

**OUR COMMUNITIES ARE IN THE HEADLINES.
THE STAKES ARE HIGH—FOR OUR FAMILIES AND
OUR NATION. WHAT HAS TO CHANGE?**

Ask the Experts:

**PARENT LEADERS FROM
THE NEIGHBORHOODS**



COFI

Community Organizing
and Family Issues

TO YOU

COFI trains and organizes parents to be leaders in some of the toughest communities anywhere. **This is the story of how these parents organize at the grassroots level for their children and communities and then come together as a powerful, multicultural and diverse collective voice, fighting for all families.**



From the desk of **Ellen Schumer**, COFI Executive Director

COFI-trained parents have led the way: Restoring recess for children in Chicago Public Schools. Replacing zero tolerance with restorative justice as the basis for school discipline. Ending suspensions for young children. Knocking on 5,000 doors to find out why neighborhood children weren't in preschool, then winning structural changes to remove barriers in public programs. Innovating a peer-to-peer Head Start Ambassadors program so more children get the benefits of quality early learning.

And, yes, these are important changes. But to understand COFI, you need to start with the mothers themselves. They are parents who face real challenges, from community violence to unemployment, lack of childcare and failing schools. What COFI does is value parent leadership—these mothers' commitment to change. It doesn't start with sweeping societal action but with personal transformation. **The first and most important step—women tell us—is to realize their own power. Once that happens, they take important steps as parents and leaders—with their children and families and in their communities. The parents' personal strength becomes a foundation for building strong relationships—and these relationships are the key to forging social change.**

As longstanding cracks in our society are gaining more notice so too are theories of how to fix what is broken. Many talk of *parent engagement* as one such strategy, including how parents teach their children, get involved in schools, and help students succeed.

But, when you meet COFI parents, they will tell you that they have something bigger in mind by parent engagement: a vision and solutions that come from the ground up. They are building the collective power of engaged parents every step of the way. Parents are changing the ways things get done in their own families and communities and up through the channels of policymaking and institutional change.

We invite you to learn more about COFI's work, and meet these amazing women, whose courage, resilience, and grit are sparking a growing movement of parent leaders. **I hope you will be inspired to talk with them, to work with them and to spread the news.**

Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)

1436 W. Randolph Street, 4th floor
Chicago, Illinois 60607
312-226-5141

www.cofionline.org

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PARENT PROFILES

THERE IS A LEADER IN EVERYONE

ROSALZIA GRILLIER

"The COFI Way is that there is a leader in everyone and you can build a relationship with everyone," says Rosazlia Grillier. She first got involved with COFI "through a tragedy which now I would say has turned to triumph." Rosazlia had been diagnosed with lymphoma. "I was in a deep state of depression and had eaten myself to over 480 pounds. I was in a wheelchair, feeling really helpless.

The doctors told my family, 'Make her comfortable, she's got about six months.' I went to a training and little did I know I would meet COFI there. COFI helped me change my entire life. I learned more effective ways to communicate with my family and now use my skills to be a community leader."

"The Early Learning Campaign is one of many campaigns that comes to mind," she says. "People said there weren't any unenrolled pre-K and Head Start children in Englewood and I knew it wasn't true. We did surveys, wrote a report and held forums. From there we decided to do a festival where families could actually enroll their kids in Head Start or other preschool programs. We filled every open slot. That's what sparked the idea for Head Start Ambassadors who could help get children enrolled. As a result, we've reached thousands of families across the city with this initiative."

"Today, here I stand, 250 pounds lighter. I've been in Washington, meeting legislators and the President. Thank God I got a second chance! I want to bring what happened to me to everyone."



NOBODY IS GOING TO DO THAT BUT US

FELIPA MENA



In 2009, Felipa Mena's life changed dramatically when her 20-year-old son Angel was killed by street violence. Before that, Felipa, a Mexican immigrant mother of five, had long organized to make life better for low-income families and working women,

but her son's death impassioned her to help stem community violence. Working with COFI and other activist mothers, Felipa created the Wells Community Academy High School "Peace Center" (Angel had attended the school). She worked closely with high school students in peace circles, providing a safe place to talk about what's happening in their lives. She also mentors immigrant, Spanish-speaking mothers to become policy change leaders in Chicago, goes door-to-door to connect low-income and immigrant families to early learning resources, and much more. In 2013, Felipa was awarded the Chicago Foundation for Women's Impact Award.

"It's important for parents to get together and decide what they want to change," says Felipa. "They can figure out who is willing to help. COFI teaches us about developing a web of support for these kinds of efforts. Parents know what's going on in their communities. Policymakers just have data and they're just reading things to make decisions. Parents are living in those communities. We, as parents, need to take the initiative to make changes and protect our children because nobody is going to do that but us."

Parent Peace Centers offer an alternative to punitive school discipline and connect students with the listening ear of a parent from their community.





