprofessional, preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, administrator) brought their own perspective to what it means to be ready for kindergarten, and those lenses were not always in alignment.

I had assumed that testing, and other central office requirements, heavily influenced teachers’ and school leaders’ understandings of kindergarten readiness. Very few people discussed requirements as concepts of readiness. With the variance of answers from school to school, I learned that construction of any parameter of “kindergarten readiness” happens within school communities, and that schools rely on the knowledge of their members to construct that definition.

Recommendations for Community Action

Within the DPS Early Education Department, we identified recommendations from this study.

1. As a community, return to gathering information at individual school sites, and with more school administrators, around how kindergarten readiness is determined. Gathering more data could help improve an understanding of how teachers build their definitions of kindergarten readiness.

2. Develop a toolkit to foster conversations around kindergarten readiness at schools to inform community conversations and definitions. Having common language around expectations for kindergarten could benefit school communities as they make these decisions with their families.

3. Schools could host annual conversations for kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, parents, and school administrators, where collectively they determine the skills and information useful to students in kindergarten to be included in their community’s definition of success not only in kindergarten, but also the rest of a student’s school career. Ultimately, we need to build the knowledge at the school level so community members can deeply engage in meaningful and thoughtful dialogue around what best prepares students to enter kindergarten at their schools.
How do families with young children navigate the Mental Health System in our Community

Defining the Issue
As an early educator and a parent of a child with a mental health diagnosis, I quickly learned of the challenges families face when seeking access to mental health care in our community. As a director of an early education preschool for ten years, I noticed an increase of children and parents with mental health conditions that affect their ability to properly function in society, school or work. My last position was a director for a non-profit school that served ALL children. This included children that were expelled from other preschools for challenging behaviors. When I took over one of the struggling schools, I was told that all five classrooms had 40-75% of children with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). My firsthand experience as a parent revealed a process that included six to eight-month assessment waiting lists, lack of coordinated care, and no one to help the family navigate through the mental health system to ensure follow through and support.

How can a less challenging process to access mental health care be possible? How are children in their most formative years having to wait almost a year just to get assessed for a mental health issue? These personal experiences began the framework of my action research.

Engaging Community Voice
My action research process included personal interviews, an electronic survey, and a stakeholder discussion as outlined in the graphic.

- **Personal Interviews**: Interviews with parents that have experienced the journey of navigating through our mental health system for their young child
- **Data used to create electronic survey**

- **Electronic Survey**: Sent 55 electronic surveys via email and social-media
- **48 surveys completed: participants ranged from social workers, medical staff, mental health providers, preschool-12 educators, and school administrators**

- **Stakeholder Discussion**: Data gallery hosted to share data with those who participated in in the first two data collection phases as well as city council, Colorado Springs police and fire, social worker, and nurse practitioner
- **Discussion on what data spoke the loudest and how it can be used to make changes in our MH system**
**Powerful Insights**

I asked the following question in my survey: “What are 2-3 words that come to mind when you think about access and navigation of the mental health system in our community?” The voltage behind the words chosen to describe a person's experience, journey, process, access, or navigation of the mental health system in our community was an immediate red flag that there is work to be done.

Another insight regarding the financial realities families face was brought to light when a parent shared, “I have the ability to make $65,000 annually, yet with a family of four, I no longer qualify for Medicaid. I had to hold back on my career and doing better for my family for my son to get the services he needs. I calculated that I would have to make $150,000 to pay for family insurance, meet deductibles, twice a week co-pay for therapies, twice a month co-pay for psychiatrist visits, $365 a month for medications. There is no way I could make that happen.”

When I did my tour around town in public areas to see if mental health resources or awareness posters were up, I stumbled on a framed poster that said, “Navigating Mental Health?” and had the phone number to National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI) printed on it. The poster was in the very back of the emergency room that was blocked by a bathroom door when open. Additionally, there were plenty of resources in the agencies that served those with mental illness, yet it varied by zip codes. Most NAMI marketing was targeted in the lower income neighborhoods, buses, bus stops, social service centers and Peak Vista Health Clinics for under/non-insured citizens. I believe caring for the mental health of all children is a village problem not something families can handle alone. The stigma around mental health issues for those unaware of how this affects families should be addressed. Our community can work together to support all families in all areas of our community in these situations.

