

# No decisions *about us,* *without us*

The Impact of Parent Leaders  
on Early Learning Collaborations



We hope our report will inform continuing efforts to build early learning systems truly responsive to the needs of diverse families and communities.



## Acknowledgments

A special thank you to Sandra O'Donnell for writing and collaborating on this report. Thank you to all the early learning collaborations and parents in Illinois that contributed to the research and findings.

And, finally, thank you to the many funders of this work from the public sector to private philanthropy. We especially acknowledge the critical funding support for the parent leadership and engagement work from the Boeing Corporation, the Deaconess Foundation, the Grand Victoria Foundation, the McCormick Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Family Engagement Initiative and others.

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# Introduction

**Ambassadors** *who market early learning programs through community outreach;*

**Experts** *who identify problems and create solutions to system improvement;*

**Community activists** *who ‘win’ community improvements for young children;*

**Advocates for parents** *to navigate developmental screening and early intervention systems;*

**Change makers** *who can help solve systemic problems in early learning.*

These are some new roles that parent leaders in Illinois are playing as members of early learning community collaborations, groups created to increase access to and quality in early learning programs<sup>1</sup>. This report, a joint effort by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) and Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), examines the impact of parent engagement in Illinois’ early learning collaborations based on staff documentation of the process and outcomes, focus groups with parents, interviews with collaboration members, and two surveys by IAFC of collaboration stakeholders<sup>2</sup>.

While many collaborations are created by and comprised of providers and decision-makers, through the leadership of Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), and in partnership with Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), many of Illinois’ 54 community collaborations have recognized the importance of bringing the voices and expertise of one of the early learning system’s primary customers—parents—into collaborative decision-making. Over the past several years, with the support of a Race to the Top federal grant, IAFC strengthened its technical support of community collaborations and increased its emphasis on parent engagement<sup>3</sup>. In seven communities, local collaborations and IAFC also partnered with COFI, an organization devoted to parent leadership in systems change-making, using support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and other funders to intensively train and support parents as full partners in their community collaborations.

We hope our report will inform continuing efforts by the State of Illinois, local communities, and others to build early learning systems truly responsive to the needs of diverse families and communities.

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1 Please see the Appendix for more information about early learning community collaborations and the context of the work described in this brief.

2 For readers seeking more methodological and contextual information, please see the Appendix.

3 [http://partnerplanact.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018\\_Final-Complete-Collaboration-Profiles.pdf](http://partnerplanact.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018_Final-Complete-Collaboration-Profiles.pdf)  
[http://partnerplanact.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/02\\_TABLE-OF-CONTENTSv6.pdf](http://partnerplanact.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/02_TABLE-OF-CONTENTSv6.pdf)

# Roles for Parents in Community Collaborations in Illinois

COFI's goal was to develop empowered parent leaders, who are full partners with professionals, in shaping the action agendas of the collaborations.

Community collaborations—and their member organizations—can engage parents in many different ways and at many different levels. (Please see IAFC's 'toolkit' for engaging parents in both early learning programs and in early learning collaborations, at [www.partnerplanact.org](http://www.partnerplanact.org) and COFI's brief, "Parent Engagement that Builds Leadership and Power" at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).) In summary, they can<sup>4,5</sup>:

- Encourage member provider organizations to strengthen parent engagement in the classroom and between the classroom and the home, increasing parents' effectiveness as **'first teachers'**.
- Engage parents as **experts in informing program decisions** through surveys and interviews about their actual experiences using services, through parent-to-parent outreach efforts to gain parents' perspectives, and through recruiting and welcoming parents to participate directly in efforts to improve program quality.
- Engage parents as **leaders in making agency-level decisions** on issues such as how to conduct intake, program hours of operation, staffing, curriculum selection, governance, and quality assurance.
- Involve parent leaders as **policy advocates in setting the collaboration's agenda for change**, in speaking with elected and appointed officials, and in organizing support for policy change.