BREAK THAT CYCLE

ROSALVA NAVA

Fifteen years ago, Rosalva Nava was a victim of brutal domestic violence. Hopeless and frightened, she was moments away from taking her own life when her young daughter walked in on her. In that moment, Rosalva was reminded that she had something—someone—to live for. That very day, she saw a flyer her daughter brought home from school announcing a parent leadership training course. She signed up, and Rosalva shares what she learned. “Sometimes women take care of our families first and forget about ourselves,” she says. “That’s what I like about the COFI training—it talks about self and then your family. Once you take care of yourself you can take care of your family.”

In recent years, Rosalva has traveled to Washington, D.C. to testify on the power of restorative justice in schools. She helped pass legislation that allows low-income families to save money for their children’s college and future without the risk of losing public benefits.

“Until I came to COFI, I didn’t know I could channel anger into passion—and passion into action and change,” she says. Now, when working on poverty issues, she tells other women that they “have an opportunity to break that cycle of poverty.” She has been involved in the Stepping Out of Poverty Campaign. One result: a payroll card bill in Illinois that prevents employees from being charged to access their paychecks.

“COFI is like a door opening,” she says. “When you step in the door, you don’t want to come back out.”

East St. Louis parents just started COFI training and have already won new crossing guards, parking at the preschool and developmental screenings and early intervention services for hundreds of local infants and toddlers.



WE JUST HAVE TO TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

LETTIE HICKS

In the small southern Illinois city of East St. Louis, Lettie Hicks knew that schools in her community faced many challenges; now she’s part of a group of parents that is doing something about it.

Lettie, who has three children—ages 15, 14 and 2 years— belongs to a group called Parents United for Change, which was formed with support from COFI. She says she was inspired to join after hearing testimony from another COFI parent, Rosazlia Grillier. She and other mothers conducted door-to-door surveys in East St. Louis and found that the need for safer neighborhoods and transportation to school and preschool were prominent issues.

“Being part of COFI taught me that I do have a voice,” she says. “I have also found that there are other parents who stand for the same thing—safety for our children.”

Lettie, who spent much of her childhood in various foster homes, is now helping to lead efforts at two schools in the community, Vivian Adams Early Childhood Center and Dunbar Elementary School. At

Adams, she says there is little room for parents to park. At Dunbar, she says kids “have to walk through a vacant park and sometimes abandoned alleyways to get to school. When there are people in the park, there’s often drug activity or a lot of drinking. Then when you get to the school, the sidewalk is very limited. At both schools now, we’re making noise, and a lot of people are responding. We won a new crossing guard and parking spots at the early childhood center. Now we just have to take it to the next level.”

“Being part of COFI taught me that I do have a voice. I have also found that there are other parents who stand for the same thing—safety for our children.”



WHO WE ARE

Founded in Chicago in 1995, COFI is driven by a vision of building a broad movement of parent leaders working for economic, racial and social justice for families. We train and organize parents of color (mostly mothers and grandmothers) who, in turn, have built local and citywide organizations that are fighting for change around issues affecting families, and attracting attention nationally to their innovative policy solutions and organizing steps.

WHAT WE DO

COFI provides intensive and systematic leadership development and ongoing expertise with a model called Family Focused Organizing. This unique and time-tested approach helps build family-supportive communities and adds the voice and experience of parents to shaping programs and public policies affecting their lives. The core of COFI is developing the capacity of parents to be leaders, with the skills and power to change the way things get done. Parents can be effective and respected ambassadors for their own interests.

4,000
parents have
participated
in COFI's
leadership
development
program.

COFI has
provided
training and
worked in
partnership
with more
than 100
organizations.



"COFI has changed me and helped me become a better parent and better parent leader in the community. Before I didn't have a voice... but now I have a voice."

Talibah Moore, mother of three children in Chicago and a passionate advocate for increasing access to early learning programs. She knows first-hand the difference they made for her children.

COFI'S MISSION

Our mission is to strengthen the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life—from local institutions and communities to local, state, and federal policy arenas.

COFI- TRAINED PARENTS HAVE WON NOTABLE PUBLIC POLICY VICTORIES



Return of Recess

Won the return of recess to the Chicago Public Schools



Restorative Justice

Persuaded Chicago Public Schools to end zero-tolerance policies and adopt restorative justice practices



