



# Mississippi Early Learning Alliance Annual Report

*January 2020 - July 2021*

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Mississippi Early Learning Alliance (MELA) Annual Report is designed to summarize our activities and accomplishments over the past year. Our purpose is to share our guiding vision for early childhood in Mississippi, explain the strategies and tactics we are using to make this vision a reality, provide updates on our progress, and highlight emerging areas of work and collaboration.

While we are excited to share and celebrate the work we have done, MELA also intends for this report to serve as a tool for accountability and transparency with our funders, partners, and the greater early childhood community of Mississippi.

Notably, while future reports will cover 12-month periods, this report will cover 18 months (January 2020 - July 2021). Because MELA launched in January 2020, and 2020 was an extraordinary year, we realized that we could tell a more cohesive and comprehensive story about MELA's progress by extending the amount of time covered in our first Annual Report.



## OUR MISSION

MELA drives collective impact with diverse stakeholders to achieve systemic change leading to the holistic development of Mississippi children in their first 8 years of life.

## WHO WE ARE:



**Dr. Angela Bass**  
*Executive Director*



**Biz Harris**  
*Deputy  
Director*



**April May**  
*Coalitions and Programs  
Director*



**Chloe Lake**  
*Communications  
Director*



## CONTACT US

**Mail:**  
P.O. Box 16174  
Jackson, MS 39236

**Email:**  
[Contact@MSEarlyLearning.org](mailto:Contact@MSEarlyLearning.org)

**Facebook:**  
[@MSEarlyLearning](https://www.facebook.com/MSEarlyLearning)  
**Instagram:**  
[@MSEarlyLearningAlliance](https://www.instagram.com/MSEarlyLearningAlliance)



# What would be possible in Mississippi if...



*State leaders made policy decisions that prioritized equitable outcomes for children, while working hand-in-hand with community members?*



*There was cross-sector collaboration to implement programs supporting the holistic development of children, beginning at birth?*



*We aligned policies and practices with state data and the science of infant and child development?*



These questions fuel our work at MELA. We are dedicated to building an **early childhood system that Mississippi children and families deserve.**

# We believe that the most impactful change can happen when:



MELA was founded to help the Mississippi early childhood community work **together** to achieve **impacts that are far more significant than any one entity can achieve alone.**



ABOUT US

MELA was founded in 2018, but officially launched in January 2020. MELA seeks to understand and communicate both the strengths and opportunities for improvement within Mississippi’s early childhood system. We are committed to bringing diverse voices together to identify and achieve shared goals.

For more information about MELA, visit our website, [MSEarlyLearning.org](https://MSEarlyLearning.org). You can also follow us on Facebook ([@MSEarlyLearning](https://www.facebook.com/MSEarlyLearning)) or Instagram ([@MSEarlyLearningAlliance](https://www.instagram.com/MSEarlyLearningAlliance)).

OUR PLAN

From September – March 2020, MELA developed a formal, three-year strategic plan to realize its mission. To develop the plan, MELA conducted a thorough landscape analysis informed by over 50 early education leaders and stakeholders in Mississippi. This process yielded three long-term goals:

- 1. Form a statewide coalition that will identify, pursue and achieve shared goals for positive early childhood system change.
- 2. Serve as a Mississippi-focused information hub with a clear communications plan to disseminate information about the statewide early childhood system.
- 3. Develop multiple, differentiated funding streams to sustain MELA’s statewide efforts.

MELA is currently on target to meet its interim goals outlined in the plan. To download the [full strategic plan](#), visit the “About Us” page on our website or scan the QR code below.

