

Parent Engagement that Builds Leadership and Power

COFI is driven by the core belief that building the leadership and collective power of parents creates positive change in families, communities, and public policy. COFI's work begins by engaging individual parents but goes beyond improving outcomes for just one person or one family. It is ultimately about engaging *groups of parents* and harnessing their power to *impact change in policies, practices, and systems* so that the structures designed to support families, including the early care and education system, are working for and with the families they serve.

This policy brief shares some central principles and components of engaging parents to successfully impact policies and systems. We have learned *how* this kind of parent engagement can be effective in strengthening access and participation in early learning, and *why* parent engagement that builds leadership and parent power is such a positive, high impact, and essential component in strengthening the system of quality early learning for all children.



Adrienne Stewart (left, with her grandson), the Parent and Community Engagement Director for the Chicago Public Schools Office of Early Education, congratulates parents on their success in reaching more than 475 families about the importance of early learning. Through a pilot designed by COFI parents and funded by the district, COFI trained 51 parents from elementary schools to talk with their neighbors to improve enrollment and attendance in preschool.

Promising practices to enroll hard-to-reach families in quality early learning programs

This policy and practice brief comes from COFI (Community Organizing & Family Issues), the umbrella organization that trains and supports grassroots parents to be powerful leaders on issues that affect their families.

The COFI model of parent engagement relies on leadership development and organizing to ensure that parents themselves are shaping programs and policies to increase access to quality early learning.

It is one promising avenue for positive change. We share our experience in the hope that it can serve as a model and a process for addressing community problems with a “bottom-up” approach of authentic parent engagement.

For more information, visit www.cofionline.org and see the parent-to-parent research report, “Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?”

“The success of COFI’s model is tied to the effort they put into starting at the beginning: where parents are in their own lives, helping them to get involved. Then, COFI brings parents along to the next level of involvement, and then the next, until they are ready to be active participants around policy.”

—NANCY SHIER, VICE PRESIDENT, ILLINOIS POLICY, OUNCE OF PREVENTION FUND (RETIRED)

Parent engagement:

Core principles and components that make a difference

COFI impacts change through an original model of parent leadership and support, *Family Focused Organizing*.

It takes time and investment to build the kind of depth, sophistication, organization, and power that parents have achieved in COFI and POWER-PAC, but it pays back in results.



*COFI knows the impact parents can have when they take an active role in their children's education. In our model, parents start with a focus on their **own** lives, including their families, before moving on to community and public policy change.*

What works

Parent engagement is increasingly recognized as a vital component of improving learning outcomes for children. In COFI's work in the early learning arena, for example, people are seeing that engaging parents is key to reaching low-income and disconnected families. Engaged parent leaders help increase the knowledge of other parents about the importance of early childhood programs. They are increasing the participation of low-income children and families in home visiting, preschool, and Head Start programs. And, engaged parent leaders are successfully integrating their ideas into program design and policy decisions to make the early childhood systems work better.

From our experience, here are the key components to a successful parent, or family, engagement effort:

Start where the parents are.

Literally. COFI organizers reach out to parents where they are—in schools and childcare centers, in local housing projects, and in their homes. They go to where parents feel comfortable and invite their participation. These recruitment conversations are about truly listening. They are parent-centered, not about meeting an organization's goals.

The work also starts where parents “are” in their individual, personal experience. In the communities where COFI works, many parents are very low-income women: some are grandmothers raising grandchildren, others are recent immigrant mothers, and many are women-headed families that receive public assistance. A lot of these families are overwhelmed by the trauma of violence, poverty, and other issues. The parents generally do NOT start the leadership training thinking of themselves as leaders. So, we start with a focus on leadership in their *own* lives and families. We talk about taking control of your own life, your goals, and building support.

Support the sharing of stories that develop confidence and connection.

Parents sharing their stories and hearing the stories of other parents like them is perhaps the most powerful and effective way to build relationships and real engagement. Parents find connections, and then focus individually and together on their personal and family change goals and ultimately on community and systems change goals.

Build skills step by step: personal experience to public life.

