

How we got Johnny, Jada and José into preschool

**Briefings from the ground up:
Powered by grassroots
research and deep community
relationships, a group of
Chicago parents are testing
their ideas on how to get more
low-income children in early
education programs.**

Their ideas are working.



POWER-PAC
Early Learning Committee

A COFI PROJECT

About the Series: Briefings from the Ground Up

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

In some pockets of Illinois, as many as 60% of preschool-aged children who are eligible for publicly funded early education programs are not enrolled. Evidence suggests that a high percentage of these children are at risk of developmental delay or school failure.

A grassroots group of parent leaders knocked on 5,000 doors to find out how to turn the tide. Their report, summarized in the following pages, led to a new understanding of the complex reasons why so many of the most at-risk children were not in preschool. Since then, through a lively process of engagement with allies and providers, community forums and conversations, this parent group developed recommendations and practical solutions to the issue of under-enrollment.

Parent leaders are putting their ideas into action

This series of policy and practice briefs comes from COFI—Community Organizing & Family Issues—the umbrella organization that supports the parents in this work. These briefs describe innovative, parent-created pilot programs that are increasing participation of at-risk, low-income children in quality early learning programs.

These new, low-cost projects hold significant promise for practitioners, community groups, policy makers, and advocates because they are successfully connecting with the *hardest-to-reach families*.

Parents believe that in the long run, we must build the political will to increase investment in and dramatically overhaul our nation’s early education programs to create a more seamless system supporting quality, full-day, year-round universal preschool.

For now though, it is urgent that we not lose another generation of children. The programs described in this series are helping families give their children the critical step up of a good preschool education *right now*.

These briefs share results and challenges with the goal that these practices will be replicated and adapted in communities across the state and beyond.



Pilot projects are succeeding because hard-to-reach families are comfortable talking to other parents who are a lot like them.

Critical to success: parents are engaged every step of the way

In some pockets of Illinois, as many as 60% of eligible preschool-aged children are not attending any type of structured early education program.

In 2008, grassroots parent leaders knocked on 5,000 doors in 19 low-income communities to find out why.





Low-income Chicago parent leaders have their own multi-cultural, citywide membership organization: POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew—Policy Action Council).

POWER-PAC gives parents a real and respected seat at the table.

COFI pilot projects are designed to directly address the specific obstacles that keep low-income children out of preschool.

Parent engagement, every step of the way

The ideas and model programs shared here emerged out of an organic process over time. COFI finds and develops parent leaders, providing a structure that encourages them to talk to each other and articulate their needs based on their own experiences. The work is about *really listening*—and supporting parent leaders in developing strategies and actions that build a real and respected seat at the table.

COFI parent leaders are mostly women of color, mothers and grandmothers who are working to make a difference—not just in their own families and communities, but also in the way decisions get made about policies and programs that affect families across the city, state, and nationally. These parent leaders built POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew—Policy Action Council), a multi-cultural membership organization of low-income parents.

POWER-PAC identified the goal of getting all children in their communities into high quality early education programs as a key piece of the pathway out of poverty. Parents were concerned that too many low-income children of color were not participating in any type of structured early education program. As many child care administrators will attest, it is hard to solve the dilemma of under-enrollment with a top-down approach that relies solely on professional staff. Parent leaders address this issue with a deep understanding, rich history, and knowledge of their communities that only come from living there. These parents are engaged community residents who understand other parents' perspectives, offer creative, positive solutions, and are proving them out on the ground.





Parent leaders build partnerships both inside and outside the system. By sharing their stories with people who work as providers, policy makers, and advocates, they give these professionals a better understanding of the real life experiences of low-income families.

These partners, in turn, help the parents better understand the policies and structures which sustain a system that parents are fighting to improve.

Building relationships of trust and respect: partnerships are key

Parents do not do this work alone. COFI trains parents to be intentional in engaging a wide range of partners in the process. This has been a powerful and dynamic step in developing pilot projects. Parent leaders build partnerships both inside and outside the system with people who support and embrace the bottom-up approach. By sharing their stories with these early childhood policy and advocacy staff, parents help them to understand low-income parents' experiences. These partners, in turn, help the parents to better understand the policies which create and sustain a system that isn't working for low-income families.

We are grateful to the partners who work hand-in-hand with the POWER-PAC parent leaders to ensure that all children enter school prepared to succeed: *Catalyst Chicago*, the Chicago Coalition of Site Administered Child Care, the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services – Head Start program, Chicago Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Education, Family Focus, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, Illinois Action for Children, the Illinois Early Learning Council, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Voices for Illinois Children.

With these partners, POWER-PAC helped leverage a federally funded grant to test out their bottom-up ideas for engaging hard to reach families. In addition, parent recommendations are incorporated into the state's *Hard to Reach Toolkit for Programs Serving Preschool Children*.

What is the most significant takeaway about the success of COFI and POWER-PAC's pilot programs?

That solutions to intractable community challenges can happen when there is real investment in building leadership capacity among low-income parents.

CASE STUDY

Parent leaders put their ideas into action. Result?

A 25% increase in preschool enrollment



Parent leader Rosazlia Grillier gave a challenge to the community members: What are YOU going to do?



“What are YOU going to do?”

asked Rosazlia Grillier, a COFI/POWER-PAC parent leader, at a springtime community-wide preschool forum in the southside Chicago Englewood neighborhood—a community wracked by poverty, economic disinvestment, and violence.

The forum was co-hosted by COFI/POWER-PAC parent leaders, *Catalyst Chicago* (a school-reform journal), Family Focus Englewood, Illinois Action for Children and the Salvation Army. 61 parents, preschool staff, advocates, church leaders and school and city administrators came to the forum to address the question of why preschool slots in the community were going unfilled.

