THE RIPPLE EFFECT IN ACTION: WHAT 7 PARENT LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES LEARNED FROM PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

July 2019
Contributors

NYU Metro Center Team: Joanna D. Geller, Ph.D., Sara McAlister, Kate Gill Kressley, Anne T. Henderson, Wendy Y. Perez, Ph.D., Joy Sanzone

Dialogues in Action: Steve Patty, Ph.D. and Jessamyn Luiz

Family Leadership Network: Danielle Asher


Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI): Rosazlia Grillier, Kellie Magnuson, Tracy Occomy, Ellen Schumer, Graciela Suarez

Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLÉ): Kris Buchmann, Erica Gallegos, Kristen Gamboa, Matthew Henderson

Parent Ambassadors: Sonja Lennox, Lori Pittman, Joel Ryan, Katy Warren

Parents for Public Schools (PPS): LaShron Cooley, Joann Mickens, Nita Rudy

Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) of Greater Rochester, NY: Ricardo Adams, Luva Alvarez, Jackie Campbell, Jennifer Ghidui, Carolyn Lee-Davis

Parent Voices: Gladys Holder-Soto, Mary Ignatius, Tamra Michelle Loomis, Maria Luz Torre

Copy-editing: Rosemary E. Foley

Graphic design: Romina Barrera

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the Hagedorn Foundation, and the Peppercorn Foundation.

We thank the following individuals for their thoughtful review of the full introduction and synthesis: Soo Hong, Ed.D. Lynda Parmely, Donna Thompson-Bennett, Rosann Tung, Ph.D., Elaine Zimmerman. We also thank Lynda Parmely, Elaine Zimmerman, and Ada Sanchez for helping to detail the history of this project.

Learn More

The full publication with all seven evaluation narratives and a complete synthesis is available on Amazon or at http://parentleadershipevaluation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/

Please contact Joanna Geller, Principal Investigator, at Joanna.geller@nyu.edu for more information or to speak about how your organization can become involved.

About NYU Metro Center

Metro Center promotes equity and opportunity in education through engaged sciences—research, program evaluation, policy analysis, and professional assistance to educational, governmental, and community agencies serving vulnerable communities and populations. Metro Center is nationally and internationally renowned for its work on educational equity and school improvement, bringing together scholars, educators, and innovators from diverse backgrounds to collaborate on a range of projects to strengthen and improve access, opportunity, and educational quality across varied settings, but particularly in striving communities.
What if the parents in your community had access to an organization that developed their knowledge and skills to become leaders, organizers and advocates for children? Would parents become a vital constituency for expanding opportunities for children and families? Would your community become more vibrant and cohesive as parents from marginalized groups and neighborhoods found their voice? Would civic institutions and policies become more democratic and equitable? As a result, would your community become a better place for all families to live and raise their children?

Teams of parent leaders and staff from seven parent leadership initiatives throughout the country conducted interviews with a total of 169 parent leaders to answer two evaluation questions:

1. What are the impacts of parent leadership development initiatives on the parents who experience them?
2. What are common successful practices of these initiatives?

78% of the parent leaders interviewed were parents of color. The teams worked together and with other community members to analyze their findings and reflect on the implications for the organization. The NYU Metro Center synthesized the findings across the 7 organizations.

**Key Takeaway**

Leadership, community organizing, and other movement-building organizations must invest in human development. Otherwise, they may experience policy wins, but will not build power in a way that leads to transformational change.

---

**7 Common Outcomes Across the Organizations**

**Social connections**

“Lo que me ha hecho fuerte es participar en grupo, y la confianza que me brindan las personas en ARISE.” (Translation: “What’s made me strong is group participation and the trust I am given by people at ARISE.”) – ARISE Parent Leader

Parents’ networks expanded, opening the doors to new civic, personal, and professional opportunities, and giving them more people to count on.

**Worthiness and Voice**

“I deserve more and so do my children.” – Parent Ambassadors Parent Leader

Parents developed confidence, self-worth, self-love, resilience, social connections, support in times of need, and a vision and belief that change was possible.