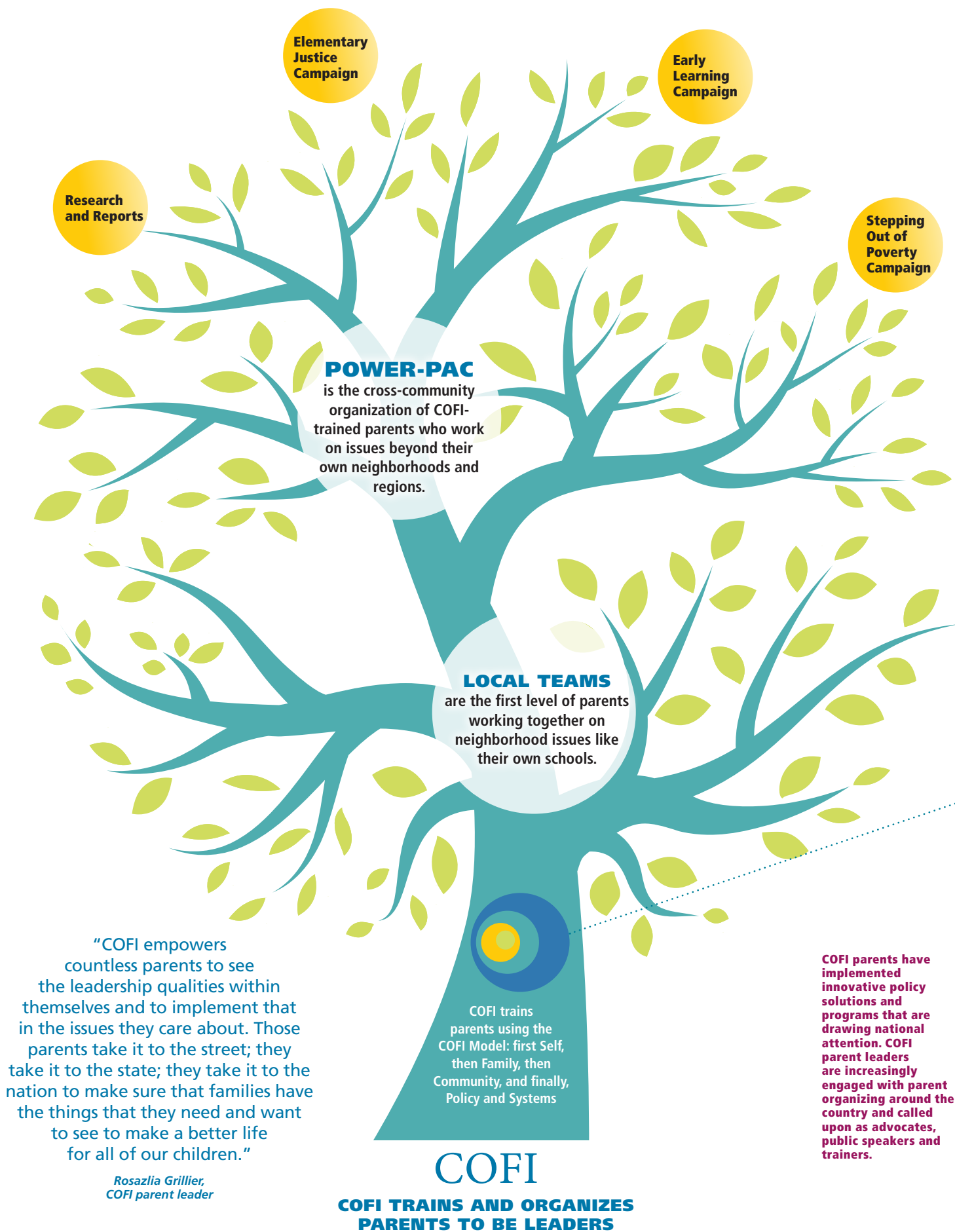
No suspensions for small children

Got suspensions banned for children below second grade



Early Education

Won funding for peer-to-peer ambassador program that connects families to high-quality early education programs and information