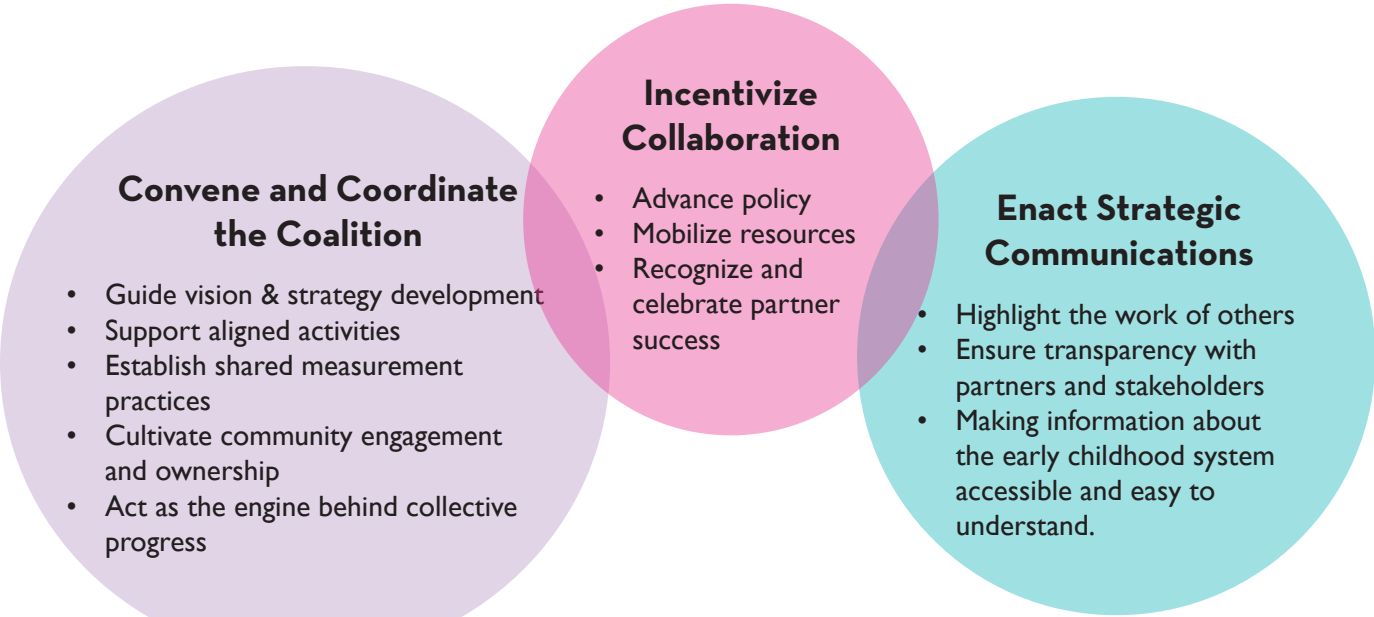
Download our three-year strategic plan.



OUR APPROACH

MELA implements the Collective Impact Model, a tried and tested framework for facilitating and achieving large-scale social change. This model provides a structured method to align the efforts of community leaders, state and local organizations, government agencies and private citizens to achieve shared goals and priorities.

**MELA’s role in the collective impact framework has three main components:**



OUR IMPACT

JANUARY 2020 - JULY 2021

During our first 18 months as a statewide organization, we began implementing the three main components of our approach with three primary audiences. Throughout all of our work, promoting equity remains a constant priority.

Promoting Equity

Convene and Coordinate the Coalition



Organizational Partners

Childcare Providers



Incentivize Collaboration

Enact Strategic Communications



Parents and Families

## OUR IMPACT ON CHILDCARE PROVIDERS

### Mississippi Early Learning Resources Shared Services Site

MELA launched [MSEarlyLearningResources.org](https://MSEarlyLearningResources.org) to support and engage with childcare providers. The site features tools, resources, and cost-savings offers that providers need to succeed in their dual roles as business professionals and educators. They can also find Mississippi-specific information pertaining to policies, regulations, and advocacy opportunities.

Over 1,200  
childcare  
providers are  
registered to use  
the website

Membership  
is free for  
approved users

- The Mississippi Early Learning Resources website uses a groundbreaking, economy-of-scale model to bring together early childhood programs and childcare providers so that they can strengthen their business practices, share services and buying power, and find evidence-based resources to support young children's holistic development.
- The site is updated continuously to ensure that information, toolkits, webinars, and discounts remain relevant and up-to-date.

