The Seeding Disruption Fellowship

How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

By Paul Beach and Hailly T.N. Korman

FEBRUARY 2025

Bellwether

Introduction

Students of color in the District of Columbia (District) — including Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Pacific Islander young people — experience worse education, health, and economic outcomes than their Asian American and white peers.[1] These long-standing racial inequities exist in most metropolitan areas in the U.S., held in place by interacting and mutually reinforcing systems that are built to resist change. As a result, racial identity influences a young person's outcomes in innumerable ways as they move through life in the District. Many individuals working in schools, state agencies, juvenile facilities, hospitals, nonprofits, and other settings in the District have dedicated their professional lives to addressing these racial disparities and producing better outcomes for youth — but there are limitations to what any one person can do alone.

Despite good intentions, the work of these individuals often fails to take into consideration the interconnectedness of the different systems that youth and families interact with simultaneously. In fact, the coordination and communication among all the entities that serve youth and families ranges from nonexistent, to inefficient, to counterproductive.[2] The result is a fragmented system of care where agencies, organizations, and professionals are siloed off from one another. For example, the percent of youth aged 10-18 who are involved with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems — referred to as dual-system or crossover youth — ranged from 45% to 70% in one study of three metropolitan areas.[3] However, the percent of crossover youth in the District is unknown because there is "no single source of public data," which renders these youth "functionally invisible."[4] What *is* known is that Black children are vastly overrepresented in both systems.[5] The invisibility of crossover youth in the District is just one example that highlights the fragmented and siloed nature of the social services system.

Better coordination within and across the public and private sectors is needed to meaningfully address racial disparities in education and other areas of life. This is not a new problem, nor one without visibilities at the highest reaches of government. Unfortunately, past efforts aimed at producing better cross-agency coordination and integration have often failed to produce substantial progress.[6] The current direction of federal policy also suggests that intentional efforts to forge greater cross-sector coordination and integration will be few and far between in the coming years, which makes local leadership all the more important.

Communities need diverse, cross-sector coalitions that work together to break down silos and disrupt racial disparities in education and other fields. Leaders working in different sectors need a neutral and protected space to convene, engage in shared learning, build relationships, and collaborate on work to disrupt racial inequities in education and other areas of life. **This brief describes five lessons learned from one approach to addressing racial disparities in the District: the Equity Lab's Seeding Disruption Fellowship** (Fellowship). The Fellowship is a cohort-based program designed for senior leaders in the District who work in pre-K through grade 12 education and related fields (Sidebar 1). The Fellowship works to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to build diverse, cross-sector coalitions that seed policies and practices to disrupt the inequitable status quo. The Fellowship has grown from an inaugural cohort of 24 individuals in 2017 to an active leadership development network representing more than 200 alumni today.

Many individuals working in schools, state agencies, juvenile facilities, hospitals, nonprofits, and other settings in the District have dedicated their professional lives to addressing these racial disparities and producing better outcomes for youth — but there are limitations to what any one person can do alone.

Lessons learned from the Fellowship can inform the work of leaders and funders in other cities that want to build diverse, cross-sector coalitions to disrupt racial inequities in education and beyond.

Systems-level disruption must be grounded in history and place, lead to the breakdown of cross-sector silos, and be rooted in strong, trusting relationships. The longevity of the Fellowship also illustrates that building a cross-sector coalition of systems disruptors takes time and that seeding small wins are often the catalyst for big disruptions.

How the Seeding Disruption Fellowship Cultivates a Diverse, Cross-Sector Coalition

The Fellowship offers valuable lessons to organizations and funders in other cities that are attempting to build coalitions that address complex, citywide challenges and disrupt racial inequities. Each lesson learned and key takeaway below is unpacked through the lens of the Fellowship.

Systems-level disruption must be grounded in history and place

Key Takeaway: Too often, calls for policy change are divorced from their historical context and thereby fail to learn from past efforts, whether they were successful or not. Any effort to convene and facilitate a coalition of cross-sector leaders must be place-based and grounded in history so participants operate from the same set of facts and a shared understanding of which systems need disrupting, how, and why.

Disrupting racial disparities in a specific place cannot occur effectively without a deep understanding of how history and racism led to the design of systems that perpetuate inequities. A detailed discussion of how historical and current policies produce inequitable outcomes by race in the District is out of the scope of this brief.[7] However, two sets of policies are worth describing because they demonstrate how systems are interdependent and how education is influenced by and influences other aspects of life: residential segregation and local schools.