In COFI training, parents learn how to set goals and build the skills it takes to achieve them. Becoming confident leaders in their personal lives and in their families is a first step to moving on to effective leadership at the school or in the community.

Help parents to find and build support.

Parents create what we call a “web of support” around themselves and their families—supporting one another and finding support from others. As they build the capacity to address their personal and family struggles and share their successes with each other, they are drawn into conversations about the interconnection between their personal struggles and broader community issues.

Build teams to establish collective leadership, action, and power.

With a new sense of confidence and support, parents use newly-acquired planning and leadership skills to work in teams to address common issues through public and community action. We invite parents to identify shared goals for their families and/or in the community as a whole. Our work on early learning comes directly from the concerns of the *parent action teams*. Some examples of team projects include door-to-door outreach, hosting a story hour for children, or creating a safe passage parent patrol.

Use positive visioning.

As a team, parents work together to create visions of what they imagine their community could be like if it truly supported their children and families. Parents envision positive solutions to some of the seemingly intractable problems the communities are facing. They use their knowledge of their community, their experience, and their creativity to come up with innovative programs, practices, and policies that address community challenges.

Seek out partners and solutions.

Parent action teams are trained and encouraged to seek out partnerships in the community and beyond. COFI emphasizes positive problem solving while encouraging parents to build relationships and develop allies in “the system.” Parents bring newfound skills and the parent-created visions and solutions to community and policy partnership tables. As such, parent leaders become a crucial constituency and component of any early learning community or policy collaboration.

Recognize that personal transformation is an important element in creating larger social change.

When parents believe they are leaders in their own lives and have a sense of control over their own circumstances, they begin to see that change is possible on multiple levels. In a recent evaluation, prior to COFI training, less than half of parent participants saw themselves as leaders, while after the training two-thirds saw themselves as leaders. Also, post-training, parents felt more confident in their ability to set and accomplish individual and family goals and overall felt more connected to their community.



Parent action team members from Peabody and Reavis elementary schools implemented an early learning program that engaged parents with young children in story hours. Members also provided leadership training for the families.

The how and why: *Building leadership and power*

“The biggest impact that COFI brings is helping to pull out the voices of parents who have young children. These parents are the change agents in our early learning community. We have learned the importance of listening carefully to what the parents have to say and the benefit of working with them to develop and implement their ideas. To value what people bring to the table, we have to have the patience and skill to help them learn how to bring that gift forward.”

– VANESSA RICH, DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, CITY OF CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND SUPPORT SERVICES

The most important impact of parent engagement happens when parents start to **make peer-to-peer connections** with each other and other families. In COFI parent training, parents learn to trust themselves and to build mutual trust with one another. Parents build a common vision for the future, focused on positive change. Working together, they then learn the skills of intentional, relationship-building including how to articulate their own experiences and how to listen to others. Across the city and state, these parents are now taking these skills and positive messages door-to-door to other parents and to policy making tables.

True partnership with parents requires both patience and listening. Parents *build dynamic and intentional partnerships with institutional leaders* who can truly listen to the parent leaders’ real life stories and hear what needs to change to improve outcomes for children in local communities and programs. Policy makers, providers, school staff, and others grow to value these authentic relationships, built on mutual trust across racial, economic, cultural, and professional boundaries. Collaborating with parents is about more than a token seat at the table; it requires active efforts to integrate parents into shaping the way things get done.

Partnerships are a two-way street. When parents learn that their perspectives are truly respected, they bring new ideas to the table—and they learn the practical parameters of the work. Parents take what they’ve learned at the table back into their communities and become the conduit for communicating to others families how to manage real or perceived obstacles to participation.

For example, families who were avoiding enrolling children in early learning programs because they were afraid of losing their child care subsidy, learned from



POWER-PAC Early Learning Committee members with Vanessa Rich, Deputy Commissioner, City of Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (third from left).