**Recommendations for Community Action**

Since one in five people in the United States have a mental health condition (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2015), it is imperative that our law makers, stakeholders, learning and business communities work together to increase the number of children able to access mental health services. The stakeholders that participated in the Community Voices Data Gallery had the following suggestions on next steps:

- Partner with NAMI to see exactly where they are in their campaign on reducing Mental Health Stigma and their future marketing plan
- Create a toolkit for educational presentations that consists of:
  - Slides that can be used to scroll in medical offices, breakrooms, dentist offices, cafeterias etc.
  - Presentation (Prezi or power point form) for wellness workshops offered by employers. We worked on a sample slide show and discussed the best delivery of the data.
  - NAMI one-pager infographic to post on local boards at coffee shops, local businesses and handout community events
Early Childhood Special Educator  
*St. Vrain Valley School District*

**Joan Scheuerman**  
**Building Inclusive Classrooms**

**Inquiry Question:**
How can we identify and use the strengths of our community to build a classroom culture of inclusion?

**Defining the Issue**
I began looking at inclusion broadly and researched how we, as educators, approach inclusion in our early childhood programs. Inclusion encompasses working with young children with differences or behavior concerns and how we enact policies and practices to include parents in school programming. I wanted to explore how the levels of inclusion affected the group as a whole, and whether, as an educator, I could utilize specific strategies to increase feelings of inclusion. I wanted to understand how inclusion facilitates trusting relationships, to insure all children feel safe enough to engage in the risk-taking essential to social and academic learning.

**Engaging Community Voice**
My research into how inclusion is perceived by those involved in schools offered me the opportunity to invite teacher, parent and children’s views of inclusion, and an opportunity to search the literature for inclusive practices beyond my school.

I gathered a cross section of data asking questions of parents and teachers about their views on inclusion. Based on the initial survey data, I facilitated a Chalk Talk for teachers, designed to dig deeper into issues including methods and tools used to identify children’s strengths and the depth of commitment community members had towards inclusion.

I searched my classroom weekly journals, sent to parents as a reflection of the previous week, for evidence of inclusion. I found the journals as a source of strengths-based communication. The review of the weekly learning brings attention to how the children’s actions through play and in many cases demonstrates how play promotes the learning across all domains identified in state standards, including social-emotional learning.

I offered a camera to children, inviting them to photograph anything that made them feel safe at school. This data collection strategy highlighted how the children’s voices can be included in the classroom research.
Powerful Insights

I was energized by the patterns I saw in the literature about the teacher’s role in building an inclusive classroom, the necessity for the teacher to drive this effort, and the many tools available to enable teachers to shift to a more strengths-based approach to children and their families, and their profound effect on teachers’ approaches to their students.

Time spent in a classroom by parents, presumably promoting inclusion, was viewed differently by teachers and parents. I questioned the difference between invitation and inclusion, and discovered inclusion was a much more vulnerable experience for both teachers and parents, often leading to a more fulfilling experience for all. The Chalk Talk with teachers disclosed they wanted more time to explore these ideas with colleagues. Time was also cited on the teacher survey as a deterrent to exploring new methods to be more inclusive.

And it is clear that families are not all the same; facilitating inclusion starts with learning their strengths, empowering teachers to individualize inclusivity for each child and family. The review of my classroom journals revealed a wealth of children’s strengths in the classroom, every day. Recognizing these strengths and voicing them is imperative to building the trust necessary in an inclusive classroom.

Giving the camera to my students yielded a very different result than I anticipated. They almost exclusively photographed people; their teachers, classmates and themselves. I had several requests by children to take their picture because, at that particular time, they felt safe, often while engaging in what I viewed as courageous behavior. As their teacher I was moved by how important these relationships are in their lives, and it strengthened my commitment to building a classroom environment where children feel like this all day, every day.

I learned how inclusion is a process of each person feeling safe and as an integral and necessary part of the group. I experienced how the deep listening we’ve learned in our Buell Fellowship and the deep reflection we’re encouraged to practice leads us to inclusion that is vulnerable and personal and is based in the strengths of teachers, parents and children. This approach can change the trajectory of a child’s schooling experience.

Recommendations for Community Action

Through this research, I have come to understand that teachers must feel empowered to build an inclusive classroom. A commitment by administration to give time to this work is crucial in building these skills.

