TO YOU

COFI trains and organizes parents to be leaders in some of the toughest communities anywhere. This is the story of how these parents organize at the grassroots level for their children and communities and then come together as a powerful, multicultural and diverse collective voice, fighting for all families.

COFI-trained parents have led the way: Restoring recess for children in Chicago Public Schools. Replacing zero tolerance with restorative justice as the basis for school discipline. Ending suspensions for young children. Knocking on 5,000 doors to find out why neighborhood children weren’t in preschool, then winning structural changes to remove barriers in public programs. Innovating a peer-to-peer Head Start Ambassadors program so more children get the benefits of quality early learning.

And, yes, these are important changes. But to understand COFI, you need to start with the mothers themselves. They are parents who face real challenges, from community violence to unemployment, lack of childcare and failing schools. What COFI does is value parent leadership—these mothers’ commitment to change. It doesn’t start with sweeping societal action but with personal transformation. The first and most important step—women tell us—is to realize their own power. Once that happens, they take important steps as parents and leaders—with their children and families and in their communities. The parents’ personal strength becomes a foundation for building strong relationships—and these relationships are the key to forging social change.

As longstanding cracks in our society are gaining more notice so too are theories of how to fix what is broken. Many talk of parent engagement as one such strategy, including how parents teach their children, get involved in schools, and help students succeed.

But, when you meet COFI parents, they will tell you that they have something bigger in mind by parent engagement: a vision and solutions that come from the ground up. They are building the collective power of engaged parents every step of the way. Parents are changing the ways things get done in their own families and communities and up through the channels of policymaking and institutional change.

We invite you to learn more about COFI’s work, and meet these amazing women, whose courage, resilience, and grit are sparking a growing movement of parent leaders. I hope you will be inspired to talk with them, to work with them and to spread the news.

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