To more deeply ground the local collaboration's work in the experiences of the families that they seek to serve, IAFC supported collaborations to implement any or all of a wide range of IAFC-identified parent engagement goals, strategies, and tools, like Innovation Zones (community collaborations supported through the federal Race to the Top grant). Leah Pouw, the IAFC senior staff person working with the Innovation Zones, stated:

*We learned that families want to connect. Community systems are more effective when parents are engaged. We learned that the best place to engage is the place that works best for the parent at that point in time. This may vary and so the collaboration must always ask, and reflect—what's hard and what would make it easier.*

In addition to IAFC-provided collaboration support, COFI identified seven communities with high numbers of low-income children of color eligible for, but not enrolled in, quality early learning programs. COFI then partnered with the local collaboration and implemented their intentional, intensive model of parent leadership training and support. COFI's Family-Focused Organizing model takes parent leaders successively through a three-phase/three-year leadership development training process designed to strengthen leadership skills and capacities to make change at the personal/family, small group, community, and systems levels. It is described at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).

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4 Early learning community collaborations are often rooted in the 'Collective Impact' model developed by Stanford University, which initially did not emphasize consumer participation. See [http://www.fsg.org/blog/how-do-you-successfully-put-collective-impact-action?utm\\_source=fsg&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ciprinciplesofpractice20160425&utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=CONTINUE%20READING&utm\\_campaign=ciprinciplesofpractice04252016](http://www.fsg.org/blog/how-do-you-successfully-put-collective-impact-action?utm_source=fsg&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ciprinciplesofpractice20160425&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=CONTINUE%20READING&utm_campaign=ciprinciplesofpractice04252016).

For critiques, see: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/emmett-d-carson/collective-impact-\\_b\\_1847972.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/emmett-d-carson/collective-impact-_b_1847972.html); <http://www.gjcpp.org/en/resource.php?issue=21&resource=200>; <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2017/01/09/collaborating-equity-justice-moving-beyond-collective-impact/>

5 Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Learning Systems at <http://www.cssp.org/young-children-their-families/body/Ripples-of-Transformation-Family-Engagement-Toolkit.pdf>

In these COFI-partnered communities, the parent leaders created their own parent-led groups to support their voices in the larger collaboration. COFI provided the leadership trainings as well as ongoing staff support to these emerging parent leadership teams. COFI's goal was to develop empowered parent leaders, who are full partners with professionals, in shaping the action agendas of the collaborations.

As a result, community collaborations across the state implemented new and deeper approaches to engaging parent leaders. They have:

- **Made the collaborative table welcoming of parent voices**—changing meeting times to accommodate parents' schedules, providing for child care, providing interpretation in different languages and translation of materials, creating space in the agendas to listen to parents;
- **Established opportunities to hear family voices directly**—seeking their perspectives in meetings; conducting surveys, interviews, and focus groups; hosting 'World Café' conversations;
- **Encouraged parents' community outreach and leadership**—supporting parent-to-parent outreach, encouraging parents to be visible in community forums and meetings, promoting parent participation at community fairs, hosting peer-led parent trainings, and promoting roles for parent leaders as parent advocate, navigator or ambassador;
- **Involved parents in deliberation and problem-solving**—soliciting parents' perceptions, perspectives, and action ideas in full collaboration meetings, in work groups and executive meetings, and on parent advisory councils;
- **Supported parents in providing feedback to state systems based on collaboration findings** through testimony based on personal experience; meeting one-on-one and in-groups with policymakers; and participating in coordinated activities to raise awareness of issues in the community.



## CASE STUDY

### *From 'Service Recipient' to 'Change Agent'*

#### **The Impact of Parent Leadership in East St. Louis' Early Learning Collaboration**

Early in the life of the Innovation Zone in East St. Louis, an impressive group of partners—including AOK Early Childhood Network, Children's Home + Aid, Child Care Resource + Referral (CCR+R), Child & Family Connections, East Side Aligned, East St. Louis School District, Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House, SIUE Head Start, and area families—began the process of co-creating a shared agenda for children and families, examining quantitative data provided by partners and qualitative data provided by families. Sharing their lived experiences in participating in early learning and special education services, parents reported that they did not know about all the available support services; they discussed transportation costs and complexity; and they presented evidence—hours of programs not aligned with their work schedules, inconvenient program locations, long wait lists, cumbersome paperwork, and confusing eligibility requirements—that led them to believe that providers and policy makers often were not responsive to the complexities of their lives.