The group shared stories and perspectives and brainstormed ideas for how to connect with more families—especially those considered “hardest-to-reach.” Small groups suggested media campaigns and bumper stickers. One resident, Hazel, thought that her retiree walking club, “the Silver Sneakers,” could talk with neighbors about the importance of early learning as they walked through the community. Some wanted to do a big push at the Back-to-School Parade in August.

A month later the group met again. Rosazlia asked, “So what HAVE you done?” and people responded. Hazel had talked to her neighbors while out walking. The Chicago Public Schools had printed door hangers and palm cards that they offered to Hazel and others to publicize the preschool programs that had open slots. A child care center director had met with parents to talk about how families can help get the word out about why early learning matters.

The group vowed to continue the push, and the work went on all summer. At the Back-to-School Parade, CPS preschool staff joined the city’s Head Start representatives and a team of COFI/POWER-PAC parents. They set up an “Early Learning Tent” where they gave out books, painted faces, talked with families about the value of early learning and available resources, and signed up children for preschool.

By September, preschool enrollment in 8 schools in the Englewood community had shot up 25%—from 240 students in 2007 to 300 in 2008! This success inspired the creation of the Head Start Ambassador Program.



At the Back-to-School Parade, parents set up an “Early Learning Tent” where they gave out books, painted faces, talked with families about the value of early learning and available resources, and signed up children for preschool and Head Start.



RECOMMENDATIONS

5,000 parent-to-parent interviews provided groundbreaking data to shape new policies and practices

Why isn't Johnny in preschool?

Over the course of two years, parent leaders went door-to-door in their communities, low-income Latino and African-American neighborhoods across Chicago, and talked with more than 5,000 parents and family members. They gathered in-depth, sometimes surprising, and often moving information from “hard-to-reach” families. Answering the door, parents were comfortable talking to other parents who were a lot like them.

COFI and its early learning advocacy partners provided professional research support to analyze the treasure trove of information that came from the ground up. Then, the POWER-PAC parents took the results back to their communities where they hosted community forums with neighbors and other community stakeholders to sort through the findings, identify the most critical barriers, and brainstorm practical and policy solutions. This table shows their results:

What's the obstacle?	What do parents recommend?
<p>1 Transportation barriers prevent children from getting to and from school <i>Most preschool programs in Chicago don't offer transportation and some families, especially elderly grandparents, have difficulty walking their children to and from school.</i></p>	<p>➔ Pump up funding for van and bus service and fund creative solutions like the “walking preschool bus.”</p>
<p>2 Preschool schedules conflict with parents' work schedules and child care needs <i>Preschool schedules often don't align with parents' work schedules, requiring complicated or expensive transportation and child care arrangements. Half-day preschool programs don't provide enough hours to enable parents to work full-time.</i></p>	<p>➔ Adjust preschool schedules so that they accommodate family and work schedules.</p>
<p>3 Many parents are not aware of the importance of preschool, lack information about preschool options and/or feel their child isn't ready for preschool <i>POWER-PAC's research found that many parents didn't know the importance of early childhood programs, some didn't know that there were free preschool programs in their communities or where to find them, and others thought their child wasn't ready if they weren't potty-trained or didn't speak English.</i></p>	<p>➔ Put real resources into aggressive media campaigns on the importance of early learning.</p> <p>➔ Increase funding for home-visiting programs that bring resources, education, and support to parents and caregivers.</p> <p>➔ Fund parent-to-parent and community-based outreach which helps families understand the importance of early learning and connect them to programs.</p>
<p>4 Families worry about the potential loss of state child care assistance <i>Many families were concerned that if they enrolled their children in a classroom-based early education program they would lose their Child Care Assistance Program subsidy. This is especially a concern in situations where a child's care provider is a relative that depends on the subsidy as a source of income. The reality is that families can retain their child care assistance if the child is in a half-day preschool program.</i></p>	<p>➔ Provide clear and specific information to families receiving subsidies on how they can still enroll children in preschool or Head Start.</p>

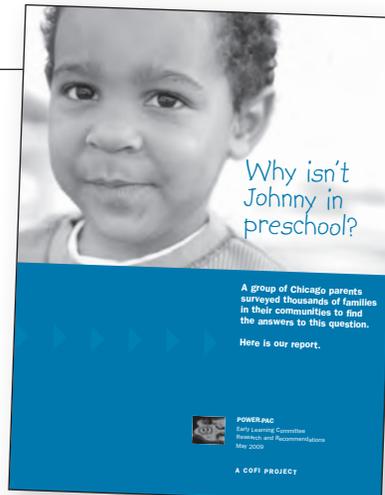
Key findings

Parents describe the process of enrolling children in early care and education as a confusing and frustrating maze. With so many different programs and funding sources, families often have difficulty understanding their early learning options and figuring out which programs or funding sources they are eligible for. Many programs have complex enrollment procedures, requiring families to provide detailed documentation of income and other information, with different requirements for different programs. Parents expressed interest in a one-stop model where families can go to one place and easily access all of the early learning support that they need from birth through age five.