THE COFI MODEL: FAMILY FOCUSED ORGANIZING

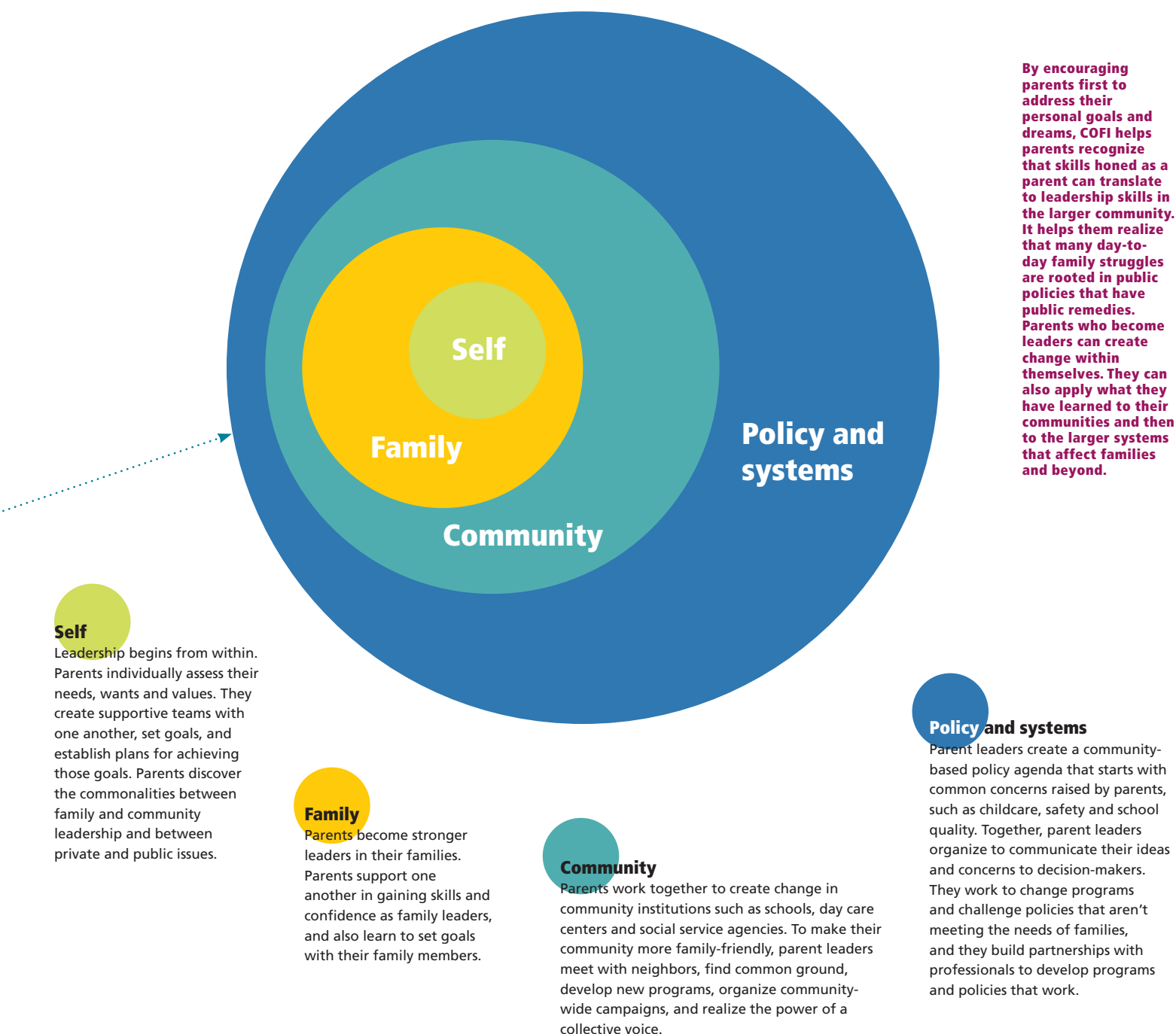
The COFI Model uses parents' strengths and commitment to their children and to their neighborhoods to help make positive change in their own lives, their families and their communities.

The model emphasizes the commonalities between family and community leadership and between private and public issues.

COFI's Family Focused Organizing is a systemic and proven model of how people who are far outside the centers of power become leaders, build organizations, and win.

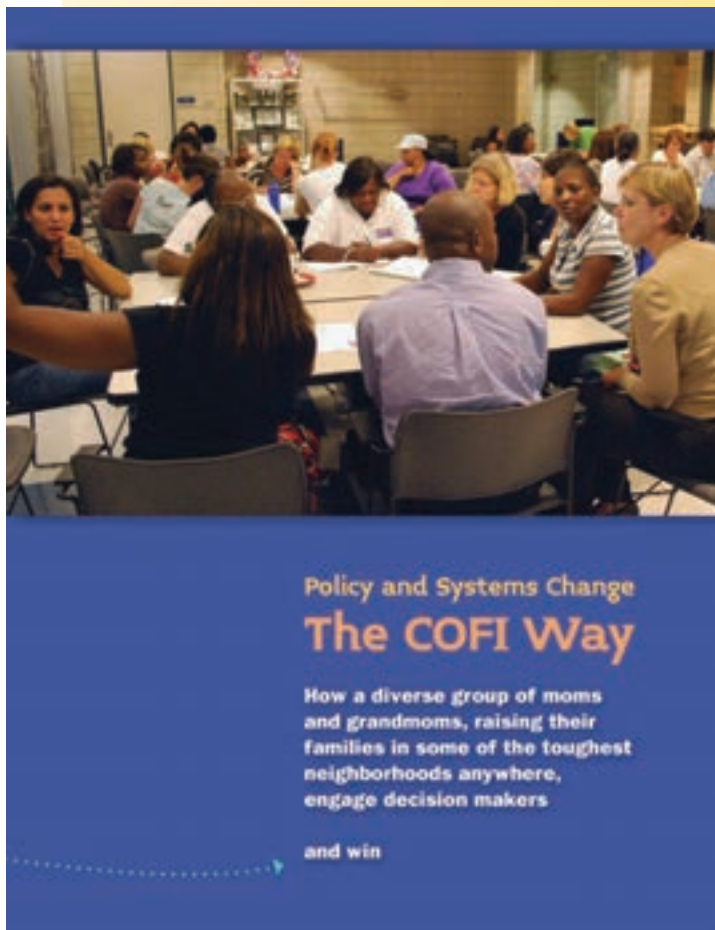
Family Focused Organizing is distinct from, but can also be complementary to, more "traditional" community organizing models.

COFI targets its organizing work toward a population that is often not involved in traditional organizing or the public sphere—very-low-income families including public aid recipients, recent immigrants (primarily mothers), and grandmothers raising grandchildren.



FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO REPLICATE OUR MODEL, WE OFFER NATIONAL TRAINING, IN-DEPTH REPORTS AND IN-PERSON TRAINING

COFI is committed to sharing its learnings and building a movement of family focused organizers and leaders. Toward that end, we endeavor to document and disseminate the innovative solutions being implemented by parents and we train other groups and agencies in the processes and skills of Family Focused Organizing. Go to www.cofionline.org/learn-how/training-consultation/ for more information.



Early Learning Policy Briefs: After several years of successful implementation of parent-created innovative programs to reach more low-income children with high-quality early learning programs, COFI and POWER-PAC released a series of policy briefs on these efforts. These briefs provide compelling evidence that solutions to intractable community challenges can happen when there is real investment in building leadership capacity among low-income parents.

As with all campaign efforts, COFI publications and trainings are developed in partnership with the parent leaders.

The COFI Way is generating a fresh look at how low-income parents of color are becoming effective, innovative partners in policymaking on the issues that affect their families every single day.

Packed with real-life stories and perspectives from parents raising families in some of the toughest communities anywhere and based on interviews with prominent policymakers who got to know the parents at decision-making tables, the report is creating great interest among policymakers, public officials, community and advocacy organizations, and foundations.

SHARE THE LEARNING

COFI actively pursues opportunities to share what we've learned about building parents' power with others. To build a movement of organized parents, COFI is committed to spreading the word and helping replication happen elsewhere. To read reports on our work, go to www.cofionline.org/publications/reports.

PARENTS ORGANIZE

POWER-PAC is a cross-cultural, cross-community membership organization of COFI-trained parents whose mission is to build the voice and power of low-income, immigrant and working families by uniting parents across race and community around issues of importance to children and families. The numbers below tell the story of their successes.



10,445
children referred
to Head Start



**Won discipline
code changes**
that reduced
suspensions
by **35%**



**Streamlined
Ready
To Learn
preschool
enrollment**
for **22,873**
families



Got recess reinstated
for **266,000+** elementary
students



150 **community
schools**
opened in Chicago



**Expanded SNAP
(food stamps)**
to **40,000** more
Illinois families



REPORTS WITH PARENT-DRIVEN RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

POWER-PAC parents are deeply connected in their own communities and able to do research that outsiders can't. They knock on thousands of doors, host community forums, and collect information that results in incisive reports which can be accessed at www.cofionline.org/publications/reports.



Parent to Parent Guide: Restorative Justice

Background on POWER-PAC's Elementary Justice Campaign and their work to end "zero-tolerance" policies and bring restorative justice to the schools.



Why Isn't Johnny in Preschool?

Parent interviews of over 5,000 parents and caregivers in low and moderate-income communities found that 40 to 64 percent of preschool-aged children were not enrolled in preschool or Head Start.

CAMPAIGNS AND VICTORIES

ELEMENTARY JUSTICE CAMPAIGN

“My daughter was expelled from 7th grade for talking during lunch.”

“My child was suspended for ten days for looking out the window.”

Nelly Torres knew about the “school-to-prison pipeline” that punished children—more often than not, children of color—for being children, and pushed them out of school and on to the streets. But this time, the stories were being told by other mothers, women she knew, other COFI-trained leaders whose children she’d seen grow up.

If this was happening to these women’s children, were her kids next? Nelly and the other mothers and grandmothers around the table came together and sparked the Elementary Justice Campaign in 2004, to break the cycle of criminalizing low-income youth of color.

Parents knew their own experiences with their children in Chicago’s low-income African American and Latino neighborhoods. Even kindergartners were getting out-of-school suspensions. Many elementary schools had prison-like atmospheres; at the time, 82% of the students didn’t have recess and many were not even allowed to talk during lunch. Parents were told their children starting kindergarten are already trailing their white and middle-class counterparts.

The campaign has made immense progress. One example: POWER-PAC along with its partners won major changes to the Chicago Public Schools Student Code of Conduct: **ending suspensions of 2nd grade and younger; reducing expulsions for 5th grade and younger; and banning group punishments such as the practice of “silent lunch”** where youngsters were not able to talk during lunch.

Parents won a reduction in the maximum number of days a student can be suspended. Punitive “zero-tolerance” language has been replaced by a new philosophy of restorative justice that teaches children to behave appropriately and resolve conflicts—*without* suspending or expelling them from school. The Campaign has leveraged hundreds of thousands of dollars for restorative justice programming.

**AT RIGHT,
FROM TOP:
Parent
Peacemakers
planning and
hosting Peace
Circles at
school-based
Parent Peace
Centers**



POWER-PAC is a cross-cultural, cross-community membership organization of COFI-trained parents whose victories are making a difference in their neighborhoods and across Chicago and Illinois.



