

Turning Parents into Strong Community Leaders

*By Ellen Schumer
and Sandy
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Late last winter, Nancy Santiago, as a member of the "Parent Policy Committee," helped convince Chicago Public Schools to involve parents and communities more fully in deciding the distribution of funds from a major federal program. This spring, she won re-election for a seat on her Local School Council, where she is one of six parent representatives that govern her children's school. She also remains a leader of a parent activist team that has changed her local school into a community learning center, opening it to the community afternoons and evenings, bringing in additional programs, improving safety, and building relationships with hundreds of community members.

Paula Daniels has just accomplished two major milestones. She was offered a full-time job in her children's school after volunteering there for over eight years. And she held the kick-off meeting of Sankofa Community Outreach and Restoration Center (SCOR), an action and support group for parents whose lives have been changed by having a family member involved in the criminal justice system. She still finds time to be a volunteer leader in a parent action group at her local school.

Santiago and Daniels are two of the 1000 parents who have participated over the past five years in a process created by Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) to develop community leaders from the ranks of parents.

COFI was founded on three core beliefs:

- Parents, as leaders of families, are a great untapped source of community leadership.
- Parents, because they are leaders of families, will focus the community's action agenda on making communities better places to raise families.
- Parent-leaders will find common ground across

divisions of geography, ethnicity, and class that will make it possible to build constituencies for systems change.

Partnerships

COFI, founded in 1994, grew out of Women Leaders in Action, a pilot program in eight Chicago-area communities that tested curricula aimed at integrating women leaders' self, family and community leadership growth. Since then COFI has provided its training to more than 20 teams of parent or family leaders (and one group of teens) in five Chicago neighborhoods.

COFI's projects are usually implemented in partnership with local institutions, which provide some funding and other support. Early and sustained buy-in from the leaders and staff at those institutions (executive directors, principals, front-line staff and board members) opens a lot of doors and keeps the parents from being isolated. A deeper level of change can usually be achieved if the institutions themselves have begun to think about how they need to change. Before a project can begin, COFI facilitates discussion and training for the staff and boards of local partners on what it means to truly hear and be accountable to parent voices and family issues. Moving from assuming they know what parents want to active listening - creating the psychic space for parents to articulate their own goals - is the biggest hurdle.

For example, in the West Town community - a multi-ethnic, mixed-income community on Chicago's northwest side - COFI worked with a collaboration of youth service providers and settlement houses to sponsor a three-year project. Four settlement houses co-sponsored the project, seeking funding support, serving on the governing committee, and working closely with the parent leadership teams as they developed. Before the training began, COFI's discussions and planning with the collaboration focused on what it would mean for parents to really share in their decision-making on youth and family programming and to participate on their boards and policy committees.

Emerging parent leaders (graduates of the initial

leadership training) joined, and eventually outnumbered, the settlement house representatives on the governing committee within a year of the project's launch. Several years later, we see visible increases in parent leadership roles in schools, agencies, on settlement house boards and other community organizations in this neighborhood. The settlement houses have made changes in how they provide services based on these new working relationships. For example they have begun to provide on-site child care during adult basic education classes, retrained their reception and intake staff, and introduced new programs, like joint parent and child computer classes.

Although working with partners from the beginning is ideal, sometimes institutional buy-in can work in the other direction - an active and successful parent group will secure support from institutions that COFI wasn't able to interest beforehand.

Self, Family, and Team Leadership Training

After setting up partnerships, COFI begins to train local staff organizers. These can include existing parent leaders from the community or from other COFI projects, staff or organizers in the local partnering organizations or new staff hired specifically for the project.

Next they need to recruit prospective parent leaders. COFI has focused on schools to do this because parents come into contact with schools every day, and, at least in Chicago, parents have a structured voice in governance of the local schools, so they are not in a "client" relationship. COFI organizers often stand by school doorways to greet parents as they drop off or pick up their children. Parent leaders also recruit other prospective leaders from their own social networks (churches, day care centers, school committees).

COFI's theory is rooted in the "developmental organizing" tradition. Rather than focusing on transferring skills and tactics, we focus, using intensive long-term small group dialogue, on raising awareness among people who do not see themselves as leaderly or powerful that they are indeed both. "One of the questions

was who's the leader in your house," recalls one parent leader. "And I started to think about it, and it was me! I'm the one who makes sure they have their shots..., and the bills are paid and the food's on the table and they are safe. So that changed my whole life."

Developmental organizing also encourages connections between private lives and public leadership. As Paula Daniels has discovered through SCOR, parents who were formerly isolated in their "private" problems become not only strong sources of mutual support, but also allies for creating change, when they began to recognize the "public" dynamics of their problems. In addition to supporting one another personally, SCOR members are considering taking on the exorbitant rates phone companies charge inmates calling home and the discourteous treatment of family members who visit inmates.

COFI's six session leadership training program begins with a community visioning orientation and then discusses what kinds of leaders and leadership skills are needed to achieve these visions. The visioning experience helps participants identify common concerns and common goals, and begin to build a team and create excitement about what they might accomplish together. The training then turns to goal setting, breaking goals into achievable objectives, asking for and providing mutual support, and balancing personal, family, and public responsibilities. At the conclusion of the training, the group decides if they want to form a "Parent Action Team" and continue to work together to support one another and to improve their schools and communities. (They invariably do.) Parents describe the impact of Self, Family, and Team training as "transformative."

Daniels, who was already a longtime school and community activist before she participated in COFI's training, says the training "gave me that push to go on and achieve my goal," starting the SCOR. "The concept was in my mind for a few years; COFI was the sparkplug that caused the engine to go." Daniels observes that her parent action team has been the victim of its own success: members have achieved their personal goals - getting jobs and going back to school - so well that the team has had

difficulty finding new meeting times.