**Best solution?
Streamline
the maze.**

What's the obstacle?	What do parents recommend?
<p>5 Parents are concerned about the cost of child care co-payments <i>Even though Preschool for All and Head Start offer free half-day programs, some providers expand that to a full-day by offering child care, which is funded by sliding scale co-payments. These costs are both a barrier to enrollment and a main reason why children drop out. As income goes up, some working families “top out” of eligibility and are charged the full program cost, while others see co-payments go up and they feel they can’t afford it.</i></p>	<p>Reduce co-payments for child care for low-income families so that they can afford all-day combined preschool and child care programs.</p>
<p>6 Documentation requirements lead to confusion and frustration <i>The preschool enrollment process can be hard for families because of the amount of paperwork required. Also, some programs asked for a Social Security number, even though this is not a requirement of the Preschool for All or Head Start programs.</i></p>	<p>Simplify the registration process and paperwork, make it more family-friendly, and do not require Social Security numbers, so families can register quickly and easily.</p>
<p>7 There are not enough preschool slots available in some neighborhoods</p>	<p>In communities in which there are not enough preschool slots, build new facilities to meet this demand.</p> <p>If there are empty slots in communities, support recruitment efforts to fill these slots.</p>

The full report can be found on our website, www.cofionline.org



Acknowledgements

We give special thanks to the McCormick Foundation for its generous funding of COFI and POWER-PAC parents' work to increase access to early education programs for all children and their support for the research, writing, and publication of these briefs. We also thank other important funders of COFI's policy organizing work: Ben and Jerry's Foundation, Chicago Foundation for Women, Funding Exchange, Just and Fair Schools Fund, Marguerite Casey Foundation, Sociological Initiatives Foundation, Unitarian Universalist Fund for a Just Society, Woods Fund of Chicago, Wieboldt Foundation, and W. K. Kellogg Foundation. We are grateful to the many individuals, corporations, and organizational and governmental partners that support our work.

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COFI trains and organizes parents to be a powerful collective voice for positive change.

You can help spread the success of these pilot programs

The success of COFI and POWER-PAC's pilot programs proves that solutions to intractable community challenges can come from a "bottom-up" approach when there is real investment in building leadership capacity among low-income parents.

It is our hope that the practices and the *process by which they evolved* can inform early learning policy development, systems, and programs that strive to address the needs of low-income families and communities.

Whether you are reading this as a funder, practitioner, advocate, policy maker, or concerned community ally, we encourage you to be creative and curious about practical applications of COFI's model of engaging parents every step of the way.

The parents you will read about in these briefs are not just "any" parents—they are graduates of COFI's leadership training and active in POWER-PAC's local and citywide organizing campaigns. Parents learn to trust themselves and one another. They learn to be accountable to their own visions, to each other, and to the community. They learn how to have a collective voice that is focused on positive change.

Even with the best intentions, teachers and principals, service providers and policy makers can't achieve "parental engagement" without the partnership of parents themselves. With COFI's investment in leadership development, parents are successfully building relationships and learning to trust and work with people who are part of institutional systems that are often viewed with suspicion or even hostility. By working together, parents are able to articulate their own experiences. They gain the confidence and skill to break through barriers of race, class, and culture.

On behalf of the parents and children you will read about in these briefs, thank you for your interest and commitment to making quality early learning available to every family. Please give us a call or visit us online for more information.

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 their 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 to 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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PAT QUINN
GOVERNOR

January 31, 2013

Tracy Occomy Crowder
Community Organizing & Family Issues (C)
1436 West Randolph, 4th floor
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RE: January Home Visiting Task Force M

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

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

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.

Catalyst CHICAGO
INDEPENDENT REPORTING ON URBAN EDUCATION SINCE 1990

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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.

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

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.”

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 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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®  601 MBE



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.

Head Start Ambassadors Connect with “Hard-to-Reach” Families

Each summer and fall, low-income parent leaders called Head Start Ambassadors knock on thousands of doors in their communities to talk with other parents about early learning and Head Start. These COFI-trained parent Ambassadors post flyers in places where they know parents will see them. They set up tables in drug stores, grocery stores, WIC offices, and laundromats to talk with neighbors and distribute information. They team up with staff of under-enrolled Head Start centers to reach out to parents in those neighborhoods. They talk with parents at block parties, community festivals, parades, and health fairs.

Most importantly, the centerpiece of the program is door-to-door, parent-to-parent conversations. Ambassadors knock on doors to get to know families and to identify

those with children who are eligible but not enrolled in Head Start. The Ambassadors talk with the parent or caregiver about why early learning is so important. They share their experiences enrolling their own children or grandchildren in Head Start, and provide information about programs in the area. When there is interest in a referral, the Ambassador gets the names, birthdates, and contact information for each eligible child. This information is sent to Illinois Action for Children, the local referral group for Head Start and child care.

Illinois Action for Children then responds to the family with information on local Head Start centers.

Every other Saturday, the Ambassador teams are joined by 15-20 newly-trained Head Start parents to go door-knocking in their neighborhoods. These Saturday Outreach Team members are mostly young mothers who work or are in school full-time and do not have the time to be an Ambassador. However, they are equally committed to bringing the message about the importance of early learning to

their neighbors and others. These parents cycle into the program each spring and are mentored in their role by more experienced Ambassadors.



In teams of two, Head Start Ambassadors knock on doors in their neighborhoods to get to know families and to identify those with young children who are eligible but not enrolled in Head Start. They tell their own stories of enrolling their children or grandchildren and provide information about Head Start programs nearby.

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 Head Start Ambassadors program is an innovative, parent-created pilot project that is increasing participation of at-risk, low-income children in quality early learning programs.

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?”

Head Start Ambassadors have had peer-to-peer conversations with nearly 20,000 families, about half of them with a child under age 5.

Ambassadors have referred more than 3,000 children for Head Start programs.

Why does it work?

Because Head Start Ambassadors are uniquely effective at connecting with hard-to-reach families



Ambassador Felipa Mena



Ambassador Gloria Harris



Ambassador Louise Evans

» Parent Ambassadors build relationships

The Ambassadors have existing relationships in their communities and use the door-to-door outreach to build more.