Recommendation 1: Professional development and the gift of time for teachers to:

   a. Reflect on their practice with regard to inclusion, and to collaborate with colleagues to share strategies for building inclusive classrooms.

   b. Build knowledge for seeing and developing relationships with children and their families based on strengths. There are many methods available to bring these processes to staff, including the Funds of Knowledge Inventory, Learning Stories and strengths-based portfolios.

Recommendation 2: Teachers inventory of their own strength as they are surely plentiful. This knowledge gives teachers the courage to be vulnerable with our students and their families, a necessary element to truly inclusive classrooms.
Inquiry Question:
How does the community (do you), perceive access to infant toddler care in our region and how does it affect the community?

Defining the Issue
There is a childcare shortage in Montrose county and surrounding rural areas, especially for infants and toddlers, ages 6 weeks old to 2 years. There are 2,322 children in Montrose with a total population of 41,471 (QuickFacts, n.d.). Currently, Colorado childcare centers only have the capacity to serve 45% of children (Access to High-Quality Child Care, n.d.). Of that percentage, the most underserved are infants and toddlers. In Montrose alone, there are only approximately 85 infant toddler spots available for children age birth to two.

Families are being forced to make decisions that may not reflect what they really want and are not always grounded in safety and quality. Families may choose neighbors, elderly family members or centers that are possibly not an ideal fit. Families may have many reasons for the arrangements that they ultimately make. However, given the severe lack of affordable, high-quality, early education options, many are being deprived of the opportunity to have their ideal choice of care as an option. This can leave some families having to piece together multiple alternatives for the care of their children. These compulsory decisions are often undesirable or cause severe economic hardship (not working, not accepting jobs etc.).
Engaging Community Voice

My research began by brainstorming various stakeholders and identifying their connection to the issue. The stakeholders included; families, grandparents, neighbors, tax payers, city planners, developers, business owners, home care providers, child care center directors, Montrose Memorial Hospital human resources and staff, health care providers, licensing agents, Department of Health and Human Services, city government, county government, state legislators, Colorado Mesa University leaders, Technical College of the Rockies leaders, and school district leaders. After brainstorming the list of stakeholders and identifying the role they played, it was quickly realized the issue was deeply embedded in the Montrose community and highly complex.

Four different data collection tools were used; a literature review, personal interviews, small forum interviews and finally, a twelve question online survey. I wanted to make sure many community voices across multiple demographics were heard.

Powerful Insights

These words emerged when people were asked, “How do you perceive access to infant-toddler care in the Montrose region?”

The interviews revealed common themes. Some said they had to quit their job, not accept promotions and worst of all, compromise safety and quality. Most people understood how lack of access to care impacts economic development.

Participants felt that if more spots for infant toddlers were available, they could return to work no longer needing government assistance. Many also said they would be relieved that their children were in a safe place and they could focus more at work.

When providers were asked to share information, they revealed current rates do not cover the true cost of care or support capacity building. They expressed that most of the families they serve think that current costs are already too high. Providers were at a loss as to how to build infant toddler capacity with the lack of money generated from tuition.

After compiling data, presentations were made to small groups of stakeholders. They had a chance to weigh in on the process and give suggestions about next steps. This stakeholder input was helpful to understand the “Now What” of the process.

Recommendations for Community Action

The next step is to educate people about the lack of quality infant toddler care and how it affects our community. Efforts should be focused on engaging the thoughts and ideas of as many stakeholders as possible. A speaking tour reporting what information has been collected so far and then allowing for the facilitation of a discussion would raise awareness. More data would need to be collected from a larger representation of the community, possibly in the form of a needs assessment. Other communities in Colorado and the nation experiencing the same issue were more successful with implementing solutions once large amounts of relevant data were collected. After collecting more data and concluding the speaking tours, I am hopeful that a group of us will be able to work with policy makers, government agencies and business co-ops to successfully increase quality care options for families in Montrose.
Inquiry Question:
What are the undercurrents and competing critical issues facing the San Luis Valley (SLV)?

Defining the Issue
There is a growing amount of research on early child development, how early experiences impact individuals for a lifetime, and the economic impacts of quality early childhood (EC) services.

Well-known experts such as Brazelton, Lally, Heckman and Shonkoff, share their research and speak to concerns in the field. The research is clear about the importance of early brain development; “Early experiences affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health” (developingchild.harvard.edu). Additionally, quality early childhood experiences have an economic benefit; “High-quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment. Significant gains are realized through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors, and employment” (heckmanequation.org).