With that feedback, the collaborative determined that strong, deep partnerships with parents were integral to the collaboration's ultimate success. So in 2015, the collaborative created a partnership agreement with Parents United for Change, a group of parent leaders who had completed COFI parent leadership trainings, "to ensure that families/parents with young children (0-5 years of age) and their views, experiences, and stories are heard and represented at IZ meetings and activities", guiding and informing planning, strategies, outreach, and decisions in developmental screening, quality improvement, and community collective impact planning. The agreement also provided stipends for parents serving as Ambassadors (outreach).

The partnership agreement shifted the mindsets of the partners: parent leaders in this collaboration became recognized as change agents in the greater East St. Louis community as parent leaders engaged in all levels of planning, decision making and implementation. Through sometimes challenging discussions and negotiations, the parents and the other partners aligned expectations and maintained a strong focus as they worked through the normal conflicts that often arise when divergent perspectives join together to create system change. A true collaboration with parents evolved. The parents and partners have adopted a new guiding principle: "No decisions about us without us."

Children, families, and the entire community are beneficiaries of this collaboration: shared power is translating to more children receiving developmental screenings, more enrolling in early learning programs, and, indeed, more parents participating in strengthening their community.



# Impact of parent leaders on early learning community systems development

**D**rawing from both the ABL change framework<sup>6</sup> and that of the Center for Schools and Communities<sup>7</sup> to describe systems improvements fueled in partnership with parents to date, we describe evidence to date of the impact of parent engagement in early learning community collaborations:

**1. Parents have connected with families from priority populations<sup>8</sup>, raising awareness of the importance of early care and education and Early Intervention programs and providing information about enrollment processes. In so doing, parents contributed to increased developmental screenings and early learning program enrollments in communities<sup>9</sup>. They have strengthened parent engagement in programs once the child is enrolled.**

Parent-to-parent outreach strategies include:

**Ambassadors.** Parent Ambassadors (a model piloted by COFI in Chicago in partnership with the City of Chicago Head Start program) are parent leaders trained in early learning research and practice as well as in community outreach. They go door-to-door, frequent laundromats and WIC offices and health clinics, and attend community fairs to encourage other parents to enroll their children in appropriate programs<sup>10</sup>. In the Innovation Zones, five communities adapted Ambassadors. In 2017, Ambassadors spoke with over 1,500 families from priority populations in these communities. In interviews with IAFC, collaboration stakeholders cited Parent Ambassadors as a key part of parent engagement. One said, “They [the Ambassadors] were involved in local schools, volunteered as parent patrol in mornings and afternoons around schools, and knew a lot about the community. They also knew where to go and how to reach other parents and could help us connect to them. Other parents knew who they were and listened to what they had to say.”

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6 <http://ableABLEchange.msu.edu>. Illinois Action for Children introduced this framework as part of the Race to the Top grant for statewide training and technical assistance supports in Illinois in 2016.

7 <https://www.center-school.org/fssr/FamComEngag.php>;  
<https://www.center-school.org/fssr/documents/Contiboffam.pdf>

8 These populations—the focus of the Race to the Top grant—included children of teen parents, mothers age 19 or younger, children in families in poverty or deep poverty, children in homeless families or experiencing housing instability/mobility, children/families with child welfare involvement, children with disabilities, limited English speaking household and other families that experience significant barriers based on language, and children of refugees, migrant or seasonal workers.

9 Bradford R. White, *et al.*, Illinois’ Early Childhood Innovation Zones: A New Model for State Policy?, Illinois Education Research Council, 2017, at <http://ierc.education/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-1-Illinois-Early-Childhood-Innovation-Zones.pdf>

10 The Ambassadors idea emerged from COFI parent leaders in Chicago 10 years ago when a) Head Start slots were going unfilled in many communities, b) COFI-trained parent leaders found, via 5,000+ parent interviews, gaps in awareness about the importance of early learning and in accessing early learning resources. See “Head Start Ambassadors Connect With ‘Hard-to-Reach’ Families” at [http://www.cofionline.org/COFI/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/HSA\\_brief\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.cofionline.org/COFI/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/HSA_brief_WEB.pdf). COFI teamed with the City of Chicago to train parent leaders in early learning research and policy and employ them in reaching out, in teams, in high need communities to generate Head Start (and ultimately other early learning program) referrals. The idea ‘worked’: all Head Start slots have been filled over the past several years. Annual Head Start Ambassador reports to the City of Chicago are available upon request at [gdoyle@cofionline.org](mailto:gdoyle@cofionline.org).