“It’s important that we are members of and a presence in our communities. People see us in churches, libraries, doctors’ offices, everywhere.”

—AMBASSADOR FELIPA MENA

As Ambassadors go back to some of the same doors year after year, people recognize them and are more likely to pay attention to what they are saying.

“This lady that lives in my neighborhood said this was the first time she had seen people come back. We weren’t just in the neighborhood one time—we came back. She said she got her granddaughter into a program. Coming back each year—that is what it takes to get people the information.” —AMBASSADOR GLORIA HARRIS

» Parent Ambassadors speak from experience

When Ambassadors talk with other parents it is peer-to-peer. They share stories from their own lives and their experiences with the early education system.

“A professional uses a lot of fancy language, while we tell them personal stories. I give them a testimony from my grandson. He is doing well in kindergarten now. Many of the moms—especially the young moms say—‘I don’t want to let my baby go.’ But I told them how it would help their kids get ready for school.”

—AMBASSADOR LOUISE EVANS

“You have to get your own self involved—give them your own story. I tell them how proud I am of my daughter who is 6 years old and doing so well—she is in the highest group in first grade.” —AMBASSADOR REGINA SIMMS

» Parent Ambassadors share valuable information

The Ambassadors receive training from Head Start experts on topics like children with special needs and the support services that accompany Head Start and Early Head Start, which they share with other parents.

“The trainings gave us the information so that we could not just enroll children, but also educate parents. There is lots of misinformation about Head Start. Through the trainings we participated in, we made people—parents, schools, churches, businesses—aware of how beneficial Head Start is to the entire community.” —AMBASSADOR RUBY MURPHY

» Parent Ambassadors dispel myths and offer support

The Ambassadors are able to offer support and encouragement for parents who may not want to send their child because of their own negative school experiences or fear of entering the “system.”

“I met parents who were undecided or nervous about sending their child to Head Start because that was their first child. We let the parents know that they could sign up to volunteer or work at the agencies their children attend.”

—AMBASSADOR CONCEPCIÓN SALDIVAR

» **Parent Ambassadors share their personal commitment to quality early education**

Many of the Ambassadors' own children and grandchildren have participated in Head Start or other early learning programs. They see the difference it makes in children's lives. They know that the sooner children get into quality early education programs, the better opportunities they will have.

“People appreciated us trying to get the babies in school—our eagerness and purpose, even in 90 degree heat. We didn't care what the weather was outside; we want these children in school.” —AMBASSADOR MICHELLE MORTON

It is well established that peer-to-peer outreach is a game changer in low-income communities. Public health practitioners long-ago realized that the messenger is as important as the message. The successful transmission of the message often depends upon the legitimacy and “street cred” of the person delivering the message. For example,

Promotores de Salud, or Health Promoters, serve to connect communities that are often low-income, underserved, and/or marginalized with resources, information, and support. Another highly regarded peer-to-peer effort is *Ceasefire*—which engages formerly gang-involved residents in intervention efforts to prevent violence among current gang members.

“We are the ‘go to’ people in our community about Head Start.”

—HEAD START AMBASSADOR ROSAZLIA GRILLIER



Ambassador Regina Simms



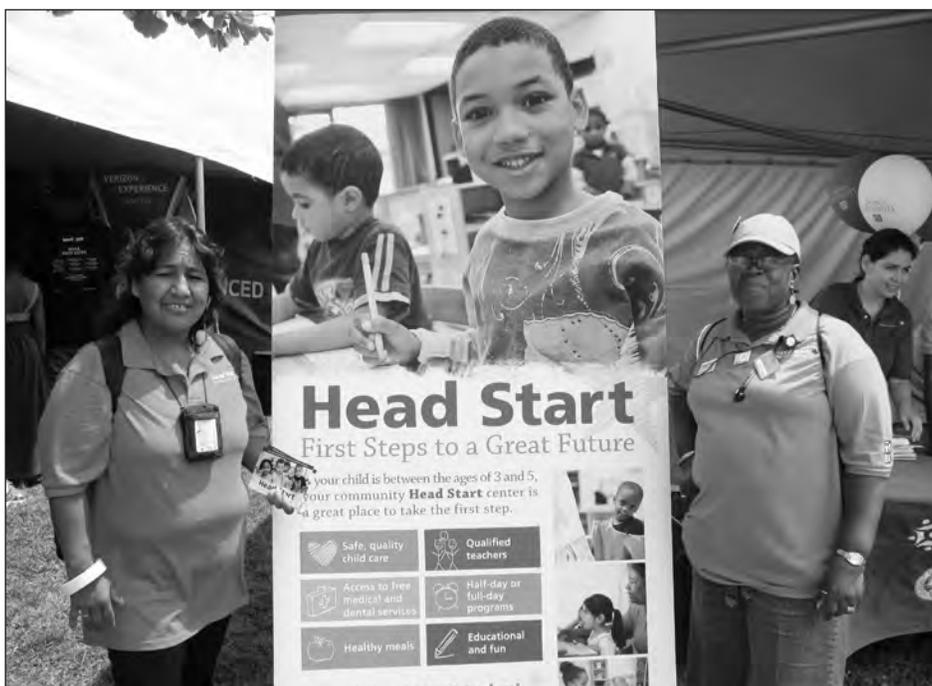
Ambassador Ruby Murphy



Ambassador Concepción Saldivar



Ambassador Rosazlia Grillier



In addition to knocking on doors, Head Start Ambassadors set up tables in drug stores, grocery stores, WIC offices, and laundromats to talk with neighbors and distribute information. They talk with parents at block parties, street festivals, parades, and health fairs.