After twenty years of work to increase early childhood services in our south-central rural Colorado community and making progress on systems-building efforts, there is still limited public and political support for child care, young children and their families. Why is this the case? With all of the research-based information to increase our understanding, I believed that the public and political will was lacking due to the competing critical issues facing the San Luis Valley.
Engaging Community Voice

My community action research was completed by interviewing key leaders. Our conversations covered the critical issues facing our community; how these issues are impacting children and their families; the key leaders’ understanding of how our children are cared for; and their hopes for the near future. The community members and public servants interviewed represent a county commissioner, city mayor, police chief, university board trustee, director of social services, hospital administrator, water/agriculture expert, bank executive, realtor and small business owner. Additionally, I collected artifacts such as a city plan and comprehensive economic development strategy. My research and literature support how my inquiry issue is framed and clearly defines how both “public” and “political” will are necessary to impact change.

Powerful Insights

I was not surprised to hear community concerns such as, “The opioid issue is so critical; it is difficult to address it’s far reaching tentacles,” “Today the greatest issue is being near historical drought conditions,” or “The SLV is economically depressed compared to the rest of the state”. What I found most fascinating is that other critical issues are not being prioritized. But instead, key leaders do not think about early childhood services at all: “I don’t have a clue, I don’t have young children,” “This was a great conversation brought to our attention today, but once we walk out this door, early childhood won’t be thought about,” “I am so removed from it, I don’t know and did not think about early childhood until you walked into my office,” “County and City leaders see early childhood services as someone else’s role.”

“What we experience in the 21st century is the battle between child development facts (research-based information), fictions (unverified beliefs), and outdated assumptions about family functioning that keep the United States from adequately supporting early development (Lally, 2013)”.

Recommendations for Community Action

San Luis Valley residents must figure out how to generate public and political will for positive social change around the issue of early childhood services in our community. This IS a complex issue. Long-term, effective change in complex issue areas typically happens only if the government and key public stakeholders are pushing in the same direction (Post, Raile & Raile, 2010). Data from the initial phase of this community action research project was shared with additional members of the community. The group expanded on the data and developed a number of starting point ideas. Two main action steps were identified. 1) Involve important stakeholders and 2) Develop clear shared goals and messaging. I intend to share data I collected during this project, with community groups and elected officials. Additionally, I plan to research ways to assist our community to increase its level of public and political will for early childhood services.
Defining the Issue

Families with children that experience challenging behavior need access to services and interventions as decades of research support that high-quality intervention services can change a child’s developmental trajectory and improve outcomes for children, families, and communities (Goode, Diefendorf & Colgan, 2011). Early Childhood services that can be accessed through school districts and Part B are sometimes not enough when needs involve challenging behaviors that require a higher dosage and greater intensity. Medicaid waivers can provide these intensive services. In Colorado, there are 17 children’s waiver programs offered through Medicaid.

Many layers exist to accessing and maintaining services through Medicaid waivers that can become barriers for families. The first potential barrier to services is low-income eligibility requirements. These eligibility guidelines limit the income adults can earn to retain benefits (Meyers, Lukemeyer, & Smeeding, 1998) and leave many middle-income families choosing between income or services. Meyers et al. (1988) found that some families make a “rational choice to forgo work or enhanced employment opportunities” to keep their “earnings low enough so that their children can receive essential Medicaid benefits” (pp. 210). Other barriers include wait lists. Previously families waited upfront for a spot on a waiver, often a year or longer. Today families are quickly moved to waiver programs but can wait 12-18 months to find a provider. Additionally, Community Center Boards (CCBs) report turnover to be as high as 50-69% for providers who support children’s waivers (Alliance Report, 2017). Finding a replacement provider can again take up to 18 months.

Engaging Community Voice

Data gathered from the community took various forms that include interviews, literature reviews, information gathered from websites and a chalk talk with members of the community. Stakeholders in the community all have vested interest in Medicaid and Medicaid waivers, including: families, service providers, state agencies, and state Medicaid.
**Powerful Insights**

I knew before beginning my research that families with young children that have significant challenging behavior often need access to additional services beyond what is provided through schools and part B & C. These intensive behavioral services are provided through various Medicaid waiver services for children and accessing Medicaid was often a problem for families.

My assumption was that low-income eligibility requirements prevented families from being able to access Medicaid services. I learned that while low-income eligibility may pose problems for some families, many families struggled to get and maintain access for other reasons.