Action campaigns often begin with stakeholders discussing problems in their own lives, and then finding out if and how others have had similar experiences.



**Developmental screening and early intervention parent advocates.** Finding too many young children in preschool who showed signs of developmental delay that had not been addressed in the birth to three years, COFI parent leaders in Englewood, Chicago, created the role of Parent Peer Advocate in partnership with that community’s early learning collaborations to identify developmental screening resources, fill resource gaps, and help families navigate the special education system. During the pilot of this idea, eight parents trained in the IEP process and Early Intervention (EI) services. The parents provided EI information to hundreds of parents and helped 19 families access screenings for early intervention. COFI-trained Parent Advocates conducted developmental screening outreach in Greater East St. Louis as well, achieving 145 new screenings. In Aurora, COFI-trained parent leaders have taken Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) training to support parents that spoke predominantly Spanish in advocating and getting developmental screenings for their children.

**Preschool and school partnerships with parents.** In Aurora and Elgin, school district officials asked participating COFI parent leaders to partner with them in reaching out to and engaging families that primarily spoke Spanish, who often have been unaware of engagement opportunities and/or afraid to participate. In Aurora, COFI parents peer-tested the VROOM Brain Development model and are partnering with the school district to expand its use of this software app. In the Altgeld-Riverdale community in Chicago, a parent leader was trained as a ‘Tiny Habits’<sup>11</sup> coach to teach other parents tools from this curriculum to support their children’s development. In the Pilsen and Little Village communities in Chicago, Catholic Charities adapted the Parent Ambassador model into their early care and education programming. One IAFC survey respondent reported, “Service providers are building personal relationships with families through the Parent Council and are now partnering to hold Play Practice groups, Workshops, and Active Parenting groups with other organizations. There is more cohesion among collaboration partners and increased collaboration on programs and services for families.”

## **2. Parent leaders brought the voices and perspectives of families to inform the action agendas of community collaborations, grounding the priorities in meeting the needs of families articulated by parents themselves.**

Action campaigns often begin with stakeholders discussing problems in their own lives, and then finding out if and how others have had similar experiences<sup>12</sup>. Collaboration

11 <http://tinyhabitsacademy.org/start-young-10-time-tested-tips-for-teaching-tiny-habits-to-your-toddler/>

12 POWER-PAC’s Early Learning Campaign, for instance, started with preschool enrollments experienced by COFI trained parent leaders that then led to interviews with over 5,000 low-income parents (see *Why Johnny Isn’t in Preschool* at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org)).

stakeholders told IAFC interviewers that participating parents identified enrollment barriers not often prioritized or well-understood by service providers. These included:

- Safety concerns, getting young children to and from programs;
- Complicated and sometimes intimidating enrollment processes, including the inappropriate request at one center for immigration status information;
- Program hours unaligned with work schedules, particularly for those with cumbersome commutes or nontraditional shifts;
- Transportation issues for those who lacked access to cars and public transport;
- Cultural barriers, such as families' unfamiliarity with and wariness of letting young children stay in center-based settings;
- Language barriers for Spanish-speaking families and parents with limited education;
- Lack of information about the types and locations of resources; and
- Program practices that shamed, intimidated, discouraged, or patronized parents.

In the COFI-partnered communities, the problem identification process was systematic, beginning with parent leaders reflecting on their own experiences in accessing early learning programs and extending into community surveys and forums to gain the perspectives of hundreds more parents. The parents then brought their concerns and recommendations for change to the early learning collaboration tables.