The Latino Community Head Start Ambassadors reach out to families who speak Spanish.

Following parents' lead to address community issues

Head Start Ambassadors are all COFI-trained and supported parent leaders. They are members of a powerful citywide, multi-racial network of low-income parents called POWER-PAC, Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council. These parents interviewed over 5,000 parents with preschool eligible children who were not participating in structured preschool programs. They found many families lacked basic and needed information:

- » Families didn't know the importance of early education;
- » Or if they did, they didn't know that there were free preschools in their community;
- » Some worried that the family might lose their child care subsidy;
- » While others worried about their immigration status;
- » And many thought that their child was not ready for preschool because the child did not speak English, was too shy, or for other reasons.

POWER-PAC leaders concluded that despite the efforts of early educators and public education campaigns, many of the hardest-to-reach families were still not aware of the importance, ease, and benefits of preschool enrollment.

They proposed and advocated to create a grassroots door-to-door, parent-to-parent outreach program. Parent leaders understood that information would be best processed if it came from people that the families could relate to—*other low-income parents and grandparents who have similar life experiences.*

POWER-PAC leaders took the idea of a peer-to-peer outreach program to the City of Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) which administers the City's Head Start programs. The Ambassador program was born. City administrators found the idea compelling and were eager to invest in this innovative solution. Many Head Start programs struggled to fill slots yet knew that low-income families who

It is well established that peer-to-peer outreach is a game changer in low-income communities. The messenger is as important as the message.



could benefit were not enrolling their children. DFSS recognized that POWER-PAC parent leaders were determined, committed community residents (mostly mothers and grandmothers) with deep roots in Chicago's low-income neighborhoods and a "can-do" attitude about addressing intractable problems. Administrators believed that by employing these parents as outreach workers they would be creating a job-training experience in addition to bringing the early learning message to families.

In 2009, the Head Start Ambassadors Pilot Program was launched as a partnership of DFSS, COFI, and the Coalition of Site Based Child Care Administrators. The Head Start Ambassadors program is part of a multi-faceted approach to public education and marketing of Head Start in the City of Chicago.

Making a difference: results, cost-effectiveness, and benefits

Over the past 3 years, Parent Ambassadors have:

- » Knocked on 50,708 doors,
- » Spoken with 19,272 families, 9,085 of them with a child under age 5,
- » Referred 3,163 children for Head Start, and
- » Bottom line, Ambassadors helped fully enroll Chicago's Head Start program for the first time in years.

The Head Start Ambassadors program has proven to be *very cost-effective* with an average cost of \$175 per referral. The cost includes Ambassadors' salaries and the organizational expenses of providing training, supervision, and administrative support.

Each Head Start enrollment brings federal dollars into local programs, a national average of \$9,000 per child. If even half of the referrals generated by the Ambassadors program become actual Head Start enrollments, *the total program investment is bringing back 32 times its cost in early learning program revenues*. This figure is based on the conservative assumption that one-third of those enrolled will participate in Head Start for the full two years.

“Since we started working with the COFI-trained parent leaders, we have surpassed our enrollment goals every year—and we’ve surpassed them earlier each year.”

—VANESSA RICH, CHICAGO
DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND
SUPPORT SERVICES

Moreover, research shows that participation in quality early education programs increases a child's likelihood of graduating from high school, attending college, and earning more money. Early learning also decreases the chance that they will be involved in special education or the criminal justice system.

Less readily measurable, but an important potential benefit to examine further, is the extent to which those 19,000 plus conversations helped create a buzz in the community that, over time, is increasing awareness of the importance of quality preschool programs. Also, these conversations help re-weave social connections and trust within communities and support community building, so that both Ambassadors and the people they speak with feel more connected to their community.



Head Start Work Leads to Jobs

“Thanks to COFI training and the Ambassador program, I have completed my education and now have a job as an outreach worker for families in public housing.”

—KEOSHA GAMBLE

Keosha Gamble is a young mother from the Altgeld public housing neighborhood on Chicago's far south side. She began COFI leadership training at her child's Head Start center, and joined the Saturday Outreach Team. As she explained: "I have young children in Head Start and I'm able to talk to mothers first-hand about the benefits of Head Start. Now I feel I'm really giving back to my community."

The skills, confidence, and connections Keosha gained through her work as a Head Start Ambassador, along with her passion for early learning, helped her land a full-time job with Illinois Action for Children doing outreach with families in public housing!

Other parents have also gotten outreach jobs and some are now training to be community health workers.

Keys to success



“We meet parents at their comfort level. Parents might be intimidated by someone from the Center, but as the parent of a young child, I go to them and they talk to me.”

—MICHELLE MORTON,
HEAD START AMBASSADOR AND
SINGLE MOTHER OF A TODDLER

Strong leaders, effective training, and good management

The Head Start Ambassador project is managed by COFI which recruits and selects Ambassadors on the basis of leadership skills and experience, ability to build relationships with parents, and demonstrated passion about the importance of quality early childhood education. Ambassadors are all low-income African-American and Latina mothers and grandmothers who are veteran activists in their communities.

The 12 Ambassadors are divided into three teams by region and language spoken. One team is assigned to the low-income African-American communities on Chicago’s westside, another to the African-American communities on Chicago’s southside, and a third team works in the Latino communities on the northwest and southwest sides.

Each team goes out together 3 days a week for 4 hours at a stretch. Every other week Ambassadors are joined by Saturday Outreach Teams, newly trained Head Start parents who are motivated to spread the word in their communities.

Ambassadors earn about \$500 per month, and Head Start parents who join them every other Saturday receive a small compensation of \$10-\$11 per hour. Program materials, such as sample scripts, tally sheets, scheduling and management forms, are available from COFI.