Not only is personal transformation and the focus on parents' ability to take control in their own lives key to building leadership, it also is key to keeping parents engaged in community change work for the long-haul. As but one example, POWER-PAC, the organization of low-income parents and grandparents which COFI supports, just celebrated its 10th anniversary—and many of the founding members are still involved in making personal, family, community, and policy changes!

parents going door-to-door around early learning that they can have their child in a half-day preschool and still receive the full state subsidy if a family member or caregiver is watching the children the remainder of the day while the parent works. (See the companion *Head Start Ambassador Policy Brief*.)

This kind of deep parent engagement has a **snowball effect**—a core group of trained parent leaders engage more and more parents over time. Parents are *the best* at getting other parents involved.

As more parents are engaged, **a constituency is being built** that is pushing toward the goal of tearing down policy barriers that block access to early learning programs. Ultimately, parents say they are working toward a seamless early learning system to help break the vicious cycle of poverty.

Success breeds new opportunities. Because parents' peer-to-peer outreach on early learning has been so successful, we are being asked to help other programs that impact families in poverty. A new Food Ambassadors program is in its second year of spreading the word about summer meal programs for children which help reduce food insecurity and help families balance their summer budgets.



Parent engagement and organizing are making a big difference in Englewood, one of the toughest neighborhoods in Chicago



A COFI-trained parent and participant in the home-visiting program, Kimberly Smith (above and at right) is promoting the program in the media and the community. She shared her enthusiasm saying,

“As a participant in the home-visiting program, I know the benefits it has brought to my family and I know how important the support I receive has been in raising my child.

When I go door-to-door, I’m able to speak from my own experience and help other families connect to the resources they need, which makes me feel so good.”



COFI parent leader Kimberly Smith from Englewood speaks at a coalition press conference with Chicago Police Chief Garry McCarthy (far left) about the impact of quality early childhood investments as a long-term violence reduction strategy.

Over the past several years, COFI and other local groups have worked together to engage and organize parents to increase access and participation in early learning in Englewood, one of Chicago’s toughest communities.

Now, the Southside Early Learning Network is building an infrastructure of parents, providers, and others with the goal of creating a more seamless system of supporting children and families. The effort is funded through the federal MIECHV (Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting) program, which also provides home-visiting support and services to over 100 area families with infants and toddlers.

The Network brings together more than 85 local and state-level child and family-serving agency staff, and a core group of eleven COFI-trained neighborhood parent leaders to coordinate early learning efforts in the area. As part of the effort, the parents went door-to-door to spread the word about the program and recruit families.

In just 6 weeks time, 11 COFI parent leaders put in 513 hours of door-knocking and referred 150 pregnant women or new mothers to early childhood home-visiting programs.



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GOVERNOR

January 31, 2013

Tracy Occomy Crowder
Community Organizing & Family Issues (C)
1436 West Randolph, 4th floor
Chicago, IL. 60607

RE: January Home Visiting Task Force M

Ms. Crowder,

The Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) would like to extend our gratitude to you for attending the January Home Visiting Task Force (HVTF) meeting and sharing your experience with the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV). It was very impactful and helped give the Home Visiting Task Force a true picture of what MIECHV looks like "on the ground." The progress your community has made in collaboration building and serving hard to reach populations is impressive. The hard work and dedication of you and your staff play a huge role in the success of the MIECHV project.

Thanks to your participation, the HVTF and our Federal Project Officer at Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) had the opportunity to see first-hand the collaboration of the South Side Early Learning Network. The HVTF and HRSA have taken notice of the remarkable work taking place in your community. OECD is very proud to have you a part of the MIECHV Team. We are appreciative of how you spent your time and your willingness to share your experiences.

Congratulations POWER-PAC'rs
of the Southside Early Learning Network for all
of your hard work!!

Lannon Broughton
Jimmie Cotton
Semelda Elverton
Helen Green
Rosazlia Grillier
Gayle Hill
Deborah Hill
Matthew Johnson
Annie Jones
Milo McNeal
Elicia Randle
Antonio Randle
Cornelia Simms
Kim Smith
Jennifer Smith
Danetta Taylor
Tara Williams

"The progress your community has made in collaboration building and serving hard to reach populations is impressive."

It's nice to be recognized!

The impact of parents with COFI leadership training has been noticed and recognized by the news media and policy makers, as well as in their own communities.