### Child Care Clean + (CCC+) Program

In early summer 2020, childcare centers had a critical need for personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies to prevent the spread of COVID-19. MELA coordinated with partners to respond quickly, securing millions in state funding for centers to purchase the supplies they needed, at a discounted price.

\$3.9 Million  
in state funding  
for PPE

MELA & partners  
distributed  
funds to  
798 centers

Centers received  
\$4,844 each

- In June 2020, MELA coordinated with a cohort of childcare providers, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning at the University of Mississippi to successfully advocate the legislature to pass House Bill 1782. This bill appropriated \$3 million to help childcare providers purchase PPE and sanitation supplies during the pandemic.
- The appropriation resulted in a program called Child Care Clean + (CCC+), which was co-facilitated by MELA and the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning.
- CCC+ has been praised by the legislature and childcare providers for its efficiency and impact. The program also received a \$10,000 reward from ACE's Champion for Children Program.
- In November 2020, the legislature awarded an additional \$900,000 to CCC+, and the program is currently slated to reopen and run through December 2021.

## OUR IMPACT ON PARENTS AND FAMILIES

### Resource Guides for Parents and Caregivers

Throughout 2020, parents and caregivers were tasked with managing the stress of an international pandemic, facilitating their children's at-home learning, and explaining current events and issues - including racism and anti-racism demonstrations - to their children. MELA created research-informed guides to help caregivers navigate challenging times.

**MAKING THE  
MOST OF IT:**  
OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME FAMILY & CAREGIVER FREE RESOURCES  
FOR CHILDREN AGES 2-8

Download  
the Guide  
on our  
Website



**LET'S  
TALK.**

RACE, RACISM, AND ANTI-RACIST ACTION  
WITH CHILDREN AGES 0-8

Download  
the Guide  
on our  
Website

### MELA created two early childhood resource guides:

1. **Making the Most of It:** This guide shares evidence-based tips for how to keep children's learning on track when in-person school is not an option.
2. **Let's Talk:** This guide includes information, resources, and tips for how to engage in meaningful and age-appropriate conversations about race, racism, and anti-racist action with children.
  - The guides were posted on MELA social media channels, and are available for download on the [MELA website](https://mela.org).
  - When the guides were shared on MELA's Facebook page, the post referencing the *Making the Most of It* guide reached **11,328 people**, and the post referencing the *Let's Talk* guide reached **2,637 people**.

**PROMOTING  
EQUITY**

To advance equity, we need to build a greater awareness and understanding of race and racism, including how systemic racism impacts children and families. MELA is helping address this need by providing high-quality resources and information about these topics to parents and educators for use with Mississippi's future leaders: today's young children.



# OUR IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

## Early Childhood Capitol Day 2020: Power the Future

MELA convened Mississippi leaders in for Early Childhood Day at the Capitol to exchange knowledge, build partnerships, and advocate for children.

- In January of 2020, Capitol Day was attended by the lieutenant governor and key legislative leaders in education. The event provided a platform for participating organizations to share their experiences and expertise, and facilitated relationship-building between early childhood experts and policymakers.
- Capitol Day 2020 was covered broadly by state and local media.

Over 30 organizations attended



## Virtual Early Childhood Capitol Day 2021: Power the Future

Due to the need for social distancing, MELA adapted Early Childhood Capitol Day 2021 to a virtual format. Given the pandemic's broad and significant effects on young children, it was more important than ever to use Capitol Day to celebrate the resilience of early educators, cultivate a culture of learning and collaboration between early childhood stakeholders, and connect with policymakers.

- Survey evaluation data from the 2021 event suggests that we met our goals for attendee satisfaction, learning, and partnership building.

66% of survey respondents rated Capitol Day 2021 as “Excellent,” 30% rated it as “Very Good.”

84% of survey respondents said they were “very likely” to attend Capitol Day 2022.

### Capitol Day 2021 attendees said:

“ This was my first Capitol Day. I was able to participate because of the virtual format.