Carefully select, screen, and support Ambassadors

By design, Head Start Ambassadors are low-income parents themselves. In many cases, they are struggling to keep their families afloat and facing a myriad of personal challenges. Many have had difficulty finding or keeping jobs, and may struggle with basic expectations of timeliness and organization. Several of the Ambassadors have limited literacy skills and some do not speak English. None own a car and most do not have a driver’s license. Most do not have home phones and some have no access to a telephone or computer of any sort. And for many, balancing work with family responsibilities and crises creates continual obstacles. While the Ambassador role is part-time and temporary employment, participants are expected to treat it as a “real” job and to learn job skills where appropriate. Practical strategies that have helped include:

- » Building incentives (for perfect attendance and on-time record) into the pay scale, but still providing flexibility for those who run into an occasional problem;
- » On a weekly basis, each outreach team can adjust its schedule to accommodate individuals with conflicts such as doctor appointments or court dates;
- » Some Ambassadors have been asked to leave due to the challenges around reliability and timeliness;
- » COFI staff with cars help transport bags and materials to outreach sites;
- » Providing public transportation passes to Ambassadors moving from site to site;
- » Checking in face-to-face and via team cell phones for those without phones of their own;
- » Pairing Ambassadors with different skill sets together so that they can communicate effectively with a range of parents and to compensate for

Ambassador limitations, including language and physical barriers. For example, the more physically fit Ambassador might carry the materials, while the less fit Ambassador holds the clipboard.

Provide introductory and continuing training to the Ambassadors

In this pilot, all the parents involved in the program—Head Start Ambassadors and Saturday Outreach Team members—are graduates of COFI’s *Self, Family & Team* leadership program, a 7-session series that works with the parents to set and achieve personal, family, and group goals. The training helps parents to focus on positive, long-term goals for themselves and for their families, and to develop action plans for moving forward. COFI offers *Self, Family & Team* trainings in selected communities and, through its partnership with DFSS, to 30-40 Head Start parents annually at multiple sites around the city of Chicago.

Once recruited—and with COFI leadership training under their belts—Ambassadors and Saturday Outreach Teams participate in another 8 hours of intensive training: 4 hours of which are provided by COFI about community outreach, and 4 hours about the importance of early learning and about Head Start programs and policies, provided by Head Start experts. Ambassadors also participate in weekly on-the-job follow-up training sessions. Topics include community visioning and goal setting, how to listen to others, techniques for building relationships one-on-one, identifying community stakeholders, time management, professionalism, “hats” (mindfulness about the Ambassador role and how it is both different from and complementary to that of the community leader role), and specific sessions on Early Head Start, services available to special needs children, and supportive services to families available through Head Start.

Offer continuing support to parent Ambassadors, especially rookies

In addition to its trainings, Community Organizing & Family Issues provides physical, practical, and emotional support to Ambassadors. Each Ambassador team is supported by a Team Leader, a COFI staff professional who is trained in parent leadership development. A Team Leader works approximately two hours for each hour of outreach. COFI Team Leaders:

- » Organize the teams’ schedules and assignments, including developing maps and meeting points;
- » Structure outreach strategies—such as providing coordination around community events, identifying under-enrolled programs to partner with, and stuffing bags of materials to distribute to families; and
- » Supervise and tabulate data records—including outreach destinations, logs of families spoken with, time sheets, and mileage/travel expense reports.

Above all, COFI Team Leaders coach, mentor and advise the Ambassadors, helping them to become ever more effective parent educators who serve as community resource people on Head Start.



Over the past three years, Head Start Ambassadors have spoken with nearly 20,000 families.

Supporting each other, celebrating success

Head Start Ambassador work is physically and emotionally draining. The Ambassadors are out walking for four hours at a stretch. They are going up and down the front steps of buildings and up and down stairs inside of apartment buildings. Some families greet the Ambassadors with welcome and appreciation, but some doors are slammed in their faces. The Ambassadors need time to share these stories and to unwind from the daily grind. A weekly two-hour meeting to unpack the week’s work and to plan for the coming week is helpful. At these meetings, COFI also works with the Ambassadors to balance the stresses of the work with the feelings of accomplishment. It is vital to celebrate reaching targeted numbers of referrals and goals!

You can help spread the success of this program

The past three years of the Head Start Ambassador program have shown that peer-to-peer outreach is a promising practice in reaching low-income families who have eligible but unenrolled preschool-aged children and in spreading the message about the importance of early childhood education. However, peer-to-peer outreach is not yet a routine part of early education programs. We ask that early education centers, policy makers, and advocates consider the following ways which they can help make sure more “hard-to-reach” families have access to quality early learning programs:



Head Start Ambassadors going door-to-door

Invest in grassroots parent leadership, engagement, and organizing as a way to identify new policy and practice solutions from the ground up.

Encourage programs and communities with high numbers of at-risk unenrolled children to try parent peer outreach as a marketing strategy.

Carefully evaluate the impact and the cost-effectiveness of parent peer outreach, with specific respect to increases in enrollments and costs relative to existing marketing and public education programs.

Explore targeted funding mechanisms, like partnerships with corporations who recognize the importance of early learning, to provide seed funding for areas with high numbers of eligible but unenrolled children to pilot parent peer outreach programs.

Explore public funding partnerships with workforce and economic development agencies to create transitional jobs in preschool peer-to-peer outreach.

Ultimately, commit to increased investments to build a more integrated and seamless early learning system.



COFI

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The Walking Preschool Bus: A Neighborhood Solution

Low-income families identify transportation issues as one of the biggest hurdles to enrolling—and keeping—their children in preschool.