2012 HEAD START RECRUITMENT
YEAR END REPORT

Head Start

First Steps to a Great Future



"Begun in 2009, the Project has so successfully increased Head Start enrollments that it has continued."

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Home visiting expands with federal funds

By: Rebecca Harris / June 4, 2013

Every two weeks, Kimberly Smith gets a visit from a parent educator who teaches her an activity to do with her 17-month-old son, Jeremiah. The visits have helped her become a better parent, says Smith.

During a recent visit, a parent educator had Smith carry out an activity with her son that involved putting items in a container, then having him pull them out and examine them. The goal: to promote learning by capitalizing on a young child's natural curiosity.



Diane Saxon-Carter (left), a parent educator from Blue Island District 130, advises new mom Porsche Harris to talk to and read to her son, to build a strong bond with him.

"The South Side Early Learning Network, convened by COFI, promotes the collaboration and helps agencies work through any problems that arise."

Making an impact

The results, costs, and benefits of deep parent engagement

“Every approach has unique advantages...Of all the models I studied, COFI’s approach is **the most effective at engaging society’s most disenfranchised members in the broader community and in public life.**”

—DR. KRISTINA SMOCK,
*DEMOCRACY IN ACTION:
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING
& URBAN CHANGE*



Parents learn to make change by building relationships and telling their personal stories. Parents discover shared issues and shared passion to take care of their children.

There are many models, programs, and purposes that come under the umbrella of parent engagement. All of them require organizational investment of time and money. When parents are engaged not only in individual change, but also in impacting systems and policies that affect them, the payoff can be huge for individual children, families, and society at large.

COFI results

In COFI’s nearly 20-year history, over 3,000 parents have participated in training. Those parent leaders have inspired hundreds of projects in local schools, neighborhoods, and citywide that have made a difference for children—from parent-led afterschool centers, to parents in the classroom, to walking preschool bus programs. Some projects are parent-run initiatives under COFI’s direct umbrella or within a partner organization. Others are part of broader coalition efforts where parent leaders are a piece of a wider team of parents and professionals.

Over time, COFI-trained parents also built their own organizations at the local and the citywide level. Ten years ago, with COFI’s support, parent leaders created the citywide parent-led organization POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew—Policy Action Council) to take on policy and systems change issues that parents understand deeply from their own lives, schools, and communities. POWER-PAC’s *Early Learning Campaign*, which emanates from parents’ experiences, aims to increase access to and participation in quality early learning for low-income families.



Every year, POWER-PAC leaders take their stories and visions for change to the State Capitol. Talking with elected officials has led to policy changes that make a difference.

Already, the POWER-PAC Early Learning Campaign has gotten big results:

- » Parent-to-parent outreach in more than 30 Chicago neighborhoods that has reached 35,000 families and raised awareness about the importance of early learning—connecting these families with early learning programs and resources;
- » Full enrollment in Chicago Head Start for 4 years in a row;
- » Walking Preschool Bus programs that improve attendance for 3- and 4-year-olds;
- » A growing number of state-funded initiatives to test parents' innovative, community-based approaches to reaching more children with early learning resources and to engaging parents and communities; and
- » Parents actively involved in the policymaking tables and several parent recommendations have been adopted by Illinois Early Learning Council and the City of Chicago.

“My experiences with COFI reaffirmed my belief that parents are the most important constituency. The room for error diminishes when you increase parent involvement. That can be the difference sometimes between having a good policy and a great policy... COFI certainly empowers parents to be engaged in the district.”

—JOSE ALVAREZ, CHIEF OF STAFF FOR D.C. STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS AND FORMER DISTRICT LEVEL POLICY MAKER AT CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Our take on parent compensation

Some parent engagement programs provide a stipend, small honorarium or incentive prize for parents who participate. Generally, COFI does not do this for the actual parent engagement meetings and trainings. Instead, we assure that parents don't incur any transportation or child care costs in order to participate by offering rides and providing child care and refreshments for the sessions and meetings.

