

Evaluation for Equity

Measuring What Matters in
Parent Leadership Initiatives

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



PARENT LEADERSHIP
INDICATORS PROJECT

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The Parent Leadership Indicators Project is creating a parent leadership indicator framework that will offer a novel and comprehensive evaluation tool to parent leadership development initiatives for advancing their work. This work builds on a parent leadership theory of change, developed in collaboration with experts in the field and with parent leaders and staff of PLIs, that illustrates parents' pathways from being relegated to the political margins to being valued by public officials and influencing policy and practice changes in ways that lead to more equitable opportunities for children (Henderson & Gill Kressley 2016).

The [parent leadership theory of change](#) emphasizes the collective and relational nature of parent leadership development. While individual parent leaders build crucial skills and experience transformative growth, they grow as leaders in community with other parents. Expanding networks of parent leaders take collective action to change practices and hold systems accountable for serving all children well. Parent leadership initiatives require a different kind of evaluation that aligns with the participatory and empowering goals of PLIs and that reflects how individuals, communities, and systems are slowly transformed over time through the hard work of building trusting relationships.

This paper aims to help evaluators, funders, and practitioners think through possibilities and considerations in evaluating PLIs. The full paper includes an overview of the practice of evaluation, principles for strong evaluation, what we have learned about evaluating PLIs, and recommendations. In

this executive summary, we focus on what we've learned about evaluation from our engagement with PLI staff and parent leaders and our approach to evaluating PLIs.¹

What we heard from PLI staff and leaders

Through listening sessions, focus groups, and meetings, our team heard from PLI staff and parent leaders about how evaluation can be most relevant and useful to their initiatives. We identified some common themes, outlined in this section.

Whose priorities?

In PLIs' previous experiences, evaluation prioritized outcomes that were defined by funders or evaluators, with little or no parent leaders or initiative staff. The parents' own stories and priorities, questions, and needs should take precedence over collecting broader quantitative data. PLI evaluations must employ anti-racist principles and include research questions about how PLIs advance social and racial justice. Priorities for PLI work that should be reflected in evaluation include cultural competence; relationship building across lines of race, class, language, and culture; challenging the deficit assumptions about families living in poverty and families of color that often shape institutional practices; building the power of those families to hold systems accountable for serving their children well; and ensuring that diverse voices are well represented in formal and informal civic spaces.

Individual and collective impacts

Parent leaders and PLI staff shared their dissatisfaction with past evaluations that have defaulted to describing impacts on individual parent leaders, not capturing the collective aspects of leadership and empowerment. Evaluating complex, collective, multi-level initiatives is challenging, and there are few widely used or established methods for rigorously assessing collective action, changes in policy and practice, or democratic capacity, nor for examining the connections between personal transformation and community transformation.

Investment and capacity building

Parent leaders and PLI staff recognized the heavy lift – in terms of time, funding, staffing, and expert knowledge – required to do evaluation well. Many PLIs lack the systems or capacity to carefully collect data and track outcomes over time. They discussed the need to build their own capacity to conduct and use evaluation and their desire to learn together with other PLIs about promising practices and evaluation strategies.

¹ For the full paper containing more details on what is outlined in this summary, visit <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publications/PLI-evaluation-for-equity>.

Our approach to evaluation for PLIs

Our goal is to identify and develop tools and supports that:

- help make evaluation more feasible and relevant for PLIs;
- center the experiences, needs, and interests of parent leadership initiatives while balancing the priorities of parent leaders with those of other important audiences, such as funders and policy-makers;
- facilitate learning communities of PLIs, evaluators, and other stakeholders that will continue to advance knowledge and practice;
- acknowledge the time and capacity constraints facing PLIs.

We reviewed existing research on parent and family leadership to identify a set of indicators that provide starting points for thinking about potential outcomes of parent leadership. The indicators are mapped onto a [theory of change](#) developed collaboratively with parent leaders. For each indicator, we have identified examples of evidence – “what this may look like” – and suggest possible evaluation methods and measures, where appropriate. The indicators will be available online, with links to additional resources and tools.²

² See Appendices A and B of the full report for more information about the PLI indicators and framework and their development.

³ For more detail and resources on these guidelines, see the full report.

To reflect what we’ve learned from PLIs, attend to capacity building, and meet the interests of other stakeholders, we use the following guidelines:³

- We embrace theory-based, [developmental](#) approaches to evaluation.

In complex initiatives, theories of change often shift in the face of emerging challenges or fail to anticipate important outcomes and challenges. A newer approach – developmental evaluation – recognizes that change is often non-linear and that complex initiatives often move in directions not anticipated even by the best-designed logic models, and creates a dynamic relationship between evaluation and practice. This flexibility and interplay between implementation and evaluation is especially crucial for evaluating community- and system-level outcomes. Developmental approaches build the capacity of PLIs to make use of evaluation data by facilitating conversations about data in real time, to inform decisions.

- We prioritize [participatory](#) approaches, while building on what’s already been done.

Participatory approaches ensure that parent leaders and PLI staff, who have often had little experience being listened to or regarded as experts, are engaged in defining the outcomes that matter, such as advancing racial justice; posing and refining evaluation questions; structuring evaluations to support program improvement and strategic decision-making; making decisions about what data to collect and in

what form; and making sense of data. We hope that participatory evaluation of PLIs will facilitate the development and testing of new ways to measure and document processes and outcomes that reflect the experiences and needs of parent leaders and PLI staff. In our review of existing methods and measures, we noted particular gaps in evaluation of impacts on public officials, collective action, and civic climate.