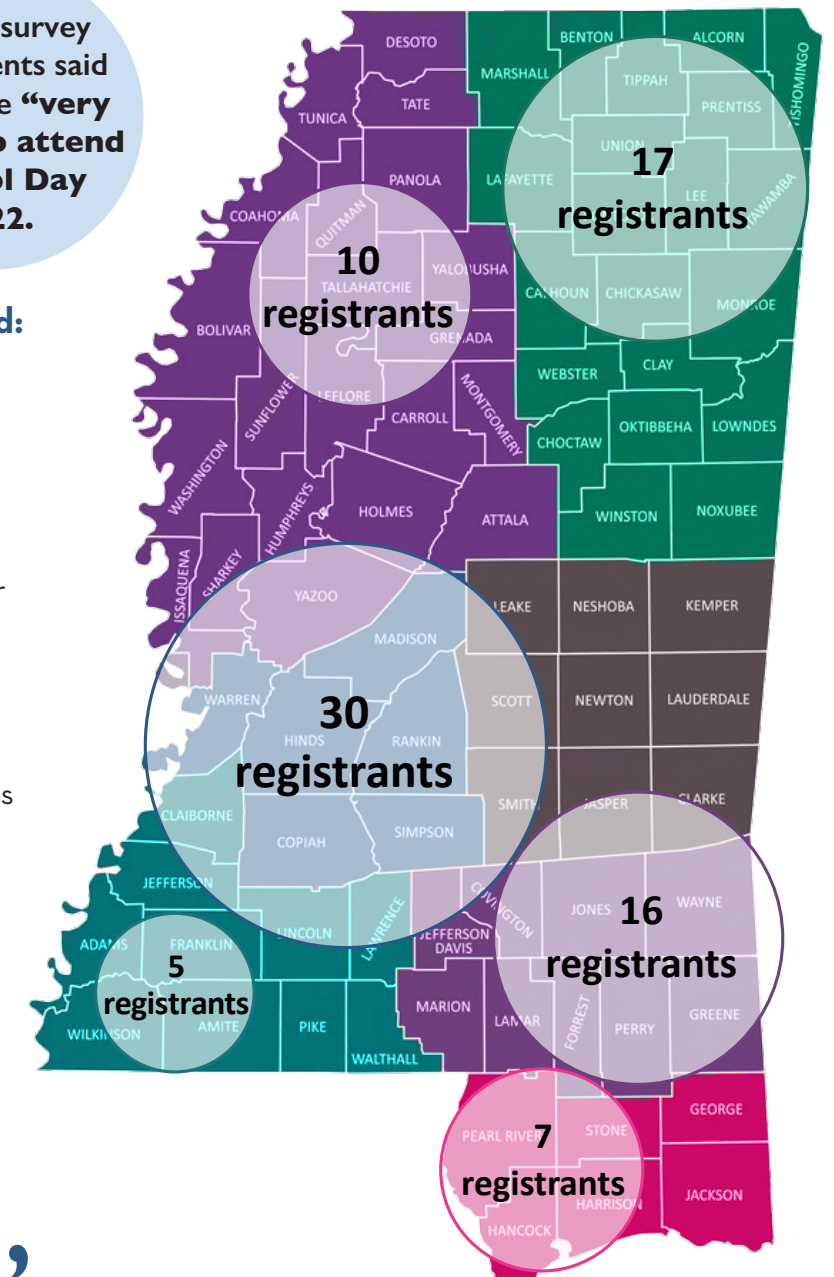
Amazing job bringing us together virtually and still making it feel like we were together!

The facilitated break out sessions by region were excellent.

Very well organized, as always! The videos were amazing and I hope every legislator viewed them.

We felt very empowered and energized to continue our important work with children. ”

85 early childhood stakeholders from across the state pre-registered for Capitol Day 2021 – and over 140 attended:



A third Early Childhood Capitol Day is scheduled for January 2022.



# OUR IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

## Mississippi Forum for the Future: Communicating about the Early Years

In January 2021, MELA partnered with two organizations to convene a diverse group of early childhood stakeholders to: (1) establish a common understanding of the early childhood system in Mississippi, and (2) construct a common language to describe the system itself, its impact on children, and the large-scale benefits of investing in early childhood.