As one stakeholder told the Illinois Education Research Council (the third party evaluator of the Innovation Zones), “Actually trying to understand what it is that families needed, that was completely different from what we did before. We just kind of gave the information, here it is, and didn’t think about that whole process of why are they still not coming.”<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Similarly, parent voices contributed to finding simple and creative solutions to longstanding early learning community systems problems, practical solutions because they are fully grounded in parents’ authentic experiences.**

Ten years ago, COFI-trained parents developed a set of recommendations for improving access and quality in early learning programs drawing from interviews with over 5,000 low-income families and a review of ‘best practices’ in the field (assisted by a sociologist)<sup>14</sup>. Several of those recommendations, updated by outreach in their own communities, have been implemented or placed on action agendas by community collaborations. Among them:

***Ambassadors to ‘market’ early learning to priority populations*** in ways (and with language) parents can understand and identify with. As one collaboration leader told the Illinois Education Research Council: “A real asset to this initiative is Parent Ambassadors. They’re the ones who provide consistent outreach in the

**Parent voices contributed to finding simple and creative solutions to longstanding early learning community systems problems, practical solutions because they are fully grounded in parents’ authentic experiences.**



13 Bradford R. White, *et al.*, Illinois’ Early Childhood Innovation Zones: A New Model for State Policy?, Illinois Education Research Council, 2017, at <http://ierc.education/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-1-Illinois-Early-Childhood-Innovation-Zones.pdf>

14 *Why Johnny Isn’t in Preschool* and *How We Got Johnny, Jada, and José in Preschool* at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).

Parents advised and partnered on innovations to acquaint priority populations with the preschool experience.



community. They're always speaking with families. They're encouraging them to come and visit the preschools. They're asking questions about why their children are not enrolled in preschool. They're sharing their own testimonies of the benefits of preschool."

***Transportation options to enable children to attend preschool regularly and safely, a top-cited enrollment barrier.*** Greater East St. Louis parents 'won' new stop signs, bus stops, and parking spaces, as well as a preschool bus route reaching 200 families. Aurora parents recently gained bus service for 3,000 preschool and elementary school students. In dense urban neighborhoods, several "walking preschool buses" provide parents to escort young children to and from preschool.

***Parent-friendly and simple(r) application and intake systems*** to address another frequently-cited enrollment barrier: application processes that are complicated, intrusive, and duplicative. In Chicago, parent leaders have provided extensive input into the new online enrollment system, and North Lawndale parents recently provided testimony on how the enrollment 'season' (beginning in the spring) doesn't work for families. In East St. Louis, with significant parent leaders' input, provider partners developed shared enrollment documents, including marketing flyers, an intake application, family interview protocols, a weighted risk/scoring rubric, an early learning program options matrix to support family decision making and a family experience evaluation.

***Parents advised and partnered on innovations to acquaint priority populations with the preschool experience.*** A Preschool in the Park program in Elgin acquainted families with early learning resources in a fun, engaging community space. A Pop-Up Preschool in Cicero as part of a Back-to-School Fair, introduced families to an early education environment to give them comfort with enrolling their children.

#### **4. Parent leaders have helped connect the early childhood collaborations more fully to the communities they serve, raising the importance of early learning in broader community- building and development initiatives, revealing broader community challenges that affect early learning enrollments, and identifying new community allies and resources to support early learning systems improvements.**

Although many ‘professional’ collaboration members are deeply steeped in the communities they serve, still, parents, as community residents, expand and strengthen those community connections. Here are some examples:

- **Parent leaders’ own knowledge of community resources and stakeholders** has informed outreach in places such as WIC offices, community festivals, churches, public housing developments, and laundromats that are not common outreach locations.
- In the COFI-partnered communities, **parents surveyed dozens of community residents** as part of their leadership training: these surveys have found neighborhood violence, anti-immigrant antipathy, pressing economic security problems, and children’s healthy development to be priority concerns of parents.
- These surveys were followed by **parent-led community forums or Town Halls**. Some of the forums focused specifically on the importance of early learning enrollments, while others, in line with survey findings, focused on economic security and neighborhood violence strategies. In Aurora, the Town Hall focus was access to health care among uninsured and/or undocumented families. In Little Village, the focus was neighborhood violence. In Evanston and Elgin, the focus was economic security issues such as consumer debt and Children’s Savings Accounts.
- Another example illustrates how **collaboration parents go beyond the traditional boundaries of the early learning system to strengthen the community’s response to families**. In one community, a respondent reported on an IAFC survey, “Parents were involved in making changes for our local WIC program. Through surveys and one-on-one conversations, families explained why current health department schedules weren’t working for them. From there, a night WIC schedule and Walk In WIC hours were developed.”
- In several communities, **parent leaders’ ability to speak to other parents in their native language was a key asset to better community connections and family outreach** by school districts and other child development and early education stakeholders. In Pilsen-Little Village, for example, parents shared information and resources for other parents in Spanish. Similarly, outreach in the Mexican Consulate generated conversations with 100-200 families each visit. Also, the Elgin/COFI Parent Ambassadors were able to reach otherwise ‘hard-to-reach’ new immigrant families.
- **Parent leaders’ evolving relationships with broader community development collaboration efforts** (Cradle to Career in Evanston; East Side Aligned; Team Englewood; Austin Coming Together) **and local elected officials** in several collaborations helps both to raise the visibility of early learning in the community and also to encourage community residents



