

COFI's Parent-Led Initiatives

Making A Difference for Low-Income Children and Families in Chicago

COFI Supports Families

"When I came to the U.S. from Mexico," said Graciela Suarez, a parent leader and organizer in the West Town community, "I missed my family, and I was quiet and depressed. The COFI training helped me see that other people who were in a similar situation were setting goals for themselves and accomplishing them." With the support of her parent team, Graciela tackled her most daunting personal goals — learning English and earning her GED. Inspired by her success, she began working with other parents on broader community changes: creating a parent room at the school, winning funding for after-school programs, and tackling community safety issues. Graciela became a leader at her school, and at the community and citywide levels. She joined the staff of West Town Leadership United, a COFI partner organization, in 1999 and currently works as a parent organizer and coordinator of after-school programming.



Graciela Suarez, parent leader and organizer

COFI Impacts Systems

COFI-trained parent leaders, working together at the citywide level, formed POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew - Policy Action Council) to impact larger policy and systems change. They identified the goal of targeting punitive school discipline policies and practices at the elementary school level. Out of their own children's experiences in Chicago schools, they felt these policies need to change. In talking with other families, they found that 1 of every 3 parents in their communities had had a child suspended from school, and that suspensions and school-based arrests more than doubled in the past ten years.



POWER-PAC parent leaders met with Chicago Board of Education President Michael Scott to negotiate changes to Chicago Public School policies to (a) make school discipline policies less punitive, and (b) create alternative discipline policies and programs that educate, rather than criminalize young people. Board President Scott agreed to fund 10 to 20 alternative discipline pilots in Chicago elementary schools and to involve these mothers in helping to rewrite the district's Uniform Discipline Code.





Mary Jo McConahay

POWER-PAC leaders Louise Evans and Glenda Tardy with Ms. Evans's granddaughter, Trinity.

COFI Builds Communities

At the Austin Peace Center, 29 pre-teen girls and boys come one afternoon each week to the peacemaking room at their Westside elementary school. There they participate in Peace Circles run by parent leaders from their community. They are learning to see themselves in a new light — as peacemakers — rather than disrupters of the peace. The young people in the program would have been suspended from school, but instead they have been offered a second chance. In just a few short months, these girls' and boys' grades and behavior have turned around. As one teacher at the school reported: "(One of my students) exhibited very angry and challenging behavior until he began in the program. Since then, though, he has been recognized as one of the most improved students with both his behavior and his academics."



POWER-PAC leaders hold a press conference calling for a return of recess to Chicago Public Elementary Schools. Over 82% of Chicago elementary schools currently do not have recess. Front row, from left, POWER-PAC leaders include: Nelida Torres, mother of four from the Humboldt Park area; Lynn Morton, a single working mom raising a son and helping to raise two nephews from Chicago's Westside; Felipa Mena, a recent Mexican immigrant from the West Town area; and, in the rear, Martha Plummer, a grandmother raising grandchildren in Chicago's Englewood community on the Southside, with children from across the city.