160 attendees

- Early Childhood Educators
- Childcare Providers
- Child Advocates
- Pediatricians & OBGYNs
- Pollicymakers & Legislators
- Home Visitors
- Researchers

15 presentations on early childhood education, development and health issues.

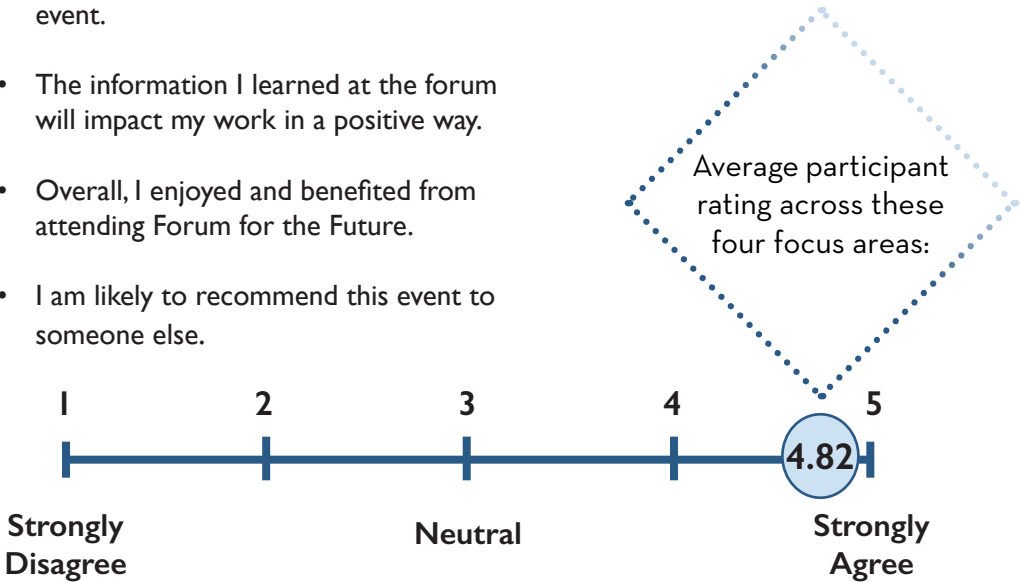
- MELA planned and co-hosted the event with the Children’s Foundation of Mississippi and the Child Health and Development Project: Mississippi Thrive!
- Co-hosting this event paved the way for us to bring our early childhood partners together in new ways. For example, this process bolstered our ability to organize a Child Care Development Block Grant coalition to help provide feedback on the upcoming application, and has solidified our partnerships with the Children’s Foundation of Mississippi and Mississippi Thrive!

PROMOTING EQUITY

A primary and explicit purpose of the Forum was to engrain equity as a cornerstone of our work to improve the system. We highlighted racial equity throughout presentations and discussions during the event.

Post-event survey results suggest that attendees found the event highly worthwhile and enjoyable. Respondents generally “strongly agreed” with the following statements:

- I had all the information & support I needed to fully engage the day of the event.
- The information I learned at the forum will impact my work in a positive way.
- Overall, I enjoyed and benefited from attending Forum for the Future.
- I am likely to recommend this event to someone else.



## Backbone Support for Collective Impact Initiative

MELA is the chosen backbone support organization for collective impact work around early learning in Mississippi. This means that we are the engine driving collaboration among early education organizations in Mississippi through strategic planning, continuous communications, meeting facilitation, and information-sharing.

- Since the summer of 2020, MELA has received technical assistance from the Collective Impact Forum to establish a formal collaboration structure. We have participated in trainings from the Collective Impact Forum, alongside the Children’s Foundation (our policy partner) and the Social Science Resource Center (our data partner).
- MELA is using the Collective Impact framework to engage with a diverse group of stakeholders across the state to establish and execute a common agenda to improve outcomes for young children.
- With the help and approval of key partners, MELA has established principles that will guide how we work with partners and the public, an overarching and iterative goal that will inspire meaningful collaboration, and a timeline for the work that aligns with the collective impact framework.