VICTORY POWER-PAC parent leaders work together to win funding and support from the school district, police department and county government for **Parent Peace Centers** at Chicago public elementary and high schools. At these centers, parent peacemakers are trained in restorative justice practices and lead peace circles with students at risk of disciplinary actions. The circles give students a space to voice their perspectives and be heard in school.

EARLY LEARNING CAMPAIGN: ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS FOR ALL FAMILIES

In 2007, POWER-PAC leaders launched the *Early Learning Campaign*, an organizing, policy change, and public awareness movement to identify and overcome real barriers for low-income families to access quality early learning. POWER-PAC leaders know that high quality early childhood education is proven to be part of the path out of poverty and critical to avoiding the “Cradle-to-Prison” pipeline that catches too many African American and Latino young people.

The campaign began with parents knocking on doors, and finding that in some pockets of Chicago, as many as 60% of preschool-aged children who are eligible for public-funded early education programs were not enrolled. In 2009, COFI and POWER-PAC released “Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool,” tabulating results from talking with more than 5,000 families.

Because COFI trained parents were talking peer-to-peer, they were also uniquely able to uncover the obstacles for families getting young children into early education programs. Since then, COFI has shown what can happen when there is a real investment in building leadership capacity among low-income parents. During 2012 and 2013, COFI published policy briefs that describe innovative, parent-led programs that get more children into preschool. Parents have said that it’s not about “hard to reach” families—it’s about hard-to-reach programs.

Parent leaders understand that high quality early learning is key to breaking the cycle of poverty and they are uniquely able to uncover obstacles for families getting children into these programs.



VICTORY Parents created the “Walking Preschool Bus” program where they walk children to and from preschool to increase their attendance, help ensure safety and assure the little ones who otherwise could not get to preschool and are able to attend. Parent teams got these “buses” up and running at 10 Chicago schools.

The program increases access for preschoolers whose families may have a hard time with work schedules, limited mobility, and other real-life practicalities that are addressed by this innovative parent-led program.

Parents helped Illinois leverage a \$3.5 million federal grant that included funding for pilot programs in six sites to test out POWER-PAC recommendations about improving access for “hard-to-reach” families to quality programs. POWER-PAC leaders pioneered and work as parent-to-parent Head Start Ambassadors, helping achieve full enrollment year after year.

COFI trained parents have been at the table, serving on state and local policy committees as they have integrated parent engagement and parent-led outreach into Illinois’ initiatives on developmental screenings, home visiting, and preschool expansion. Most recently parents won the streamlining of preschool and Head Start enrollment systems in Chicago.



The necessity of bringing the enrollment process out to the community has been a core principle guiding POWER-PAC’s work on early learning.





STEPPING OUT OF POVERTY CAMPAIGN: WORKING TO END THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

In 2009, POWER-PAC leaders began work to address the particularly harsh impact of the financial crisis and Great Recession on low-income families and develop and participate in strategies aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty. Since then, they have partnered with advocacy organizations in the Illinois Asset Building Group (IABG) to win major legislative and administrative changes through their Stepping Out of Poverty Campaign. POWER-PAC is advocating for Universal Children's Savings Accounts, which would be opened for each child in Illinois upon their birth and to which families can contribute over the years. When the child turns 18, they can then use the account for educational purposes. Studies show that children who have savings accounts have increased hopes and aspirations for going to college.

POWER-PAC surveys of parents on economic security issues revealed that 60% of the families live on less than \$20,000 a year and 45% are not employed. Parents are working on a new campaign to address issues of debt that hold families back.

With partners, parents also helped pass legislation on payroll cards, eliminating the fees associated with the cards that nickel and dime families. They worked to increase the minimum wage in Chicago and eliminate asset limits for families receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) so that families can actually save money for their futures. And they are working to raise consciousness and advocate for policies that end the racial and gender wealth gaps.

Progress on this campaign also includes:

- 2009: POWER-PAC, in partnership with the Illinois Asset Building Group, provided financial literacy information and resources around public benefit programs, and training on the historical context of the growth of the racial wealth gap in the U.S.
- 2010: By this year, parents had succeeded, with legislative partners, in winning the creation of a Legislative Task Force to explore Children's Savings Accounts in Illinois.
- 2013: Parents and their partners won the passage of new legislation to eliminate asset limitations in Illinois' Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.
- 2016: Parents surveyed hundreds of families statewide to unpack issues of debt, discovering a devastating impact on employment, housing and access to higher education.

VICTORY Active Parents of Nixon (Padres Activos de Nixon) is a COFI parent team at Nixon School in Chicago working to address asset building, little by little. On Chicago's Northwest side, the parent team partnered with the Northwest Side Housing Center and a local bank, Wintrust, to open matched savings accounts. Seven families saved at least \$250 each, which was matched by the bank for a total of \$3,500 saved. Parent leaders also hosted a workshop on the Federal Deferred Action Immigration policy. Some families plan to use their savings to pay the cost of applying for legal immigration status; others save for their children's college funds.



AT LEFT: Parent leaders with State Senator Kimberly Lightford campaigning for a raise in the Illinois minimum wage; Parent leaders present the results of their debt survey using street theater.