Where a person lives impacts nearly every aspect of their life, including what doctor's office or clinic they go to, what grocery stores they buy food from, and where their kids go to school. For the first half of the 20th century, Black residents in the District were legally barred from buying houses or renting in certain parts of the city by racially restrictive deed covenants — written terms in housing transactions that prohibited selling to Black purchasers.[8] This has led to a deeply segregated city today.[9] The parts of the District where most Black residents currently live (Wards 7 and 8 in particular)[10] have not received the same substantial public or private investment as other parts of the District,[11] and as a result, these areas today are defined by inadequate access to health care,[12] food deserts,[13] and a high concentration of under-resourced schools[14] — all preventable if these areas also received substantial investment. Wide-scale racial discrimination in the workforce has also led to lower wages and fewer economic opportunities for the District's Black residents, making it difficult to move to neighborhoods with greater resources and ensuring that the city remains highly segregated by both race and socioeconomic status.[15]

Simultaneously, at the center of nearly every local social services system in the District are pre-K through grade 12 schools, which are also highly segregated by race and to a lesser extent, socioeconomic status,[16] since a student's home address determines their default, or neighborhood school. However, the District does provide a workaround: intra-district open enrollment, where students can enter a lottery to attend any of the District's schools.[17] Although more than three-quarters of students attend a school outside of their neighborhood boundary,[18] the District's schools remain highly segregated by race with approximately half of schools enrolling at least 90% Black students (68% of the District's school-age students are Black).[19] High levels of school segregation still exist because the students in wards with the highest percentage of Black residents are most likely to stay in their ward for school, regardless of whether they attend their neighborhood school or choose a different school via open enrollment.[20]

4   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

On top of this school segregation, which is the direct result of residential segregation, Black students are more likely to attend a low-performing school,[21] be chronically absent,[22] and be suspended from school.[23] The latter leads to greater involvement with the juvenile and eventually the criminal justice systems, a phenomenon referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.[24] Many students who are involved with the juvenile justice system do not return to pre-K through grade 12 school at all[25] and very few graduate high school,[26] reducing their opportunity to access positive economic[27] and health outcomes[28] later in life.

The Seeding Disruption Fellowship Is a Leadership Development Network

The Fellowship was co-created by Michelle Molitor and Abigail Smith in 2017, with the inaugural cohort of Fellows concluding their work in 2018. Since then, nine more cohorts of Fellows have participated in the program, creating a growing, cross-sector network of more than 200 professionals in the District united by a shared language and commitment to more racially equitable outcomes for youth.

The selection criteria for the Fellowship map directly to the aims of the program. Cohort members must be willing to advance their own understanding of racial inequities and have a "baseline of understanding regarding the concepts of race and privilege." Cohort members must also be senior leaders within their organizations who are committed to initiating small and big disruptions to the systems that maintain and reinforce inequitable racial outcomes for youth.

Each cohort consists of roughly 25 individuals from the public and private sector, with approximately half coming from pre-K through grade 12 education and the other half coming from adjacent sectors, such as health care, workforce development, housing and urban development, and philanthropy. The motivations for applying to the Fellowship also vary. Some Fellows are new to the District and are seeking community while also building their network. Other Fellows are part of an organizational pipeline where staff from the same organization participate in the program across multiple cohorts. Finally, some Fellows come to the program with specific racial inequities they are seeking to disrupt. Alumni have worked on Fellowship projects that range from increasing organizational diversity and building more equitable resource allocation models to ensuring school closure processes are more equitable.

The Fellowship is a place-based initiative that begins by grounding cohort members in the history of the District to show how government and institutional systems have been designed to create and perpetuate racial inequities. That historical context grounds the first of four formal cohort sessions. The sessions that follow focus on the concept of systems-thinking, including how interconnected systems maintain the status quo of racial inequities, as well as how various systems impact Fellows' work. A goal of all this professional learning is spurring ideas for how Fellows can disrupt these inequitable systems, centering on the importance of navigating complex politics and the power of cross-sector relationship-building.

In addition to the cohort sessions, Fellows work on a project — either independently or in collaboration with other cohort members — focused on addressing racial inequities. Fellows are also provided with personalized support and mentorship from Equity Lab staff with deep connections to a broad and diverse network of District professionals as well as extensive experience navigating the city's complex public policy and political system.

In 2022, the Equity Lab launched the Seeding Disruption Remix, which is a one-year program designed specifically for high school students in the District. In time, program leaders hope to fully integrate the Fellowship and Seeding Disruption Remix.[29] The Equity Lab also offers the Nexus Fellowship, a national program launched in 2019 for senior social change leaders in education and adjacent fields.[30]

While the Fellowship's primary aim is addressing racial disparities in education, the program is designed around the recognition that public systems are intertwined and that conditions in health, housing, public safety, and other areas of life influence how students experience education and what happens in classrooms throughout the District.

Fellows dive deep into the history of residential segregation, local schools, and a host of other topics during the first cohort session, including eight required readings covering the experiences of Black residents from enslavement to the present day. Many of these readings elevate personal stories of Black residents who have been affected by, dealt with, or persevered through systemic racism. Fellows are asked to discuss and identify ways that this history shows up in today's systems and their everyday work. A fundamental question that one program leader asks Fellows to wrestle with is, "How do we look clearly at history and the oppression-based systems that we are continuing to try and dig ourselves out of?"