**The discovery that early learning program enrollment requirements were complicated and not aligned with state systems led to this problem being addressed at the state level.**

to value early childhood as an important quality of life component in the community along with other issues. The larger lesson emerging from this finding is exciting and significant: Early learning community collaborations—fueled by parent leaders—are finding themselves to be agents in comprehensive community building/development strategies. We all know that successful child outcomes are rooted in adequate housing, clean air and water, fresh food, income earning opportunities for their parents, access to health and dental care, and safe streets, as well as in effective early childhood programs. Not too long ago, early childhood development was not on the radar screens of community organizing and community development agendas. Through the work of some early learning community collaborations, and with huge assists from parent leader-organizers, new synergies are emerging at the local community level to create truly comprehensive supports and strategies to improve child outcomes.

### **5. Lastly, parents involved in early learning community collaborations have become effective systems change advocates ... and effective organizers in building grassroots participation in such efforts.**

Both IAFC and COFI have ensured that their respective public policy advocacy arms keep the early learning community collaborations up to date on challenges and opportunities in state and federal policy in strengthening early learning systems. Both organizations actively encourage the participation of all community collaborations and their entire memberships in systems change efforts and they particularly encourage the participation of parent leaders in systems change advocacy campaigns. COFI has a defined structure—POWER-PAC Illinois—and leadership training process<sup>15</sup> through which to engage parents in policy advocacy.

Over the past two years, parent leaders involved in early learning community collaborations have, through their own advocacy and by drawing in additional grassroots muscle:

#### ***Generated significant changes in local level systems, such as . . .***

- In Greater East St, Louis, new attention to increasing developmental screenings, a unified and simplified enrollment process, and a preschool bus;
- In Englewood, the creation of what has become a statewide ‘early intervention redlining’ campaign, bringing attention to the dearth of developmental screening and early intervention resources in certain high need communities;
- In Aurora, the discovery that early learning program enrollment requirements were complicated and not aligned with state systems, which led to this problem being addressed at the state level, and the gaining of school buses for children who need them;

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15 COFI’s three phase Family Focused Organizing leadership curriculum ends with Policy and Systems Change. That curriculum, as well as a document describing the process and its impact on systems, *Policy and Systems Change: The COFI Way*, are found at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).

- In Evanston, the establishment of a pilot test of Children’s Savings Accounts as a partnership between the Evanston Community Foundation, local donors, and the the local COFI parent group; and
- In Chicago, a unified early learning system with a simplified, common (across programs) and parent-friendly application.

***Joined with IAFC, POWER-PAC Illinois, and other statewide coalitions and organizations***, such as Voices for Illinois Children, the Illinois Asset Building Group, the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, the Responsible Budget Coalition, to engage more parents of young children and more community stakeholders in championing issues that promise to support better life and learning outcomes for at-risk young children, including:

- Successfully helped advocate to restore child care eligibility in Illinois from 50% FPL to 185% FPL, restoring child care assistance to tens of thousands of lower income families;
- Participated in trainings in the advocacy process conducted by the Latino Policy Forum, IAFC, and COFI, culminating in discussions with elected and appointed officials about child developmental issues—such as the importance of home visiting and the impact of the state’s budget impasses on access to such programs — in their communities;
- Advocated for and passed legislation prohibiting expulsions in preschool programs;
- Advanced Children’s Savings Accounts for Illinois; and
- Supported higher minimum wage proposals.