EXPANSION AND REPLICATION

For 21 years, COFI has worked to build the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life. Through COFI's intensive and systematic leadership development and organizing process, leaders address issues at both a personal level and through public action.

While based in Chicago, COFI expanded its partnerships to low-income parents of color in four Illinois sites outside of Chicago in 2014—Aurora, East St. Louis, Elgin and Evanston—and deepened its work in three Chicago neighborhoods by working with parents of very young children. Here are two stories of COFI's work in new Illinois communities. COFI received funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Family Engagement Initiative to implement, document, and disseminate the three-year leadership training and organizing process in these expansion and replication communities.

EAST ST. LOUIS, ILLINOIS

In 2013, COFI came to East St. Louis, a poverty-stricken and under-resourced community of about 30,000 in southern Illinois, to do trainings for parents, through the All Our Kids Early Childhood Network. The goal was to build parent leaders who will eventually address public policies that affect families. Later, COFI organized parents from early childhood centers and preschools. Transportation was among the prominent issues parents identified.

Yolanda Wooten, a single mother who has two grown sons and three grandchildren, has lived in East St. Louis for almost all of her life. “My main concern has been to keep kids on the right education track. In COFI trainings, I learned about myself, how to manage things and give to the community. And I learned that I’m not alone; I found a circle of friends who support each other. We’ve knocked on doors in the community, learned about what concerns people have.”

“Before COFI, I didn’t know what steps and procedures to take on issues that affect our community,” she says. Wooten helped organize a group called Parents United for Change, which has met with the mayor, the police chief and others.

Dr. Kareem Mateen, administrator with East St. Louis School District 189, calls COFI “a true support system in the community.” “I have seen COFI transform parents into leaders—parents who didn’t even know that quality. The major thing is, they want their voices to be heard.”



“We have power in numbers, and if we pull together, we can make changes in this city. Now, I don’t just have love for my children, I have compassion for my city.”

Yolanda Wooten, a single mother who has two grown sons and three grandchildren, has lived in East St. Louis for almost all of her life.

RIGHT, FROM TOP:
Parents United for Change in East St. Louis meet to review their outreach findings; COFI parents organize a community day for their neighborhood to help people get to know each other





“This is my passion now. With COFI, I’ve found a family that accepts me where I am. I am part of this movement.”

Liliana Olayo is the mother of three children who are 9, 14 and 22 years old. She lives in Aurora, a new community where COFI is training parents to be leaders. She is shown here displaying her COFI advanced leader badges.



LEFT, FROM TOP: Liliana Olayo and other parents graduate from COFI Parent Peer Training; Padres Lideres Activos of Aurora present on their work at a Statewide Parent Gathering.



AURORA, ILLINOIS

“I wish I had met COFI before I did,” says Liliana Olayo, a mother of three who lives in Aurora, where COFI has trained parents to be leaders over the past two years. “I am grateful. COFI teaches me that I need to be strong for my kids—but that can’t be possible if I don’t take care of myself.”

COFI has trained several groups of parents in Aurora, a mixed income city about 50 miles west of Chicago, including one group from the school district’s early learning center and one from the Visiting Nurses Association Home-Visiting program. Local partners include SPARK (Strong Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten) Early Childhood Network, East Aurora School District 131, and Family Focus-Aurora.

Trainings started in 2014. In Phase 1, participants looked at themselves, their goals and how they could become leaders. In Phase 2, parents learned the skills of community outreach, interviewed 104 neighbors and hosted a Community Forum attended by over 100. Parents also organized a Parent Summit that addressed the need for children’s savings accounts.

“I’ve learned about many tools and resources by being involved with COFI,” says Olayo who moved in 1991 from Mexico to the U.S. where she has lived ever since.

“I tell COFI I have three goals,” Olayo says. “I want to make a difference on my street, where it’s not always safe; in the school district, where we don’t have school buses; and in all of Aurora. We need more parks and more activities, especially for the teenagers. They need to know that someone is thinking of them.”

In the meantime, Olayo says that she and COFI are trying to bring more people into the program. “This is my passion now,” she says. “With COFI, I’ve found a family that accepts me where I am. I am part of this movement.”

VISION

We asked four women who know COFI well to share their thoughts about the future and potential of the organization and its work.

BUILDING LEADERS

**FELIPA MENA, PARENT LEADER
AND POWER-PAC CO-CHAIR**

When I first got involved in 2001, there were 40 or 50 parents who were a part of COFI. Now there are 400 to 500, and more and more

parents are taking leadership roles in their schools and communities. The importance of sharing our stories and experience is still such a big part of what we do.

How do we continue our work in the future? We can apply the COFI model, see what changes need

to be made and just keep informing families. For example, when we started to work on early learning issues, parents weren't really informed about their options. When we speak to them, now, we help them understand how they qualify for programs. In the next couple of years, I want to see the education system understand more than just what's going on in the schools—it's also about what happens in our communities. To learn about that, people in the school system should talk to us. Students talk to us and we understand them because we're in the same community and listen to them.