At the same time, we hope that rather than reinventing the wheel, PLIs can use and adapt existing resources such as published evaluations, scholarly literature on parent leadership, and research and evaluations from other fields such as psychology, sociology, community organizing, and civic engagement. Using existing measures saves the time and expense of drafting, piloting, and revising scales, and can enhance confidence that the scales are measuring what they intend to measure (i.e., they have validity) and that they work consistently (i.e., they have good reliability). However, existing measures must be chosen with care, since some may have been developed and tested with communities very different from those where PLIs work or may come from research traditions that don’t value racial justice, empowerment, or other values central to PLIs.

- We prioritize [qualitative, narrative data collection methods](#) while balancing qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Qualitative approaches can help advance the racial justice goals of PLIs, by centering the stories, reflect-

tions and analysis of parents of color to offer counter-narratives to stereotypes and deficit-based assumptions and better reflecting transformative changes built on relationships. An over-reliance on quantitative measures tends to elevate programmatic and individual outcomes, which more easily lend themselves to quantitative measurement, over community and civic outcomes.

While prioritizing qualitative approaches, we can judiciously select quantitative methods that address specific questions and complement qualitative findings. Quantitative methods are often less labor intensive than qualitative and facilitate the collection of data from a large number of people. Quantitative methods also lend themselves to measuring change over time, facilitate comparisons or aggregation across multiple cohorts or multiple initiatives, and allow insight into links between participants' experiences with the program (e.g. satisfaction, attendance) and program outcomes.

- We help PLIs **build their evaluation capacity** and make evaluation more feasible.

Evaluation – especially when it includes qualitative data – is expensive and time consuming, and PLIs operate with limited budgets, staff members who are already stretched thin, and parent leaders who are volunteering their time. Real investment in evaluation capacity building and networks is crucial. PLIs need access to expertise, scholarly knowledge, existing evaluations, and

networks of their peers with whom they can reflect, learn, and problem-solve. They need infrastructure and investment in capacity building for data collection, analysis, and acting on findings. They need tools, strategies, and best practices so that evaluation strengthens their reach impact, rather than distract from their core work. Building the evaluation capacity of PLIs will ensure that they are able to reflect thoughtfully on successes and challenges, hold themselves accountable, support empowered and effective parent leaders, and advocate with funders and officials for the kind of evaluation that best reflects their work.

Recommendations

We close with recommendations for funders, evaluators/researchers, and practitioners. These recommendations are not exhaustive, and we expect that the list will evolve and grow over time. However, we are confident that the recommendations have been informed by members of each of the three groups and that enacting them will contribute to evaluations of PLIs that are both rigorous and just. We anticipate that our indicator framework will support each of these groups with some of these recommendations (See Appendix A of the full report to learn more about the framework, timeline, and future activities).

PLIs

- Reflect on past experiences with evaluation and how those experiences strengthened the initiative's work or fell short of being useful.

- Engage parent leaders and staff in conversations about goals, outcomes, and systems for collecting and analyzing data.
- Advocate for the inclusion of qualitative/narrative data and appropriate timelines with funders.
- Take part in professional learning communities with peer initiatives, evaluators, and researchers.

Evaluators and researchers

- Work with PLIs to develop low-cost, simple methods for collecting programmatic data that support ongoing evaluation (including online and mobile phone-based applications).
- Continue identifying, compiling, and adapting measures, methods, and approaches that meet the needs and context of PLIs.
- Interrogate the theoretical underpinnings and assumptions of widely used measures to ensure that they support the racial justice and empowerment goals of PLIs, and test their validity with diverse populations represented in PLIs.
- Adapt methods and measures from community organizing, social movement, and democracy research and evaluation to reflect the context and needs of PLIs.
- Document the process, successes, and challenges of conducting evaluations in partnership with PLIs.
- Prioritize dissemination of evaluation findings – and descriptions of evaluation approaches – to practitioners and funders, in addition to academic audiences.

- Work with parent leaders and parent leadership practitioners to develop guides, trainings, and other supports to build the evaluation capacity of PLIs.

Funders

- Ensure that grantee reporting expectations reflect the goals and desired outcomes of PLIs and do not hold PLIs accountable for outcomes outside of their scope or theory of change.
- Ensure that grantee reporting expectations and funding for evaluation reflect social and racial justice values.
- Develop realistic evaluation timelines that recognize that progress is non-linear, unpredictable and dependent on context, and that goals and priorities shift even in established initiatives.
- Encourage and invest in participatory approaches.
- Learn about, and encourage other funders to learn about, narrative and qualitative research methods and emerging methods for evaluating collective action and civic/democratic change.
- Invest in PLI's capacity and infrastructure to design, conduct, and act on evaluation.
- Invest in professional learning networks of PLIs, evaluators, and researchers to share best practices, build capacity, and develop shared measures and data collection and analysis methods.

Bibliography

Henderson, A. T., and K. Gill Kressley. 2016. *Capturing the Ripple Effect: Developing a Theory of Change for Evaluating Parent Leadership Initiatives*, Final Report Phase I. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform. <http://annenberginstitute.org/publications/RippleEffect>

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This report and other materials related to parent leadership indicators are available at <http://parentleadershipevaluation.org>.