**Shifting the Blame**

“I learned that I’m not broken. The system is broken.” – Parent Voices Parent Leader

“I came to understand racism and how a system can take away privileges. After learning this, I felt stupid, but PLTI created a safe place to learn. I came to understand that I had oversimplified people and my community. I came to understand what was greater substance and that my fellow PLTI cohort’s experiences were similar in many ways, and this gave me a sense of belonging.” – PLTI Rochester Parent Leader

Parents understood how their own experiences were related to larger policies, reframing stories of pain as stories of strength and resilience. This process cultivated empathy and relationships across racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and language difference.
Working Across Difference

“When I would have met you? When in my life would I have met women and men from different nationalities and gotten to know them? We wouldn’t have gotten to know each other if we didn’t have this.” – OLÉ Parent Leader

“After PLTI I am more open minded, [as] opposed to the tunnel vision that I used to have; I understand other people go through struggles, even those who don’t look like me.” – PLTI Rochester Parent Leader

Parents leaders described their PLI as a community in which they were comfortable sharing their opinion and disagreeing, and where they were able to work together towards a shared goal.

Community-Level Change

“Advocacy starts with one person and trickles to the next, and the next, and the next. True advocacy happens when one person is a voice for someone else, but then teaches that person to be a voice for himself.” – Parents for Public Schools Leader

“Yo he hablado con candidatos, con políticos a nivel local y nacional con Nancy Pelosi, también puedo hablar en foros, entrevistas, corte de comisionados y de la ciudad, juntas de escuela, universidad...Yo sé a dónde ir con quien ir, con quien hablar y que decir.” – ARISE Parent Leader

Translation: “I’ve talked to candidates, to local and federal politicians, to Nancy Pelosi. I can also speak in forums, interviews, commissioners’ and city court, school meetings, and the university. ... I know where to go, who to go with, who to talk to, and what to say.”

In the words of a PLTI Rochester leader, parents felt a duty to “live up to their civic potential,” rather than wait for others to make change. Identification with their parent leadership family helped parents translate their love for their own children into civic action on behalf of all children.
“I used to be a destroyer but having come through the prison experience, and come to COFI, with my new family, I have learned to be a community builder. My older children did not get my full attention but my youngest child will know his father and see me as a leader.”
– COFI Parent Leader

Parents dreamt about – and did – what they never thought possible. They designed projects and lead campaigns, told their stories in front of hundreds of people, met with elected officials, joined task forces and councils, ran for offices and school board seats. Their self-confidence spilled into other parts of their lives.

Multi-Generational Benefits

“Estamos desarrollando comunidades con valores y que sean transmitidos a las nuevas generaciones.” – ARISE Parent Leader
Translation: “We are developing communities with values and that are transmitted to the new generations.”

Parents’ confidence and cultural pride radiated onto their children, children looked up to their parents and also became part of a connected, civically engaged community.
What Works?
5 Practices that Lead to Impact

Humanizing: Meeting parents’ individual needs and goals

“I know I am part of the Parent Ambassadors Family. If something tragic happened tomorrow, I know that the first to show up would be the Parent Ambassadors.”
- Parent Ambassadors Parent Leader

“Parent Voices allowed me to rediscover myself and what I was meant to do.”
- Parent Voices Parent Leader

The organizations provided childcare, meeting times that accommodated school and work schedules, food, and translation and supported parents as they developed new leadership skills and as they navigated family and employment struggles.

Unifying: Developing solidarity across difference

“I learned about my own internal racism. I didn’t see how prejudiced I was beforehand. As you come through the program you become aware of the racism around you and you want to change it.”
- Parent Ambassadors Parent Leader

“Before I got with COFI, I felt like all Hispanics were taking our jobs and all of our opportunities - so ‘send them back’. Now I’ve grown to love and respect what are now my brothers and sisters. I’ve grown to admire their work ethic, their strong sense of family, and their deep support. We all fight together now.”
- COFI Parent Leader

The organizations intentionally built community, encouraged parents to bring their cultures and full selves into their work, and raised consciousness about how systems disadvantage people of color.