COFI is working in so many places—in Chicago, Aurora, Evanston, East St. Louis, Elgin, and in many other places around the country where COFI trains people. My dream is for COFI to keep training people, building leaders and impacting the political system. It's really part of the COFI way to be thinking about the future.



THE WORD IS HOPE

**ROSAZLIA GRILLIER, PARENT LEADER
AND POWER-PAC CO-CHAIR**

COFI has already expanded to communities outside of Chicago. And we're working nationally to reach people as well. I believe we can go worldwide. Look at the climate of our country right now: There are so many people struggling with issues they have in common with other people—equality of education, poverty, homelessness, lack of jobs, incarceration of our children.

These commonalities are like the glue that bring us together. COFI does it a little different than everybody else by making the families and communities a part of the structure and planning of what it does. We meet people where they are. COFI is about empowering parents, and then they evolve.

Take, for example, the work COFI has done to create children's savings accounts, which can give children in our communities the freedom to pursue higher education. We've met with the State Treasurer's Office, and we're building a movement. A lot of children don't aspire to go to college—it's not part of the conversation. Just the fact that we're building a college mentality is big.

"When I look to the future of COFI, I don't just see issues—I see what comes before and while you work on issues. COFI is about relationship-building—between parents, but also with our adversaries. We partner with almost everybody. The future of COFI? The word that comes to my mind is hope."



**COFI has
trained 4,000
parents in its
leadership
development
program.**





Parents share stories of their restorative justice work at a school-based Parent Peace Center with trainees from COFI's national Institute session.



PARENTS FEEL VALUED

GRACIELA SUAREZ, LEAD ORGANIZER AND FORMER COFI PARENT LEADER

I was a young parent and new immigrant to Chicago when I met COFI in 1998. I went through the training and saw the things you can do yourself. I was amazed. I saw this model work and make a big difference. That happened to me, and that's why I became a trainer. I see myself every time I go to a training; I think, "there's another person like me in the training." People find support and motivation and have something in common with other people.

Through the COFI model, every person's goals and dreams are important. What we see is that people who participate in the trainings are more comfortable and confident. It's common for moms to say, "Now I know my story can help another family."

When people look at big issues—like education and safety in their communities—they ask 'How can we change things—how can we improve our community?' For COFI, the answer is that parents are always part of the change. They are working together with the community; they know what the needs are and they collaborate with each other and partners in the community.

My vision for the future? I want to see COFI outside of Chicago and in other parts of the country. It's all about building and creating relationships. I really think parents feel valued at COFI. After that, they become part of a community that can make a difference on policy issues. As I look ahead, I see how COFI can grow as an organization of parents who will become leaders and improve their communities in Illinois and around the country.

IT STARTS WITH ONE PERSON

VERONICA ANDERSON, COFI BOARD OF TRUSTEES CHAIR

COFI offers an authentic and sustainable model to engage communities that are often left out of conversations about policy—and even left out of the decision-making structure that affects their own quality of life. I hope that COFI's model is replicated, whether that happens through COFI expanding or COFI's approach being adopted.

COFI is distinctive because it starts with one person and their personal, family and community goals. You can't really do what you want in the world without taking care of yourself first. Consider one example—the Elementary Justice Campaign. Back in the early 2000s, we would see 7-year-olds, and especially black boys, suspended at an alarming rate. Through POWER-PAC, a cross-community organization, COFI-trained parents worked with the Chicago Public Schools to change the CPS Code of Conduct. The results included ending suspensions for 2nd grade (and younger students) and reducing expulsions for 5th grade (and younger students).

With COFI, everything is connected to the personal experience and stories of parents. It's very encouraging and exciting.

In the last few years, COFI has done more capacity-building work. I see great potential for this model to keep reaching more and more parents and communities. Yes, it's a long-term approach: you have to cultivate a group of parent leaders, build trust and learn how to work together. The COFI model is definitely applicable and can be used anywhere.



"Yes, it's a long-term approach; you have to cultivate a group of parent leaders, build trust and learn how to work together. The COFI model is definitely applicable and can be used anywhere."

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COFI, 1436 W. Randolph Street, Chicago Illinois 60607 | 312-226-5141 | www.cofionline.org

THE POLICYMAKER

STATE SENATOR
KIMBERLY LIGHTFORD



"I have seen COFI play a very effective role because COFI parents are on the ground...

They know the environment.

They know the kids.

They know the parents.

You can respect their judgment and believe what they say.

They are willing to work in the trenches, not just show up for photo-ops."

AND THE PARENT LEADERS

ROSAZLIA GRILLIER



"You can't go and put something in place for people and think it's going to work if you're not including those people. Every stakeholder needs to be a part of the decisions and the implementation for a program to really work."

LILIANA OLAYO



"This is my passion now. With COFI, I've found a family that accepts me where I am. I am part of this movement."



**Community Organizing
and Family Issues (COFI)**

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