

CAMPAIGNS AND VICTORIES

ELEMENTARY JUSTICE CAMPAIGN

“My daughter was expelled from 7th grade for talking during lunch.”

“My child was suspended for ten days for looking out the window.”

Nelly Torres knew about the “school-to-prison pipeline” that punished children—more often than not, children of color—for being children, and pushed them out of school and on to the streets. But this time, the stories were being told by other mothers, women she knew, other COFI-trained leaders whose children she’d seen grow up.

If this was happening to these women’s children, were her kids next? Nelly and the other mothers and grandmothers around the table came together and sparked the Elementary Justice Campaign in 2004, to break the cycle of criminalizing low-income youth of color.

Parents knew their own experiences with their children in Chicago’s low-income African American and Latino neighborhoods. Even kindergartners were getting out-of-school suspensions. Many elementary schools had prison-like atmospheres; at the time, 82% of the students didn’t have recess and many were not even allowed to talk during lunch. Parents were told their children starting kindergarten are already trailing their white and middle-class counterparts.

The campaign has made immense progress. One example: POWER-PAC along with its partners won major changes to the Chicago Public Schools Student Code of Conduct: **ending suspensions of 2nd grade and younger; reducing expulsions for 5th grade and younger; and banning group punishments such as the practice of “silent lunch”** where youngsters were not able to talk during lunch.

Parents won a reduction in the maximum number of days a student can be suspended. Punitive “zero-tolerance” language has been replaced by a new philosophy of restorative justice that teaches children to behave appropriately and resolve conflicts—*without* suspending or expelling them from school. The Campaign has leveraged hundreds of thousands of dollars for restorative justice programming.

**AT RIGHT,
FROM TOP:
Parent
Peacemakers
planning and
hosting Peace
Circles at
school-based
Parent Peace
Centers**



POWER-PAC is a cross-cultural, cross-community membership organization of COFI-trained parents whose victories are making a difference in their neighborhoods and across Chicago and Illinois.



VICTORY POWER-PAC parent leaders work together to win funding and support from the school district, police department and county government for **Parent Peace Centers** at Chicago public elementary and high schools. At these centers, parent peacemakers are trained in restorative justice practices and lead peace circles with students at risk of disciplinary actions. The circles give students a space to voice their perspectives and be heard in school.

**EARLY LEARNING CAMPAIGN:
ACCESS TO QUALITY
EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS
FOR ALL FAMILIES**

In 2007, POWER-PAC leaders launched the *Early Learning Campaign*, an organizing, policy change, and public awareness movement to identify and overcome real barriers for low-income families to access quality early learning. POWER-PAC leaders know that high quality early childhood education is proven to be part of the path out of poverty and critical to avoiding the “Cradle-to-Prison” pipeline that catches too many African American and Latino young people.

The campaign began with parents knocking on doors, and finding that in some pockets of Chicago, as many as 60% of preschool-aged children who are eligible for public-funded early education programs were not enrolled. In 2009, COFI and POWER-PAC released “Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool,” tabulating results from talking with more than 5,000 families.

Because COFI trained parents were talking peer-to-peer, they were also uniquely able to uncover the obstacles for families getting young children into early education programs. Since then, COFI has shown what can happen when there is a real investment in building leadership capacity among low-income parents. During 2012 and 2013, COFI published policy briefs that describe innovative, parent-led programs that get more children into preschool. Parents have said that it’s not about “hard to reach” families—it’s about hard-to-reach programs.



Parent leaders understand that high quality early learning is key to breaking the cycle of poverty and they are uniquely able to uncover obstacles for families getting children into these programs.

VICTORY Parents created the “Walking Preschool Bus” program where they walk children to and from preschool to increase their attendance, help ensure safety and assure the little ones who otherwise could not get to preschool and are able to attend. Parent teams got these “buses” up and running at 10 Chicago schools.

The program increases access for preschoolers whose families may have a hard time with work schedules, limited mobility, and other real-life practicalities that are addressed by this innovative parent-led program.

Parents helped Illinois leverage a \$3.5 million federal grant that included funding for pilot programs in six sites to test out POWER-PAC recommendations about improving access for “hard-to-reach” families to quality programs. POWER-PAC leaders pioneered and work as parent-to-parent Head Start Ambassadors, helping achieve full enrollment year after year.

COFI trained parents have been at the table, serving on state and local policy committees as they have integrated parent engagement and parent-led outreach into Illinois’ initiatives on developmental screenings, home visiting, and preschool expansion. Most recently parents won the streamlining of preschool and Head Start enrollment systems in Chicago.



The necessity of bringing the enrollment process out to the community has been a core principle guiding POWER-PAC’s work on early learning.



VICTORY Active Parents of Nixon (Padres Activos de Nixon) is a COFI parent team at Nixon School in Chicago working to address asset building, little by little. On Chicago’s Northwest side, the parent team partnered with the Northwest Side Housing Center and a local bank, Wintrust, to open matched savings accounts. Seven families saved at least \$250 each, which was matched by the bank for a total of \$3,500 saved. Parent leaders also hosted a workshop on the Federal Deferred Action Immigration policy. Some families plan to use their savings to pay the cost of applying for legal immigration status; others save for their children’s college funds.

STEPPING OUT OF POVERTY CAMPAIGN: WORKING TO END THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

In 2009, POWER-PAC leaders began work to address the particularly harsh impact of the financial crisis and Great Recession on low-income families and develop and participate in strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty. Since then, they have partnered with advocacy organizations in the Illinois Asset Building Group (IABG) to win major legislative and administrative changes through their Stepping Out of Poverty Campaign. POWER-PAC is advocating for Universal Children’s Savings Accounts, which would be opened for each child in Illinois upon their birth and to which families can contribute over the years. When the child turns 18, they can then use the account for educational purposes. Studies show that children who have savings accounts have increased hopes and aspirations for going to college.

POWER-PAC surveys of parents on economic security issues revealed that 60% of the families live on less than \$20,000 a year and 45% are not employed. Parents are working on a new campaign to address issues of debt that hold families back.

With partners, parents also helped pass legislation on payroll cards, eliminating the fees associated with the cards that nickel and dime families. They worked to increase the minimum wage in Chicago and eliminate asset limits for families receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) so that families can actually save money for their futures. And they are working to raise consciousness and advocate for policies that end the racial and gender wealth gaps.

Progress on this campaign also includes:

- 2009: POWER-PAC, in partnership with the Illinois Asset Building Group, provided financial literacy information and resources around public benefit programs, and training on the historical context of the growth of the racial wealth gap in the U.S.
- 2010: By this year, parents had succeeded, with legislative partners, in winning the creation of a Legislative Task Force to explore Children’s Savings Accounts in Illinois.
- 2013: Parents and their partners won the passage of new legislation to eliminate asset limitations in Illinois’ Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.
- 2016: Parents surveyed hundreds of families statewide to unpack issues of debt, discovering a devastating impact on employment, housing and access to higher education.

AT LEFT: Parent leaders with State Senator Kimberly Lightford campaigning for a raise in the Illinois minimum wage; Parent leaders present the results of their debt survey using street theater.