In Walking Preschool Bus neighborhoods, parent leaders are hired as “conductors” with a regular route to walk young children to and from preschool centers. Conductors work with COFI staff and local schools to identify families whose children are not regularly attending the area preschool/Head Start programs due to lack of transportation. Then Conductors, accompanied by COFI staff, visit these families to invite them to join the program.

Conductors implement “bus routes” to accommodate participating families, and, in this model program, receive training, supervision, and administrative support from COFI.

Most of the Conductors COFI hires are already very active at the school and in their neighborhoods, making them credible and trustworthy resources for marketing the

Schools report that the Walking Preschool Bus program is increasing preschool attendance and reducing tardiness.

program in the community. Many of them have been recruited from the ranks of POWER-PAC, a powerful, citywide organization of low-income parents in Chicago. These are the very parents who initiated the idea of trying this practical, peer-to-peer approach in their own communities.

For the past three years, COFI and POWER-PAC have worked in conjunction with the Chicago Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Education to pilot this idea at a few schools; results so far have been encouraging. School officials report that the Walking Preschool Bus program is increasing children’s preschool attendance and reducing their tardiness.

Why It Works

The heart of the Walking Preschool Bus, and a key to its success, is selecting, training, and supervising highly committed and reliable neighborhood parent leaders.

As in the Head Start Ambassador program (see companion brief), gaining the trust of the families builds an understanding and commitment to the vital experience of quality early learning. Conductors are able to persuade participants that regular attendance in preschool makes a major difference in school and life success.

The trust that is built during the recruitment phase is also critical later on when the Conductor calls to let the parent know that she is on her way or knocks on the door in the dead of winter and finds the family reluctant to let the child venture off in the cold. The Conductors use the trust they have built to again convince the family of why it is so important that the child still attend.

Recognizing the Walking Preschool Bus as one transportation option for some Illinois cities and towns, this brief describes how it works and makes recommendations for expanding its use.

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 Walking Preschool Bus program is an innovative, parent-created pilot project that is increasing participation of at-risk, low-income children in quality early learning programs.

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?”

Walking Preschool Bus Conductors make sure preschoolers get to school safely.



Keys to success

Program Structure

Community Organizing & Family Issues (COFI) provides staff and management support to the Walking Preschool Bus project. COFI recruits and selects the Conductors, all of whom are low-income African-American and Latina residents from areas around the participating schools. Most of the Conductors are active parent leaders or other community residents who have expressed interest in helping with the program. Over time, the strongest and most consistent Conductors are those who have children at the school. Working with the Chicago Public Schools, all recruits are finger-printed and pass a background check before they are approved and hired as Conductors. They also need to have a working cell phone.

At each school, support for the Walking Preschool Bus is provided by a COFI staff person. He or she coordinates closely with school staff and is responsible for working with local parents and the school to recruit Conductors and participating families. Working with the school, the COFI staff member assures that the Conductors know and are fulfilling their responsibilities, including communicating well with the school and the families. The COFI staff person also arranges back-up Conductors in the event that the usual Conductor is ill. When a Conductor is ill, she or he calls both the back-up Conductor and the COFI staff person to report it. On the rare occasion that the back-up Conductor isn't available, the Conductor calls the parents to inform them that they need to transport their child to/from school for the day.

Following parents' lead to address community issues

Parent leaders in POWER-PAC spent two years digging deep into a wide cross-section of low-income communities, to find out why so many of the most at-risk children were not participating in early learning programs. In more than 5,000 interviews, transportation was one of the most common barriers identified by parents.

Some parents have physical disabilities, and many elderly caregivers have a difficult time walking children to and from school, especially in the winter. Caregivers may be responsible for other younger children and have to bundle them up for the trip each time they go to drop off or pick-up the preschooler. And, in some communities, families are afraid to walk their children to and from schools.

In addition, in Chicago and elsewhere, many preschool programs are only a half-day—some as short as two-and-a-half hours a day. For working parents, this schedule makes it difficult to get children to and from school and requires complicated and often expensive child care and transportation arrangements. According to a *Catalyst Chicago* article, “half-day programs are hard for working parents to navigate, contributing inadvertently to absenteeism” (August 30, 2011).

Parents came up with the concept of a Walking Preschool Bus. They brought the idea to the Chicago Public Schools' head of early learning who liked it and agreed to invest in this innovative solution. The parents went to bat for the idea at their local schools and developed a partnership between COFI, CPS, and the schools in order to pilot the program. The goal was to increase enrollment and stabilize attendance at preschools by eliminating transportation barriers. In implementing the project, we discovered the additional benefits of the opportunity for daily physical activity and socialization among children in the program.

Practical advice: recruit and support strong leaders, and build a good partnership with early learning program sites

Carefully select and screen Conductors, who often have little or no work history.

The Walking Preschool Bus program depends upon the unique trust that Conductors—who are peers of parents and caregiving grandparents—can establish with parents, other caregivers, and the children. And the program's success relies fundamentally on the reliability and timeliness of the Conductors—many of whom face their own challenges day-to-day, including income, employment, housing, food insecurity and chronic health problems within the family.

In order to be hired as a Conductor, applicants have to pass a background check, and frankly, in some communities it is difficult to find applicants who can do so. Additionally, it takes six to eight weeks to find out if the applicant passes the background check. At one school, the Walking Preschool Bus fell apart mid-year when one of the Conductors left and the process of screening a new Conductor took several weeks. During this time the children found alternative ways to get to school, didn't attend school regularly, or transferred out.

It can be difficult to keep the same Conductors throughout the year. As Conductors are working so few hours a day, walking children back and forth, if Conductors have an opportunity for another job with more hours, they often take it. However, when Conductors are parents at the school, they are more likely to stick with it over time.