Interviews with leaders of the Fellowship and alumni show that diving deep into the history of the District and asking this question has produced several positive outcomes. For Fellows who grew up in the District or are long-time residents, many did not have a firm grasp of the role race and racism played in shaping the District over time. As one program leader noted, "Multigenerational D.C. residents still don't know the history, why we're in the places we're in."

For example, one alumnus who is a long-time resident said they learned a lot about segregation in the District, even discovering that a home they had lived in for many years had been redlined. Redlining refers to the federal government's practice of rating neighborhoods

based on their risk for federally backed mortgage lenders, which began in the late 1930s. The neighborhoods deemed "hazardous" or that were perceived as the highest risk for mortgage lenders were referred to as "redlined."[31] The more Black residents there were in a neighborhood, the higher the likelihood that neighborhood was redlined.[32] Analyses of formerly redlined neighborhoods show that these areas are still majority Black, Latino, or Asian American.[33] Today, redlining is associated with greater racial segregation in U.S. cities and poorer environmental, health, and economic outcomes in previously redlined neighborhoods.[34] This alumnus reflected that learning about the enduring effects of the District's redlining helped them better "understand how the city came to be the way it is."

Fellows also reported sharing the readings and their expanded knowledge of the District's history with colleagues outside of the program. "In every cohort, multiple people will say to me, 'I used this article about the District's history with my team, board, etc.,'" said one leader of the Fellowship.

6   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

Breaking down cross-sector silos is essential for systems-level disruption

> **Key Takeaway**: One approach to breaking down cross-sector silos is giving professionals from different agencies and organizations multiple opportunities to build trusting relationships with one another. These trusting relationships are crucial to the success of initiatives aimed at disrupting systemic racial inequities because they lead to improved cross-sector communication, coordination, and collaboration.

Fragmentation is the defining feature of the social services system, with multiple state agencies responsible for serving youth, whether in education, health and human services, or juvenile justice. The District is no exception to this rule. In the District and every other metropolitan area in the U.S., a complex web of organizations that exist outside of government also collaborate with state agencies to provide direct services and support to youth. The silos that fragmentation creates are the enemy of systemic change. The greater the level of fragmentation, the more proactive, effective, and consistent the coordination needs to be among all the agencies and organizations that serve youth. Unfortunately, cross-sector coordination is nearly always nonexistent, leaving youth and families to navigate complex and burdensome systems that often place competing, ambiguous, or contradictory demands on them. Many families and youth are also forced to navigate these systems while confronting racism, socioeconomic challenges, trauma, or all of the above in their daily lives.

Past efforts at producing greater cross-sector coordination or integration have often failed to reduce system fragmentation,[35] and there may be little political will to try again anytime soon. Similarly, nongovernmental organizations that have or are perceived to have a vested interest in certain outcomes are not well-positioned to improve cross-sector coordination.

The Fellowship offers an alternative, grassroots model of building and sustaining cross-sector coordination. Instead of large-scale, governmental efforts to integrate services across state agencies, the Fellowship aims to develop leaders with a propensity to seek out connections, build relationships, and pursue collaborative change with colleagues in other fields and sectors. As the Fellowship's network expands with each successive cohort, an increasing number of individuals work collaboratively across sectors, train others to do the same, and model effective cross-sector relationship-building. As just one example, two Fellowship alumni, the current and former presidents of the District of Columbia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, co-led a cross-sector effort to reframe the narrative around youth gun violence in the District and put forth a systemwide approach to addressing the root causes of youth violence. The Fellowship network helped shape the initiative, called the "Prescription for the District," and is playing an active role in moving the work forward (Sidebar 2).

As one leader of the Fellowship said, "When we're in our silos, we don't get to see or experience how youth and their families interact with all these entities." They added that "deeper conversations just don't happen when you're siloed in your area." To enable the breakdown of silos, Fellows are encouraged to seek advice from other Fellows and alumni outside of formal cohort sessions, dinners, or other program activities. Past Fellows interviewed for this brief said the Fellowship's informal networking

opportunities are critical when working to address real-time challenges and for helping them better understand the bigger-picture changes that are needed.

As one alumnus summarized: "You're asked to think about who in your cohort you want to connect with outside of your sector, and it helped me push to connect with those people in a more real way to help each other and move forward together. It helped us break out of the bureaucratic silos that are holding up progress for the students we care about moving forward. There was an urgency that I tapped into to do the both/and, work at the 30,000-foot balcony and be on the dance floor to have the right conversations."

A Prescription for the District

A recent initiative launched by Seeding Disruption alumni is working to shift the narrative around current citywide challenges in the District and build a cross-sector coalition to address a spike in youth violence. To do so, the initiative is leveraging the collective power of the Fellowship's alumni network.