Relational: Building a community that felt like a supportive family

“Lo que me ha hecho fuerte es participar en grupo, y la confianza que me brindan las personas en ARISE.”
- ARISE Parent Leader
Translation: “What has made me strong is to participate in a group, and the confidence that people give me in ARISE.”

The organizations created warm, welcoming, supportive environments that often served as a refuge from stress and trauma. They offered a sense of dignity and community and provided spaces free of judgment and stigma.
"I know more, so I am able to do more, and I am happy to do more." - Parents for Public Schools Parent Leader

"The more I learn, the more I understand, the more I want to get involved." - OLÉ Parent Leader

"Before PLTI I didn’t embrace my right to reach out and connect with people in positions of power. Thanks to PLTI I don’t hesitate to pick up the phone or send an email to someone in town hall. PLTI gave a sense of security in doing this."
- PLTI Parent Leader

The organizations offered concrete skill-building, such as public speaking, storytelling, and facilitation, taught parents about public systems and policy and legislative processes, and provided parents with opportunities to interact directly with community leaders, public officials, and politicians.

"Love. We have this whole other family with PLTI. When we see each other, we’re excited, trying to find out what each other is doing. So, it’s love. Each year it grows."
- PLTI Parent Leader

The organizations provided ongoing support, through personal struggles and civic and political setbacks and became stable anchors, where parents were always welcome back, even when they had to “check out” for a period of time.
Common Areas for Improvement

This process led the PLEN members to reflect deeply on how they could better fulfill their organizational missions. Several organizations discovered that they should:

- **Become more intentional about working toward racial justice and other forms of social justice**
  Parents gained a deeper understanding of inequitable systems, but in some cases, they felt powerless to fight racial inequities or did not connect their everyday experiences to larger systems
  - OLÉ proposed supporting parents to heal from experiences with racism and discrimination.
  - Parent Ambassadors proposed hiring more staff of color.
  - Greater Rochester PLTI proposed offering alumni opportunities to continue building their capacity to fight racial inequity.
  - ARISE proposed developing sessions to combat “machismo” and encouraging couples to participate in events and sessions.
  - Parent Voices reflected on how they could better intentionally engage parents who do not speak English or whose schedules prevent them from attending meetings.

- **Formalize or institutionalize powerful practices more broadly**
  The data validated many practices that PLIs were already implementing informally and encouraged them to formalize those practices.
  - ARISE proposed integrating educational activities into events to explain their purpose and connection to the overall mission.
  - COFI proposed further institutionalizing the notion of the “COFI toolbox,” a set of skills including public speaking, active listening, and time management. They also proposed formalizing mentoring relationships between seasoned and new parent leaders.

- **Offer parents opportunities to take on a variety of leadership roles**
  Several organizations found that some experienced parent leaders wanted to do more but felt stuck.
  - Greater Rochester PLTI proposed starting an annual calendar that includes networking opportunities, continuing education and skill development, and the opportunity to convene to examine and address current local issues.
  - Parent Voices proposed connecting with more seasoned parent leaders to find out what they needed in order to stay engaged.
  - Parent Ambassadors proposed regularly convening alumni through conference calls, or preferably, in-person annual reunions.
  - OLÉ proposed better supporting leaders and organizers in developing their own path for growth in the organization.

- **Offer new content and experiences to enhance parent leaders’ skills**
  All of the teams learned about new information and experiences parents desired - particularly related to advocacy. They proposed to offer these through changing their own programming or forging connections with other organizations - community-organizing training academies, school districts, community groups focused on a particular issue.
  - Parents for Public Schools proposed integrating existing policy and advocacy resources into the core training.
  - ARISE proposed offering additional leadership capacity-building to accelerate leaders’ movement into decision-making roles.
  - Parent Ambassadors proposed inviting in more trainers who focus on K-12 advocacy.
More About This Project

A Unique Evaluation Process

The seven PLEN member organizations engaged in a “participatory evaluation” (PE) process, called Project Impact. The teams conducted their own evaluations from start to finish, with extensive evaluation training and coaching from Dialogues in Action and Family Leadership Network.