***Proposed, advanced, and won the creation of a new Family Engagement Framework*** for the state’s Early Learning Council and a new statewide Family Advisory Committee to create a locus for parent engagement and leadership across state level departments and councils focused on families with young children.



**“We had our state legislator at our summer picnic!”**

*Parent leader*

## CASE STUDY

### ***Building Mutually Respectful Relationships***

#### **The Role of Parent Leaders in the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning**

Several years ago, members of an early learning community collaboration called Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL) realized there was an important voice missing at the table: parents of small children who are—or are not—participating in early learning programs. Working with Illinois Action for Children, EPEL entered into a partnership with Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) to develop parent leaders and engage them in EPEL. COFI already had an emerging parent leadership group through its partnership with the MIECHV home visiting program, and these parents were raring to go to make EPEL a locus through which to increase enrollments in early learning programs.

These newly-trained Elgin parents believed and observed that racial discrimination in their community contributed to under-resourced programs for Latino and African American families. They also noted, beginning with their own experiences, that information about available resources was not readily available. Said one parent: “I realized that our children are at home not because the parents want them to be at home but because they do not have the information.” And others found the enrollment experience confusing and complicated: “People are frustrated about completing applications because it is a lot of paperwork to fill out”.

To tackle these challenges together, Elgin parent leaders and EPEL first sought to cultivate effective working relationships. Parent leaders felt they had to ‘earn’ the respect of the professionals; professionals had to learn to listen to parents’ voices as ones of ‘real’ expertise. Parents had to ‘win’ meeting times with child care so they could participate. But once aboard, parent leaders began, with full support from EPEL members—and particularly from School District U-46 representatives—to advance tangible improvements in early learning system access: they implemented an Early Learning Ambassadors program to outreach to eligible-but-unenrolled families in English and in Spanish that included a ‘preschool in the parks’ to outreach in the summer months; they conducted a community survey and a Town Hall to reach out to more parents; and they helped create accessible communications about available resources—in English and Spanish—including a single phone number to call.

These parent leaders, who call themselves *Padres con Poder/Parents with Power*, built their credibility by bringing their and other parents’ experiences to inform problem solving, demonstrating their leadership and early learning systems knowledge, and pitching in on outreach. Evidence of the growing mutual respect: school district officials have asked the parents to partner with them in reaching out to Spanish-speaking families and, as one parent noted, “We had our state legislator at our summer picnic!”



## Does parent involvement in community collaborations contribute to better child outcomes?

**T**he work just described has taken place in too short a time frame to answer this most important question definitively. But we have promising glimpses from the evaluation of the Innovation Zone project. The Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) found a 12% increase in enrollments of families from priority populations in programs, and an increase in quality ratings from 34% Gold to 40% Gold quality programs and 4% of programs receiving an Award of Excellence among collaboration members in the Innovation Zones<sup>16</sup>.

While the impact of parents specifically was beyond the scope of their research, data highly correlated with longer term child outcomes suggests parent engagement was one key to the success of these collaborations in improving their systems. For instance,

- Ambassadors reached over 1,500 eligible-but-not enrolled families to encourage referrals to early learning programs of families from priority populations;
- Parent advocates generated hundreds of new developmental screenings of families from priority populations;
- Parent leaders educated thousands of parents and other community residents about the importance of quality early learning program participation; and
- In bringing the perceptions of early learning program experiences of hundreds of parents to collaboration discussions, they contributed to quality improvements that supported enrollment, attendance, and achievement.

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<sup>16</sup> Bradford White, *et al.* Executive Summary of report referenced at Note 8, at <http://ierc.education/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-1-Illinois-EC-IZ-Executive-Summary.pdf>

## CASE STUDY

### *Driving the Action Agenda*

### **The Role of Parent Leadership in the Southside Early Learning Network**

On Chicago's southside, in the communities of Englewood, West Englewood and Greater Grand Crossing, parents, providers and early childhood advocates have successfully partnered since 2012, through the Southside Early Learning Network (SELN), to address issues of under enrollment and access barriers for families needing early childhood programming and to expand home-visiting.