Since 2021, the District has experienced an increase in the number of youth involved with the juvenile justice system,[36] including for violent offenses.[37] In 2023 alone, 106 youth were victims of gun violence and 16 of these shootings were fatal.[38] This mirrors a general rise in homicides overall in the District from 2017 to 2023,[39] where nearly all victims and suspects (95%) were Black (46% of the District's residents are Black).[40]

The current and former presidents of the District of Columbia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics — Dr. Jessica Weisz and Dr. Nia Bodrick, both Fellowship alumni — recognized that the District's city government was taking an overwhelmingly "tough on crime," punitive approach in response to the rise in community and youth violence. The government's approach also was reactive and did not take into consideration the root causes of youth violence or the way that various state systems are contributing to the problem. Using what they learned and the network they formed in the Fellowship, Weisz, Bodrick, and several of their colleagues in the health sector decided to change the narrative around youth violence and provide a different framing for solutions. What they came up with was the "Prescription for the District."[41]

Launched in May 2024, the Prescription for the District takes a public health approach by asking a simple question: If the District created an environment where all youth could thrive, would there be much, if any, youth violence? The Prescription for the District is designed to address the root causes of youth violence, "including structural poverty, racism, and systemic disinvestment that create historically under-resourced neighborhoods." The Prescription for the District itself is a set of nine preventive measures for creating healthy communities, such as funding out-of-school programs, providing greater access to safe community spaces, and increasing access to affordable nutritious foods. One leader who co-created the Prescription for the District is betting that if the District addressed these root causes and "did all of the things on the prescription, we would create an environment where kids can thrive." Importantly, the prescription is meant to be a living document that is reviewed and updated on a regular basis according to the needs of the community.

The Prescription for the District also sends a clear message that youth violence is not a kid or family problem. Instead, youth violence is the product of broken systems. That systems-thinking mindset, developed through work in the Fellowship, illustrates how youth violence touches everyone in the District and shows that actors in all social services sectors have a role to play in fixing these systems and creating an environment for kids that is healthy, safe, and promotes positive adolescent development.

Although led by alumni who represent the health care sector, the development of the Prescription for the District was informed by interviews with community leaders, funders, lawyers, government officials in the District, educators, and many others. The Prescription for the District has also featured in cross-cohort events as part of the Fellowship. In one event, 30 alumni representing nine cohorts heard a presentation on the Prescription for the District, gave valuable input and feedback on the content, provided ideas for how to raise funding to move the work forward, and committed to supporting aspects of the prescription in their work. As one leader explained, the current Fellows and alumni who attended these events "are now part of a larger network moving the work forward."

Instead of large-scale, governmental efforts to integrate services across state agencies, the Fellowship aims to develop leaders with a propensity to seek out connections, build relationships, and pursue collaborative change with colleagues in other fields and sectors.

Systems-level disruption is rooted in strong, trusting relationships

Key Takeaway: Funders should invest in organizations that provide space for leaders from different sectors to build relationships — work that holds tremendous value on its face. Ideally, the organizations that convene, manage, and facilitate cross-sector networks should come from outside of government, have no conflicts of interest, and carry no agenda other than disrupting racial inequities and producing better youth outcomes.

Systemic change necessitates coordinated efforts across sectors, and that change only occurs if the people who run these systems have trusting relationships with one another. While preexisting relationships are a necessary condition for initiating cross-sector collaborations, they are not sufficient for success. Individuals must build trust over a sustained period by sharing resources and following through on commitments to one another. Research on cross-sector collaborations shows that this "work is highly personal — in other words, it is about building relationships among individuals, which, in turn, leads to trust among organizations."[42]

A key goal of the Fellowship is to create shared space that fosters relationship-building. In interviews with alumni, one of the most cited benefits of participating in the Fellowship was the development of new, strong, and long-lasting relationships with peers in other sectors — relationships that would have likely not existed without the Fellowship.

Through a 13-month experience, Fellows have an opportunity to get to know one another and build relationships both in sessions and informally during the dinners that precede every cohort meeting. With each successive year, leaders of the Fellowship see these dinners as more and more critical to setting the stage for challenging conversations the following day. One leader of the Fellowship emphasized that the dinners help "participants get to know each other as people," and those connections need to be built "to move the work forward." There is usually a low-stakes activity that begins the process of interrogating people's assumptions and biases, such as a drawbridge exercise,[43] a story-based game "that folks can push and pull [on issues of power, cultural norms, and values] in a nonserious way," one leader of the Fellowship explained.

9   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

Structured consultancy protocols where Fellows share a problem of practice offer a more formal way to build relationships across sectors and provide an opportunity for real-time networking and shared learning. As one alumnus observed, "Literally every time I've been a part of a consultancy, someone else gets something out of it that wasn't presenting a problem of practice." It's during these consultancies that Fellows collectively work through their understanding of systems and learn to apply the knowledge and skills from cohort sessions to their everyday work. These sessions also build the confidence of individuals to enact change and identify those aspects of the system ripe for disruption. In addition to consultancies, the Fellowship routinely puts on "Disruption Days," where current and past Fellows come together to discuss a specific topic of interest.