Additionally, interviews with Medicaid revealed frustration related to an inability engage stakeholders with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD). Stakeholders who attended my community chalk talk meeting expressed frustration related to a lack of knowledge in many areas – not knowing what services are available, not understanding how the waivers work and no knowledge of stakeholder meetings at Medicaid.

From my research and data synthesis, three main themes emerged.

- Lack of knowledge and understanding about waivers and available services
- Too many people involved in service planning
- Unethical distribution of funds

The most powerful suggestions came from the community stakeholders that included individuals receiving services, families and providers. There is no bullet point about low-income eligibility requirements; the themes mentioned above have created additional of barriers related to access that are more problematic for families. Despite a high level of frustration expressed by these community members, they were able to generate action steps that were concise and seemingly, very doable.

**Recommendations for Community Action**

Community action steps generated were very targeted toward the identified themes that emerged from my action research, a combination of interviews, information from websites, literature reviews and community action meetings. The actions proposed have the potential to immediately impact access to Medicaid waivers and services while building momentum for future actions that may require changes at the policy level:

- Present community suggestions at Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF) leadership meeting.
- Educate families about waivers and services available through non-bias sources – aligning with conflict-free case management (Specifically have Medicaid provide a call back service to assist families).
- Connect individuals receiving services to advocacy groups as appropriate.
- Continue to explore options such as family-owned Program Approved Service Agencies (PASAs) that could deliver services and provide information to other families.
- Research workforce options and advocate for providers for training support and better wages.
The Buell Early Childhood Leaders Network (BECLN) is a collaborative network of Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program alumni intentionally connecting and aligning as a diverse group of leaders committed to serving as agents for change across the Colorado early childhood system. Since we believe effective leadership is fundamental to achieving equity, opportunity, and excellence for all young children and families, we are eager to have the 10th Cohort of Buell Fellows join our Network!

We hope our Network easily becomes a familiar professional home for this group of Fellows as we continue to practice our values of:

- **Empowerment**: We challenge and celebrate each other as leaders
- **Connection**: We seek opportunities to give and receive social supports
- **Integrity**: We align our leadership actions with our leadership beliefs
- **Development**: We gain leadership knowledge and experience

The overall theme for 2017-2018 BECLN was to move from a “Me” as an individual leader to a “We” collective network of leaders; connecting together to promote the BECLN vision, beliefs, and values. Our “Me to We” theme informed the Network’s activities of the last year and will continue to shape the Network’s direction going forward.

The 5th Annual Buell Leaders Network Alumni Retreat held in July, 2017 embodied all four of the intentions as 96 alumni gathered to connect, learn, collaborate, strategize, and engage in envisioning the possibilities of the collective “WE” of the BECLN. The Alumni Leaders Council (ALC), a cross-cohort representative group of Buell Fellows engaged in the planning and implementation of the retreat and introduced the newly designed BECLN regional model. The ALC members this year included: Vangi McCoy, Kathy Sutherland, Kristin Habicht, Patsy Brown-Bruce, Robin Levy, Soren Gall, Kelly Schultz, Kim Cassady, Casey Badger, and Eryn Weber Kaczka. The regional model divides the network into six regions throughout the state in order to afford Buell leaders the opportunity to focus on leadership activities with a localized mind set. The regional effort was supported by the recruitment of Regional Connectors to serve as the regional events/activities organizers, facilitators, and as the point of contact for Alumni in their designated regions. The Regional Connectors include, Shelley Smith, (Northwest), Ame Guilfoil, (Southwest) Priscilla Patti, Jasmine Balion, and Barbara Wacker, (Front Range/NE) Jody Berg, (South Central/SE) Diana Herrera, (Denver Metro South), Elizabeth Phillips, and Melissa Jewel, (Denver Metro North). The ALC supports the Regional Connectors as mentors and participants at the regional events and/or activities.
As the Network continues to grow, so does our visibility and accessibility as a resource for alumni. When thinking on the important work of the BECLN, alumnus Jace Holden shares, “Holding space for others; seeking out those who have a different view than we do and authentically listening to them to be of value to them and to learn from their perspective.” Alumna Kim Cassady adds, “I believe harnessing our power as a network is the most important work of the BECLN.”

Our work is supported by staff at Clayton Early Learning Becky Keigan (Director), Wendy Allen, (BECLP Co-director) and Joanne Dalton (BECLP Faculty).