PROMOTING EQUITY

MELA led partners in developing six guiding principles for our collective impact work. Two of these principles are designed to infuse a focus on promoting equity into every aspect of the work:

Balance Power ✓

Dismantle Inequities ✓

Resist False Dichotomies

Overcome Mistrust

Trust the Collective Impact Process

Own the Work

## Collective Impact Goal:

By 2030, Mississippi’s childcare system will be state-of-the-art, fueled by robust data, resources, and cross-sector collaboration to meet the needs of all children and families.



# OUR PARTNERS

MELA understands that together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. From January 2020 through July 2021, MELA leveraged partnerships with the organizations listed here to host events, implement programs, maximize resources, and promote equity.

- Forum for the Future Cohost
- Capitol Day Attendee
- MS Early Learning Resources Partner
- Forum for the Future Presenter
- Child Care Clean +
- Reinventing Quality to Advance Racial Equity Initiative: MS Chapter

## Academic Institutions



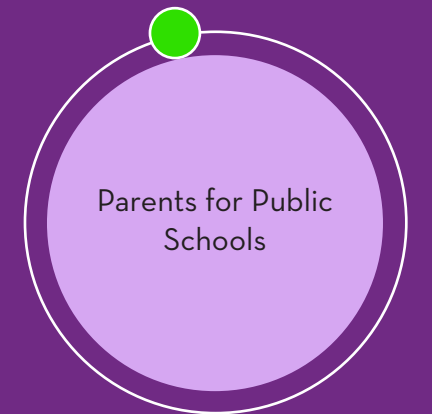
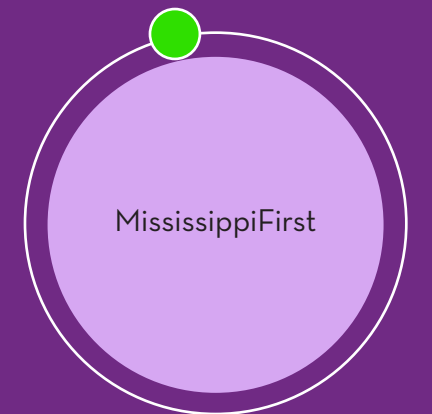
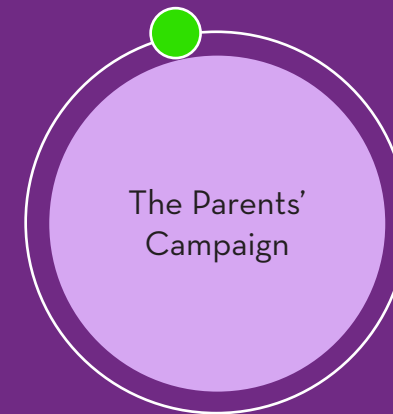
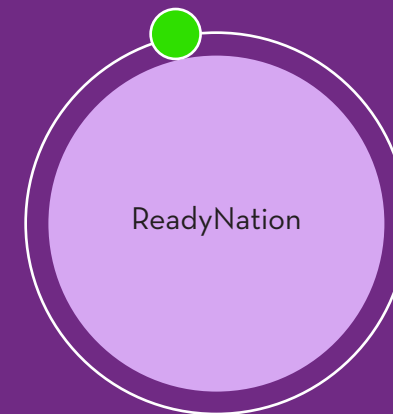
## Government Agencies



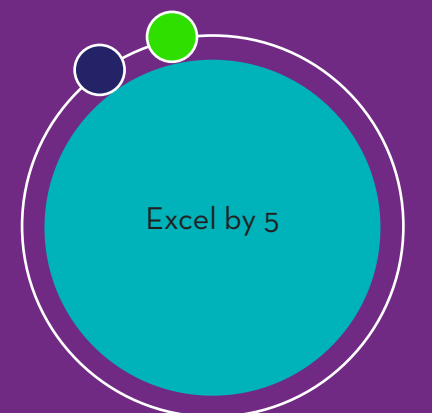
## Childcare



## Nonprofit and Advocacy Organizations



## Community Organizations and Coalitions





# WHAT'S NEXT FOR MELA?

## Collective Impact: Building Momentum

As we move into our third year as an organization, we see significant progress on our goal to convene and coordinate the coalition, especially in our work to guide the coalition's overall vision and strategic approach.