As new relationships form and existing ones strengthen, Fellows expand their network of trusted colleagues. This growing network is an asset when new problems come up and Fellows need a thought partner to contemplate solutions. In surveys of past Fellows, 95% report engaging with other alumni.[44] These relationships have other benefits as well, many of which are difficult to capture using traditional quantitative metrics. For example, Fellows who develop strong relationships with their counterparts in other sectors can improve their understanding of the laws, policies, and political dynamics that govern how other systems work.

10   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization
      Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

                                        Bellwether.org

Ideally, the organizations that convene, manage, and facilitate cross-sector networks should come from outside of government, have no conflicts of interest, and carry no agenda other than disrupting racial inequities and producing better youth outcomes.

Building a cross-sector coalition of system disruptors takes time

> **Key Takeaway**: The longer cross-sector coalitions remain active and strong, and the more they grow, the greater the potential for long-term impact and meaningful systems disruptions. The role of curating and managing networks such as the Fellowship is one that funders should consider supporting not just initially, but over several years to maximize the impact of the network.

In just its ninth year, the Fellowship represents a diverse, cross-sector network of more than 200 alumni. As this network grows, each successive cohort gains access to a larger web of influence than the one previous. There is likely no problem or issue this cross-sector network does not have insight or experience with. As one leader of the Fellowship described it: "We're training individuals, but over so many cohorts and so much time, we are genuinely making changes to systems."

This network would be a group of loosely connected individuals if not for the active role that Equity Lab staff take in creating space for current Fellows and alumni to convene, communicate, and collaborate. Creating this neutral and protected space for collaboration is essential for keeping the network active and for facilitating connections that continue to break down silos. Equity Lab staff also serve as network managers, often fielding calls from alumni who are seeking help or support. Several interviewees noted they often call Equity Lab staff when they do not know who to go to. Surveys of past Fellows also show that more than half of alumni (52%) said they asked other alumni for advice after the program ended.[45]

The longevity of the Fellowship is also felt at the organizational level when multiple leaders participate in the program. Several organizations have had staff participate, such as District of Columbia Public Schools, KIPP DC, Education Forward DC, DC Public Library, and the Children's National Hospital. Having staff participate enables continuity, ensuring that a shared language and systems-thinking approach to addressing racial inequities stays intact across an organization.

11   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

Going too fast or too big too soon can result in failed initiatives that waste resources, burn political capital, and frustrate those trying to enact change as well as the youth and families who desperately need it.

Small wins are the catalyst for big disruptions

> **Key Takeaway**: Funders that support cross-sector coalition-building should recognize and value the iterative nature of change, particularly when change is hard to measure. This may require that funders shift from providing grants for specific policy changes to investing in programs that train leaders to be system disruptors.

The government agencies and philanthropic organizations that fund efforts to disrupt racial inequities often want to see big changes in short order. Many Fellows have enacted such changes, ranging from a system-level reform that prioritized students experiencing economic challenges in charter school lotteries to a revamped organizational salary structure that ensured noninstructional (e.g., counselors, social workers, school nurses) staff of color were paid on par with white teachers in similar roles.

However, starting with modest, small wins is often what is most effective and feasible. Going too fast or too big too soon can result in failed initiatives that waste resources, burn political capital, and frustrate those trying to enact change as well as the youth and families who desperately need it. Too often, the failed attempt at change is the reason used by those in power to not try again.

At its core, the Fellowship is a leadership development program that trains individuals to identify and pursue small changes as part of their everyday professional routine. The program explicitly targets leaders who have the power to enact change within their respective spheres of influence. When those small wins are routinized over time, they collectively lead to bigger, more systemic reforms. As one leader of the Fellowship said, "We think this Fellowship *is* systems change."

The way the Fellowship produces small change goes beyond individuals. Several intentional structures that build community, such as the consultancies, informal dinners, and Disruption Days, all create space where problems are elevated and new connections, relationships, and solutions are surfaced. There is also the Small Bets fund, for which Fellows can submit basic proposals to implement an initiative (e.g., host an event, implement a policy change) at a small scale (Sidebar 3). If the "small bet" is successful, the Equity Lab works with Fellows to see how they might scale the initiative. These structures create space for the imagination and creativity needed to not only see where small wins are possible, but also to recognize where the larger opportunities for disruption might lie.

12 **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

The cumulative effect of the formal and informal activities both during and after the Fellowship is to create countless opportunities for Fellows to identify and enact big systemic disruptions. Often, however, it is the small wins that inspire more systemic disruptions. One leader of the Fellowship also posited that the small wins help build momentum and show leaders what is possible "by recognizing and achieving smaller wins early on, and when that becomes your practice and habit, you start to recognize the larger opportunities where you wouldn't even have seen it before." In other words, the Fellowship is not designed to produce discrete, individual policy changes. Rather, the Fellowship is training "leaders to think in generative ways [and] collaborate in different ways across sectors, to make change happen in ways it hasn't before."