PLEN members reported that this process helped them to:

+ Build deeper relationships with parent leaders and with fellow evaluation team members

+ Conduct evaluation in a way that was respectful, dignifying, and non-exploitative

+ Hone their active listening and inquiry skills

+ Deepen or expand evaluation practice within their organizations

+ Validate which existing practices were working and improve upon ones that were not

The Parent Leadership Indicators Project

The Parent Leadership Indicators Project, housed at the NYU Metro Center, works with parent leadership initiatives to create data collection tools, build evaluation capacity, and generate knowledge to advance the field of parent leadership. Our Theory of Change shows how high-quality parent leadership initiatives start a “Ripple Effect” whereby parents experience personal transformation, engage in collective action, become valued advisors to public officials and families, and ultimately invigorate democracy.

We are in the process of working with parent leadership initiatives to find innovative ways to test the various “ripples” of this Theory of Change.
Dialogues in Action

Dialogues in Action supports organizations with leadership, strategy, and evaluation. Their Project Impact initiative is an evaluation capacity building project designed to help social sector organizations develop durable habits of effective, meaningful and practical evaluation to help achieve a deeper and more expansive impact. For more information, visit www.dialoguesinaction.com.

Family Leadership Network

Family Leadership Network, housed within Choice for All, is a growing statewide network in New York providing tools and resources for families to choose the path to positively impact their own communities. Having had experienced the Project Impact training herself in 2016, Danielle Asher, Director of Curriculum and Training at FLN, became a consultant with Project Impact to support the PLEN process and has also supported the NYU Metro Center. For more information, visit www.choiceforall.org.

The Parent Leadership Evaluation Network

The Parent Leadership Evaluation Network (PLEN), a component of the Parent Leadership Indicators Project, includes seven parent leadership organizations representing a range of geographic areas, parent demographics, and issue areas. Data were collected in the following states.
What Difference Are These Parent Leadership Initiatives Making in their Communities?

In collaboration with elected officials and other key decision-makers, and as part of coalitions and committees, parent leaders with these organizations influence policy and change institutions and communities, and invigorate democracy. For example:

**Economic policy**

OLÉ won minimum wage increases in Albuquerque and Bernalillo County, New Mexico.

COFI won passage of legislation to create a statewide Children’s Savings Account program to provide every child born in Illinois with $50 in a college savings account.

Parent Voices increased Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash grants to lift families out of deep poverty.

**Early childhood policy**

Parent Ambassadors ensured that national Head Start assessment standards strengthened family engagement.

Parent Voices San Francisco won the first ballot initiative in the country to expand access to affordable childcare and increase the wages of early educators, generating $140 million annually by taxing millionaire commercial property landlords.

**K-12 education policy**

COFI won 150 community schools in Chicago and reinstated recess for 266,000 Chicago Public School children.

Parents for Public Schools defeated a bill in Mississippi that would have reduced public school funding under a new formula.

**Changing Institutions**

ARISE parent leaders gained approval of simultaneous translation in the Boards in the Court of Commissioners.

Parents for Public Schools parent leaders worked with the Chevron plant in Moss Point, MS to hold parent-teacher conferences at the plant so that more parents could participate.

**Changing Communities**

ARISE parent leaders won approval of the new Model Subdivision Rules that will include public lighting infrastructure and 50-year storm protection in all subdivisions in a previously neglected area.

Miami PLTI parent leaders convened to support families in the dependency system, increasing access to services and knowledge of community resources, and connecting children to services and mentoring.

**Invigorating Democracy**

COFI created a new parent voice in statewide policy development, the Early Learning Council’s Statewide Family Advisory Committee.

PLTI parent leaders in multiple states are working to get out the vote with door to door campaigns to register voters, campaigns to register high school juniors and seniors, and forums with candidates built relationships with parents and increase voter knowledge.