Our primary partners (or “extended backbone group”), namely the *Child Health Development Project: Mississippi Thrive!* and *The Childrens Foundation of Mississippi*, have **established consensus around principles that will guide how we work together**. The extended backbone group has also **approved an overarching working goal that we will use to build a common agenda**. These foundational steps lay the groundwork for our future efforts with a larger coalition.

We are currently planning a **series of interviews** to gauge whether our goal is aligned with the perspectives and needs of childcare providers, early childhood professionals, and families with young children. **These interviews will help us determine what critical shifts in the early childhood landscape will need to occur for our efforts to be successful.**



We will **share our findings from the interviews at an upcoming “State of the State” event**, where we will bring together organizations and individuals who we hope will join our Collective Impact efforts. The State of the State will be an opportunity to share qualitative and quantitative data about young children in our state and the early childhood system, and to reflect on how this data and information relates to the Collective Impact working goal. This event will be interactive, allowing attendees to pinpoint possible issues within the goal that we want to target, and brainstorm initiatives that could transform the system. **These steps will lead us to a common agenda for early childhood policies and programs that will help Mississippi’s children reach their full potential.**



## Women of Color in Leadership Cohort

Racism and sexism impact women of color in professional settings through specific challenges. Research indicates that Black women are more likely than their White counterparts to say that they want to advance professionally, but they are less likely to find mentors who will aid them. In addition, women of color face a number of hurdles to their professional success, such as subtle but pervasive doubts about their competence, intelligence, and skills despite their demonstrated performance.<sup>1</sup>

Within childcare and early childhood policy sectors, the perspectives and life experiences of women of color are critical to ensure the future success of children of color. However, few women of color in these sectors hold formal leadership or authority positions. **The Women of Color in Leadership Cohort will work to change to this unacceptable status quo.**



**MELA will recruit 12-15 dynamic early childhood leaders (formal and informal) to participate in the cohort. We will seek participants (i.e. childcare providers, teachers, state directors, advocates, community organization leaders, etc.) who share our values of creating an equitable early childhood system for children and families in Mississippi.**

MELA will design experiences to help the women in the cohort develop skills related to optimistic leadership and network building. Participants will learn how to deepen community and professional connections and foster collaboration. Additionally, we will provide professional development support that is responsive to the experiences that women of color leaders have within the early childhood sector in Mississippi.

A central focus of our will be to establish relationships between cohort members and other influential leaders who share similar professional and life experiences. The Cohort will offer a space for women to support each other, receive support from mentors, and learn strategies to navigate challenges.

1. Wingfield, Adia (2020). *Women are Advancing in the Workplace, but Women of Color Still Lag Behind*. 19A: The Brookings Gender Equality Series. The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/women-are-advancing-in-the-workplace-but-women-of-color-still-lag-behind/>

# JOIN US

*at these upcoming partnership opportunities*

**FALL 2021: Children’s Sabbath**  
**FALL 2021: State of the State Event**  
**JANUARY 2022: Early Childhood Development Capitol Day 2022**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MELA extends a warm and sincere thank you to the Tallahatchie River Foundation. MELA's work was started with Mr. Morgan Freeman's vision to support early literacy in Mississippi, and it was carried forward by his daughter, Morgana Freeman. Ms. Morgana Freeman worked tirelessly to establish the Thrive by 3rd Advisory Committee, which laid the groundwork for MELA.

Thanks to the incredible vision and generosity of Mr. Freeman and his daughter Morgana, MELA exists today, and will impact the lives of many Mississippi families and children. We owe the Freemans a huge thank you.



We also acknowledge the founding members of the MELA Board of Directors, who have volunteered countless hours to guide and oversee MELA and its strategic direction. Thank you:

- Dr. Alex Washington
- Mandy Mahoney
- Alicia Hall
- Ross Weems
- Dr. Devon Brenner
- Eddie Oliver
- Dr. Ira Murray