A Collaboration for Immigrant Families

In recent years, the District has experienced a significant increase in international migration, which has been on the rise since the 1970s.[46] From 2022 to 2023 alone, the District saw a 54% increase in international migration.[47] One Fellowship alumnus who oversees curriculum in dozens of the District's pre-K through grade 12 schools saw an increase of 100 immigrant students in just one school, which only employed a single multilingual teacher at the time. Many of these immigrant students experienced severe trauma before, during, and after their journeys to the District and needed intensive wraparound support to make a successful transition into school and the community writ large. Many immigrant students not only experience challenges in school but also face housing and food insecurity and difficulty accessing social services.[48]

Stephanie Mintz, an alumna of the 2021 Fellowship cohort, has been working with immigrant families in the District since she began as a social worker 25 years ago. In the years leading up to the Fellowship, Mintz coordinated events for partners that supported immigrant families and students in her role as the student services director and community schools coordinator at the Briya Public Charter School. After a few years of these events, Mintz and her colleagues wanted to shift gatherings from being a one-way "thank you" to key partners toward a more interactive convening where the people who support immigrant families could meet, build relationships, and share resources. In 2019, the Collaboration for Immigrant Families (Collab) was born.

The Collab began meeting in earnest in 2021, the year Mintz joined the Fellowship. As these events, which started with a few dozen people, kept growing each year, Mintz felt the need to formalize the group to provide more structure and a consistent cadence for the convenings. With support from the Fellowship's Small Bets fund, Mintz and the rest of the volunteer planning committee were able to pay for food and other meeting materials without needing to request funding from their organizations. Now, the Collab has the funding to support three in-person events per year. At the most recent event in November 2024, the Collab had more than 90 attendees representing 50 different organizations.

In many ways, the Collab is a microcosm of the Fellowship. The main purpose of the Collab is to break down silos by "bringing together people and groups who recognize and experience the impact of discriminatory systems and practices that perpetuate social and economic hardships for immigrant families in our city," according to one leader of the Collab. Attendees represent a wide range of professionals, including those in education, housing, legal services, and mental health. During meetings, attendees discuss systemic challenges facing immigrant students and families with the goals of sharing resources, networking to identify and access support, and in the end, coming up with solutions.

Like the Fellowship, the Collab emphasizes building relationships and sharing resources. As an organizer of the Collab observed, "Resources [to support immigrant students and families in the District] are vast but disconnected." This same organizer recalled the reaction one school leader in the city had after a Collab event. After this school leader came to the event, they revealed they had no idea there were so many resources out there, despite working with immigrant families for decades. Now this school leader has a growing network of people to help access resources to support the immigrant students and families in their school. Just as the Fellowship's network grows, so does the Collab's, creating another expanding web of impact.

Conclusion

The Fellowship provides numerous examples of what systems-level disruption looks like when it is grounded in racial equity, planned with purpose, and informed by history and local context. This may be the only type of *intentional* disruption that has a chance to dismantle racial inequities in education, health, and other areas of life for youth and families. On the other side of the continuum, *unintentional* disruption often leads to greater inequity. For example, the massive disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic produced a dramatic change in the structure and delivery of pre-K through grade 12 education overnight. The shift to virtual learning that resulted from near-universal school closures led to the worsening of educational inequities.[49]

The Equity Lab's approach to intentional disruption in the District through the Fellowship serves as a promising model that can be adapted and replicated in other cities. By training individuals to be historically informed change agents who can build strong relationships, break down silos, and collaborate across sectors, the Fellowship is building a network that produces intentional disruptions every day. As those intentional disruptions add up and the Fellowship's network grows, change that improves racial equity will become the norm rather than the exception in the nation's capital. ✦

More From the Equity Lab

The Equity Lab's Seeding Disruption Fellowship is a place-based initiative structured in cohorts to tackle deeply rooted racial inequities within the pre-K through grade 12 education system and related fields. Interested in how the Fellowship works and how to bring this important work to your city or community? Click here to learn more.

14   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization
      Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

Endnotes

1   See the collection of research and analysis from D.C. Policy Center. "D.C. Policy Center's Research and Publications on Racial Equity and Economic and Social Inequalities," 2024, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/research-and-publications-on-racial-equity-and-economic-and-social-inequalities/; For an example of racial inequities in education, see the disaggregated data for "Academic Achievement," "Student Attendance," and "Student Discipline," in the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, DC School Report Card, "DC Overall," https://schoolreportcard.dc.gov/state/report.

2   Kelly Robson and Hailly T.N. Korman, "Continuity Counts: Coordinated Education Systems for Students in Transition," Bellwether, April 25, 2018, https://bellwether.org/publications/continuity-counts-coordinated-education-systems-students-transition/.

3   Denise C. Herz, Carly B. Dierkhising, Jessica Raithel, Maryanne Schretzman, Shannon Guiltinan, Robert M. Goerge, Youngmin Cho, Claudia Coulton, and Sam Abbott, "Dual System Youth and Their Pathways: A Comparison of Incidence, Characteristics and System Experiences Using Linked Administrative Data," Journal of Youth and Adolescence 48 (2019): 2432–2450, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-019-01090-3.