After the parent action team sets a goal for an early learning activity or project, such as those around community building, public awareness, or engaging more families, we do often pay parents or ask agencies to compensate parents who are actually implementing these projects. We believe that doing this accomplishes three goals:

- 1) it communicates to the parent and professional partners alike that this work has true value to the institution;
- 2) it helps create a culture of accountability: you do what you agree to do and you get compensated for it; and
- 3) it helps low-income parents to afford to invest their time and energy into making a difference for other families and children in their communities.



Parents celebrate completing COFI training: Self, Family, & Team.

Costs and benefits

Parent engagement is not terribly expensive but it *is* an investment. It requires commitment and willingness to work differently with parents. The biggest expenses are for staff time for the work: the cost of hiring or contracting with experienced trainers and/or parent organizers. Other project expenses might include the cost of meeting rooms, refreshments, child care, and transportation.

Organizations and efforts that are interested in family engagement should consider the issue of long-term commitment from the beginning. Ideally, groups should commit to parent engagement efforts for a minimum of 2-3 years, given that building relationships of trust and facilitating the development of new skills, attitudes, and capacities takes time and patience. Many projects that we have worked with start by bringing together a broad range of stakeholders as a sponsoring, or steering, committee. Then, as parent leaders are trained and parent action teams developed, the newly-trained parents can join the sponsoring or steering group. The parent leaders, joining with the institutional leaders and advocates, spur energy and momentum, which can also help keep the resources flowing.

Ultimately, the goal, and what our experience affirms, is that this work builds a constituency of sophisticated leaders who passionately advocate for funding and support for early learning programs—particularly public support—and initiate innovative and creative solutions to seemingly intractable challenges. This innovation and success contribute to sustainability.

Bring COFI training to your organization

COFI shares its model of training, leadership development, and support for parents' organizing efforts through its *Institute for Family Focused Organizing*.

COFI has developed, tested, and strengthened its unique model over many years. We believe that every parent engagement effort can be stronger when it is infused with genuine and respectful encouragement of parents to speak from their experiences and find common ground to take collective action for their families.

For those who are interested, COFI works with a wide range of projects in an intentionally flexible way to suit the needs (and often the limited resources) of organizational partners. Our partnerships range from a couple of hours of consultation, to offering 4-day intensive Train-the-Trainer courses, to multi-year joint efforts to implement COFI's model in new communities. Groups that are interested in consultation, training or partnership can learn more at www.cofionline.org. Click on "COFI Model and Training" for more information, including upcoming trainings. Or call us at 312 226-5141.



Moms with COFI training are engaged and organizing outside Chicago, too



Working in East St. Louis with the All Our Kids (AOK) Early Learning Network of St. Clair County, these COFI-trained moms went door-to-door to raise awareness about early learning, find out more about barriers to access, and engage more parents to participate in AOK. AOK is a program of Children's Home and Aid.

"COFI's work is amazing. The moms have made major changes in their lives, and from a starting group of 15, we now—six months later—have 45 parents coming to our meetings."

—MELISSA RUMPH,
AOK EARLY CHILDHOOD
NETWORK COORDINATOR OF
ST. CLAIR COUNTY,
EAST ST. LOUIS, ILLINOIS

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Parents are excited to get involved and share their visions for a family-friendly community.

You can help support parent engagement that builds leadership and power

We ask that early education centers, school districts, policy makers, and advocates consider the following ways they can help engage more families and assure more low-income and disconnected families have access to quality early learning programs:

- » All parent or family engagement efforts should include leadership training and support for group advocacy and parent organizing. This way, the work multiplies beyond individual families. It is smart to build a constituency of parent leaders who can defend early education and identify new policy and practice solutions from the ground up.
- » Groups or public entities that don't have the capacity to do this on their own can partner with and invest in organizations that provide parent leadership, engagement, and organizing.
- » Share the message and build the echo chamber: parent engagement that builds collective voice and power takes resources but pays big dividends.
- » Parent engagement at multiple levels is a critical component of any early learning program. It is integral to the success of children, key to engaging low-income and disconnected families, and critical to assuring that public policies and programs work as best as they can for the communities they intend to serve.