Provide thorough introductory and continuing training to the Conductors.

On an ongoing basis, COFI offers a 7-session course in personal, family, and community leadership development that speaks specifically to the needs and interests of low-income parents. All Conductors have taken this training, called *Self, Family, & Team*—and, thus, have further developed their relational and “executive” skills. The ability to set, plan, and achieve goals is so vital to the Conductor role. In addition, Conductors are trained by COFI in the process and expectations of the role.

Provide strong staff support to the Conductors.

COFI provides structure and support to the Conductors, most of whom have little to no work experience. For each Walking Preschool Bus route and Conductor, a COFI staff person:

- » Works with the Conductor and school staff in the community to recruit families in need of the service and orient those families to the program. Each family signs a Memorandum of Understanding to participate (samples of all forms are available from COFI);
- » Structures outreach strategies to gain and maintain participants;
- » Organizes the Conductor’s schedule and creates a map for their route;
- » Checks-in daily to assure the children were picked up and arrive as planned;
- » Collects and reviews sign-in/sign-out sheets for each child from the Conductors; and
- » Above all, coaches, mentors and advises the Conductors and helps them to become ever more knowledgeable about the importance of preschool attendance and how to be effective in their role.

Gain solid cooperation from the schools or early learning sites.

The best programs are those where the school is a willing and strongly committed partner. At some schools, the preschool teachers refer families to the program and some even assist in the recruitment of Conductors. The engaged preschool programs also help to make sure that the communication between families, Conductors, and the COFI staff person is strong.

Encourage daily communication with participating families.

Family situations change, particularly when housing issues necessitate moving, and, thus, the number of children being walked to/from school can change from day to day. Moreover, as participating families are low-income, many do not have phones. Conductors are trained to check in with participating families regularly to find out if they anticipate any changes that will impact the program.

Parents came up with the concept of a Walking School Bus. Then they went to bat for their idea in their local schools.

COFI recruits and selects the Conductors, all of whom are low-income African-American and Latina residents from areas around the participating schools.





“I’m a working mom and I can’t take off work in the middle of the day to go pick up my child. The Walking Preschool Bus made it possible for my child to go to preschool.”

—MOTHER AT
JENNER ELEMENTARY



**COFI
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Making a difference: the results, costs, and benefits

Over the past three years, between 17 and 25 young children each year have enrolled and regularly attended preschools as a result of Walking Preschool Buses at five different schools. The Walking Preschool Bus project has increased children’s preschool attendance and reduced tardiness, according to officials at the participating schools. Many of the children who are walked to and from school by the Conductor had attendance issues prior to the program’s inception. In addition, an enormous program benefit reported by parents of participating children is the assurance that their child would arrive safely to school and home.

The cost of this program is not insignificant, due to the costs of needed oversight and management. However, at a cost of under \$1,000 per child per year (about \$5 per child per day), the Walking Preschool Bus is comparable to the cost of a parent escorting one child on public transportation and far less than the cost of a taxi or driving. Costs include modest fees to the Conductors—\$10 per day per route, for approximately one hour of work—plus administrative costs of recruitment, staff support and supervision, training, finger-printing, and extra insurance.

The Walking Preschool Bus provides additional benefits over other forms of transportation:

- » It connects parents and caregivers daily to Conductors who encourage their children’s learning;
- » It facilitates communication between the school and the family—in many cases the Conductor relays messages from the teacher to the home;
- » It gets young children—many of whom are at high risk of obesity and live largely sedentary lifestyles—moving;
- » It provides opportunities for children to socialize and develop their social skills;
- » It provides opportunities for children to build relationships with one or two more caring, achieving adults—the Conductors; and
- » The program provides job training experiences for Conductors who often have little to no work history.

You can help spread the success of these pilot programs

With transportation issues being one of the biggest barriers to the participation of low-income children in high quality early learning, the Walking Preschool Bus provides a promising new approach which merits further piloting. We ask that early education centers, policy makers, and advocates consider the following ways to help make sure more “hard-to-reach” families have access to quality early learning programs:

Encourage preschool programs in high-density communities where transportation is a preschool enrollment barrier to try the Walking Preschool Bus idea.

Seek options in both the public and the philanthropic sectors to provide modest grants for programs seeking to try a Walking Preschool Bus.

Support efforts to systematically evaluate the impact of the Walking Preschool Bus on preschool program enrollment and attendance, as well as other benefits it may provide for children, families, and Conductors.

Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew - Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC)

is a cross-cultural, citywide membership organization of low-income parents. Our mission is to build a strong voice for low-income, immigrant and working families by uniting parents across race and community around issues of importance to families.

Our **Early Learning Campaign** aims to reduce structural barriers to enrolling low-income children of color in quality early education programs. Other innovative organizing includes:

- **Elementary Justice Campaign** to eliminate unnecessarily punitive discipline policies and practices that negatively impact children of color in Chicago's public elementary schools
- **Recess for All!** seeking the return of recess to Chicago Public Schools
- **Stepping Out of Poverty** organizes for policy change to increase economic security for low-income families



POWER-PAC

**Parents Organized to Win, Educate
and Renew - Policy Action Council**

A COFI PROJECT



Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)'s 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 the city and state policy arenas.

Founded in 1995, COFI is driven by a deep commitment to social justice, and grounded in the time-tested principles, strategies, accomplishments, and approaches of community organizing. COFI's model of Family Focused Organizing provides intensive and systematic leadership development, and ongoing organizing expertise.

We organize low-income 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.

COFI helps to build family-supportive communities by developing parents' capacities to lead— to improve their lives, strengthen their families and better their communities.



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