4   Kathleen Patterson, "A Broken Web: Improved Interagency Collaboration Is Needed for D.C.'s Crossover Youth," Council for Court Excellence for the Office of the D.C. Auditor, 2024, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659c0df344c9c8325dd821ca/673caf1772f0ea16a294172a_Crossover.Youth.Report.5.28.24.Final.pdf.

5   Ibid.

6   Robson and Korman, "Continuity Counts: Coordinated Education Systems for Students in Transition."

7   See the collection of research and analysis from D.C. Policy Center. "D.C. Policy Center's Research and Publications on Racial Equity and Economic and Social Inequalities."

8   Sarah Shoenfeld, "Mapping Segregation in D.C.," DC Policy Center, April 23, 2019, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/mapping-segregation-fha/.

9   "Mapping Segregation in Washington DC: The Legacy of Racial Covenants, 1940–2010," Prologue DC, https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=54fecadcf61a45619534d7a88e1e3225.

10 Jamie P. Chandler and Joy Phillips, "Racial, Education & Income Segregation in the District of Columbia," District of Columbia Office of Planning, November 2020, https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/page_content/attachments/Segregation%20Report%2011-18-20%20FINAL.pdf.

11 Eliana Golding, "A Holistic and Reparative Agenda for Ending Displacement in D.C.," DC Fiscal Policy Institute, November 15, 2023, https://www.dcfpi.org/all/agenda-for-ending-displacement/; Peace Gwan and Mychal Cohen, "Combating the Legacy of Segregation in the Nation's Capital," Urban Institute, https://www.urban.org/racial-equity-analytics-lab/structural-racism-explainer-collection/combating-legacy-segregation-nations-capital.

12 Yesim Sayin and Kathryn Zickuhr, "Pharmacy Access Varies Greatly Across D.C.," D.C. Policy Center, June 3, 2019, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/pharmacy-access-varies-greatly-across-d-c/.

13 Randy Smith, "Food Access in D.C. Is Deeply Connected to Poverty and Transportation," D.C. Policy Center, March 13, 2017, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/food-access-dc-deeply-connected-poverty-transportation/.

14 Erika Roberson, "Proposed Staffing Cuts Undermine Education Equity," testimony at the Budget Oversight Hearing on DCPS FY 2025 Submitted Budgets, DC Fiscal Institute, 2024, https://www.dcfpi.org/all/cuts-undermine-education-equity/.

15 "D.C. Racial Equity Profile for Economic Outcomes," D.C. Policy Center and Council Office of Racial Equity, 2021, https://www.dcracialequity.org/dc-racial-equity-profile.

16 Chelsea Coffin, "Landscape of Diversity in D.C. Public Schools," D.C. Policy Center, December 17, 2018, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/landscape-of-diversity-in-dc-public-schools/.

17 "SY25–26 District of Columbia Public Schools Enrollment and Lottery Handbook," District of Columbia Public Schools, December 2024, https://enrolldcps.dc.gov/sites/dcpsenrollment/files/page_content/attachments/SY25-26_DCPS_Enrollment_Lottery_Handbook_FINAL_Eng.pdf.

18 Megan Gallagher and Chelsea Coffin, "New D.C. Education Data Show How School Choice Plays Out Across Wards," D.C. Policy Center, October 25, 2019, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/new-education-data-urban/.

19 Coffin, "Landscape of Diversity in D.C. Public Schools."

20 Gallagher and Coffin, "New D.C. Education Data Show How School Choice Plays Out Across Wards."

21 "2024 DC School Report Card," Office of the State Superintendent of Education, https://osse.dc.gov/page/dc-school-report-card-resource-library. Of the 46 lowest-performing schools, 87% reside in the areas of the city with the highest percentages of Black residents (Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8). The average percentage of Black students in these schools is 84%, compared to 68% in D.C. overall (authors' analyses).

22 Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "Student Attendance," DC School Report Card, https://schoolreportcard.dc.gov/state/report/explore/102.

15   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

23 Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "Student Discipline," DC School Report Card, https://schoolreportcard.dc.gov/state/report/explore/104.

24 Christopher A. Mallett, "The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Critical Review of the Punitive Paradigm Shift," Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal 33 (2016): 15–24, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10560-015-0397-1.

25 Gregory J. Benner, Songtain Zeng, Annie Laurie Armstrong, Cathrin Anderson, and Erin Carpenter, "Strengthening Education in Short-Term Juvenile Detention Centers: Final Technical Report," Center for Strong Schools, University of Washington Tacoma, December 2016, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/251118.pdf.

26 Randi Hjalmarsson, "Criminal Justice Involvement and High School Completion," Journal of Urban Economics 63, no. 2 (2008): 613–630, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0094119007000642.

27 Robert Apel and Gary Sweeten, "The Effect of Criminal Justice Involvement in the Transition to Adulthood," US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2009, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/228380.pdf.