COFI-trained parent action teams have won a commitment from Chicago Public Schools to fully involve parents and community leaders in allocating federal funds; added several new playlots and improved recreational programs at schools; helped create a new parent-led community organization, West Town Leadership United; opened seven school-based community learning centers; opened English as a Second Language and GED classes at over 10 schools; established parent safety patrols at several schools; and sponsored family activities including summer carnivals, cultural affairs, and parent and child computer classes.

Community Outreach and Action

Self, Family, and Team training graduates learn the arts of the one-on-one meeting and community surveying. They then reach out to other parents, residents, and community stakeholders to build relationships that increase the community's "social capital," to identify priority issues facing families in the community, and to engage more people in improving the community's response to families. Parent to parent outreach is done in teams of two to build confidence and to enable bilingual one on ones.

Nancy Santiago describes the experience: "At first I was shy. I wouldn't dare talk to anybody, but then I said, 'Let's give it a shot.' We went out in the community to survey as a group. We bonded and stood as a team. We did 676 interviews. We went out in the heat, rain, and cold. Nothing stopped us. What we wouldn't dare do by ourselves, we did together. We interviewed the whole community, not just Hispanics, but everyone. We asked what are the best things in the community. Then we asked what needed to change."

When the outreach process is complete, parent leaders compile the information to expand their action teams and sharpen their agendas. Santiago recalls, "After the surveys were finished, we held a meeting with parents, community leaders, and politicians. We put the surveys in front on a desk and read them out loud. We set three

goals: 1) to increase students' test scores; 2) to improve community safety; and 3) to help people in the community get into job training programs."

Not long after this meeting, Santiago's team opened a community center in the local school. The parent action teams identify and coordinate after school programs in the school for parents, children, and entire families, and they often provide child care and security. The school keeps the building open and assures integration with the daytime academic program. The parents and the school staff working together have improved student achievement enough to remove the school from the state's probationary list. Santiago's center is one of seven created by parent leaders who have been through the COFI's training in partnership with their schools; three more are hoping to open this year.

Beyond Basics

COFI supports emerging, new and veteran community leaders in the lifelong process of leadership development through Parents as Peer Trainers and the Parent Policy Committee. Parents as Peer Trainers teaches parent leaders how to lead the Self, Family, and Team training for others. All COFI leadership training is conducted by teams, so at first, parents who complete this course co-lead the training with staff. Later they may team with other parents. So far, 30 parents have participated in Parents as Peer Trainers and trained 200 more parents.

Parent leaders from local action teams who are interested in wider systems change have organized a cross-neighborhoods Parent Policy Committee to learn about the policy change process, identify priority issues and develop strategies to win these issues. Policy Committee members learn about the legislative process, how to approach elected and appointed officials, public school finance, the structure of various large public bureaucracies, and other policy making basics through formal training and less formal dialogues with policy makers and advocates. Currently, the focus is on increasing public funding support for "community schools" - schools that partner fully with community

organizations and leaders.

It Works

COFI's work validates our 3 core beliefs.

Parents are an untapped source of community leadership. Santiago and Daniels are but two of 1000 parent leaders who newly see themselves as leaders and are actively asserting that leadership. Seventeen parent leaders have moved into full-time training and organizing positions in their communities and many others are in paid part-time work at their schools or community organizations. Over 100 parent leaders have won local school council positions and 30 leaders sit on Boards of Directors of local community organizations or community collaborations.

Community leadership visions are focused on families. Although COFI parent leaders are not disinterested in housing, economic development, public safety, the environment, and other common agendas of organizing, their lists of community priorities also include family supports, the need for programs and activities for children after school, job and educational opportunities for parents, the quality of their children's schools, and safe passage for children to and from school. The lens of their vision is squarely focused on the family.

Parent-leaders will find common ground across divisions and will build constituencies for systems change. "Prior to [the COFI leadership training] experience, I would not cross over into Hispanic areas," says Daniels. "The training made it possible for us to unite a divided people, African Americans and Latinas."

An important additional impact of COFI's work has been that of strengthening the families of participants. With the growing awareness that healthy communities are grounded in effective social relationships, the many parents who report that the COFI training helped them find a job, go back to school, and resolve problems in their families are further evidence of COFI's impact in rebuilding urban communities.

Sociologist Kris Smock writes, "The parents that I interviewed are proud of their involvement with COFI's family-focused community building project. Their participation has had a significant impact on their self-esteem, their involvement in the community, and their ability to achieve their personal goals. The teams have also made important strides in addressing their school and community goals through a range of different projects. The key challenges facing the parent teams in the future will be to increase participation and to broaden the impact of their work." COFI looks forward to those challenges.

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Resources

"Community Building and Community Organizing: Creating Effective Models," by Sandy O'Donnell and Ellen Schumer. [*Shelterforce*, January/February 1996](#), #85, p. 12, 973-509-2888.

"Citizen Empowerment: A Developmental Perspective," by C.H. Kieffer, in *Studies in Empowerment: Steps Toward Understanding and Action*. J. Rappaport, C. Swift, and R. Hess, eds. Haworth Press, New York 1984.

[*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*](#), by Paulo Friere, Rev. ed. Continuum, New York, 1970/1994.

[*A Tradition That Has No Name: Nurturing the Development of People, Families, and Communities*](#), by Mary F. Belenky, Lynne A. Bond, and Jacqueline S. Weinstock. Basic Books, New York, 1997.

Strengthening Parent Voices: Transforming Families, Schools, and Community. Available from West Town Leadership United (WTLU), Executive Director Idida Perez, 1116 North Kedzie, 5th Floor, Chicago, IL 60651;

773-394-7484; or from COFI.

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