28 Elizabeth S. Barnert, Rebecca Dudovitz, Bergen B. Nelson, Tumaini R. Coker, Christopher Biely, Ning Li, and Paul J. Chung, "How Does Incarcerating Young People Affect Their Adult Health Outcomes?," Pediatrics 139, no. 2 (2017), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5260153/.

29 "Seeding Disruption Remix Is a DC Youth Organizing Fellowship for Racial Justice," The Equity Lab, https://www.theequitylab.org/sdx.

30 "The Nexus Fellowship Helps Individuals Become Equity Leaders in Their Organizations," The Equity Lab, https://www.theequitylab.org/nexus.

31 Camila Domonoske, "Interactive Redlining Map Zooms in on America's History Of Discrimination," National Public Radio, October 19, 2016, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/10/19/498536077/interactive-redlining-map-zooms-in-on-americas-history-of-discrimination.

32 Helen C.S. Meier and Bruce C. Mitchell, "Tracing the Legacy of Redlining: A New Method for Tracking the Origins of Housing Segregation," National Community Reinvestment Coalition, February 2022, https://ncrc.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/02/Tracing-the-Legacy-of-Redlining-FINAL-d.pdf.

33 Ryan Best and Elena Mejía, "The Lasting Legacy of Redlining," FiveThirtyEight, February 9, 2022, https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redlining/.

34 Carolyn B. Swope, Diana Hernández, and Lara J. Cushing, "The Relationship of Historical Redlining With Present Day Neighborhood Environmental and Health Outcomes: A Scoping Review and Conceptual Model," Journal of Urban Health 99, no. 6 (2022): 959–983, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11524-022-00665-z.pdf.

35 Robson and Korman, "Continuity Counts: Coordinated Education Systems for Students in Transition."

36 Hannah Mason, "D.C. Voices: Juvenile Justice," D.C. Policy Center, November 1, 2023, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/dc-juvenile-justice/.

37 Emily Davies, "Shootings of Youths Are Soaring in D.C., Vexing City Leaders," Washington Post, December 11, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/12/11/youth-gun-violence-dc/.

38 Destinee Adams and Michel Martin, "'We created this problem': A Pediatric Surgeon on How Gun Violence Affects Children," NPR, April 19, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/04/19/1245079832/gun-violence-children-pediatric-surgeon-washington-dc.

39 Staff report, "D.C. Homicides: Tracking the District's Violent Crime in 2024," Washington Post, updated December 4, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/dc-homicide-tracker/.

40 "Washington, D.C. Gun Violence Problem Analysis: Summary Report," National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, December 2023, https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/NICJR%20GVPA%20Summary%20Report%20%28January%202024%29.pdf.

41 Dr. Jessica Weisz and Dr. Nia Bodrick, "Prescription for the District: An Initiative by DC AAP #Rx4D" (blog), Children's National Hospital, August 16, 2024, https://chaiblog.childrensnational.org/prescription-for-the-district-an-initiative-by-dc-aap-rx4d/.

42 John M. Bryson, Barbara C. Crosby, and Melissa Middleton Stone, "Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed and Challenging," Public Administration Review 75, no. 5 (2015): 647–663.

43 "Drawbridge Exercise," City of Seattle, https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/RSJI/GRE/drawbridge_exercise2.pdf.

44 Internal Equity Lab survey.

45 Internal Equity Lab survey.

46 Peter A. Tatian, Sara McTarnaghan, Olivia Arena, and Yipeng Su, "State of Immigrants in the District of Columbia: Data Profiles of Immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean," Urban Institute, December 2018, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99031/state_of_immigrants_in_dc_brief.pdf.

47 Daniel Burge, "Chart of the Week: The Most Recent Population Numbers in Three Charts," D.C. Policy Center, December 22, 2023, https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/population-in-three-charts-2023/. Authors' calculations.

48 Hamutal Bernstein, Dulce Gonzalez, Paola Echave, and Diana Guelespe, "Immigrant Families Faced Multiple Barriers to Safety Net Programs in 2021," Urban Institute, November 2022, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Immigrant%20Families%20Faced%20Multiple%20Barriers%20to%20Safety%20Net%20Programs%20in%202021.pdf.

49 Karyn Lewis and Megan Kuhfeld, "Recovery Still Elusive: 2023–24 Student Achievement Highlights Persistent Achievement Gaps and a Long Road Ahead," NWEA Research, July 2024, https://www.nwea.org/uploads/recovery-still-elusive-2023-24-student-achievement-highlights-persistent-achievement-gaps-and-a-long-road-ahead_NWEA_researchBrief.pdf.

16   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

About the Authors

PAUL BEACH

Paul Beach is an associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. He can be reached at **paul.beach@bellwether.org**.

HAILLY T.N. KORMAN

Hailly T.N. Korman is a senior associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at **hailly.korman@bellwether.org**.

About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.

17   **The Seeding Disruption Fellowship**: How One Organization Builds Cross-Sector Relationships in Pursuit of Racial Equity

Bellwether.org

Bellwether

FORWARD THINKING. FORWARD MOVING.