In the course of their ongoing parent-to-parent outreach with SELN to raise awareness about child development and the importance of early learning, parent leaders of the Southside Parents United Roundtable (SPUR) met many families whose children were struggling in preschool and school and who felt uninformed about the IEP process in schools and unaware of Early Intervention (EI) resources that exist to serve their families. SPUR parents conceived of a peer-to-peer approach to this problem and worked with SELN to create a new pilot project aimed at connecting parents with early intervention services, including developmental screenings, and at providing peer support to families as they navigate these programs for their children experiencing developmental delays and other issues.

Parent Peer Advocates were trained and went door-to-door over a 4-month period in the fall of 2016. They provided EI information to over 800 families of young children; talked with pediatricians, child serving organizations, school officials and others about EI access problems; and intensively supported 19 families in gaining access to early intervention screenings and resources. Unfortunately, the group hit a brick wall when the project tried to get screeners to come into the community so they had to transport the families to other communities in order to access screenings. SELN has made EI access an action priority in its community, and SPUR parent leaders are working with other parent leaders and other advocacy groups to press the City and the State to address gaps in EI access.



# Recommendations

Available evidence suggests that, when public and private funders invest in supports and training for early childhood collaborations to engage parents as active change agents, community systems are made stronger and outcomes for children and families improve. Specific recommendations:

## 1. The State of Illinois should:

- continue to support capacity building of early childhood collaborations, especially in actively engaging parents as full partners in improving early care and education systems;
- invest in the engagement and leadership of low-income parents in early childhood collaborations through budgeting for staff support and meeting costs toward this end; and
- continue to support knowledge-building of the effectiveness of community collaborations and parent leadership/engagement in them, via the work of the Early Learning Council and the proposed Family Advisory Committee, and via partnerships with private philanthropies and research institutions.

**2. Private foundations** should provide multi-year and flexible support to continue, expand, and evaluate the impact of early learning community collaborations as a strategy to improve child health, well-being, and learning outcomes.

## 3. Early childhood collaborations should:

- Clearly welcome parent engagement through any and all methods that meet parents where they can engage: hosting meetings at times when parents can attend, ensuring transportation and child care, and using language parents understand, including bilingual (or multilingual) meetings when appropriate;
- In the words of one collaboration member, “Build structures within the collaborative that ensure that parents’ voices are respected and have equal weight with those of ‘professionals’”; and
- As another member advises, “Offer accessible avenues for families to voice their opinions; take action based on those opinions to ensure they feel valued and listened to; empower families to lead the discussions regarding the change they seek to see in our communities.”

## 4. All of us seeking to improve early childhood policy systems

should recognize and leverage the change-making power of parents and community collaborations working together to increase access, quality, and sustainability of funding. Strategies of early childhood collaborations that include engaged parents as active change agents have strong potential to impact system outcomes.

**“Empower families to lead the discussions regarding the change they seek to see in our communities.”**

*Collaboration member*

## CASE STUDY

### ***From Loosely Structured Network to True Collaboration***

#### **The Impact of Parent Leadership in Pilsen-Little Village Early Learning Collaboration**

Beginning in 2013, COFI trained parent leaders in Pilsen/Little Village began attending monthly meetings of the new Innovation Zone (with COFI staff translating) to plan a door-to-door outreach strategy to increase early learning program participation. They participated in reflective continuous learning processes (build-measure-learn), co-created and informed data processes to track the number of families reached.

Within the first month the parent leaders raised concerns that the collaboration needed systems to manage the volume of interested families, so they would not lose the trust from the initial engagement. In three months the number of families interested in early learning enrollments soared. Parent leaders pressed harder for the collaboration to address the need.

Addressing the coordination of referrals provided an opportunity for the group to work together on a deeper level, that of improving community systems. The parents' consistent advocacy served as a call to action for the network to formalize their collaboration.

And the behavior of the partners began to shift. They developed a shared agenda and worked together to connect all of the families to programs. They created MOUs and policies to share referrals, waitlists and vacancy data each week. By the end of the summer, outreached families were successfully connected to early learning programs in Pilsen/Little Village.

Parent involvement not only informed operations and materials, it also held the collaboration accountable to the project goals, which resulted in greater success than if they hadn't been engaged.

## Concluding thought

In the words of a seasoned professional who has championed parent partnerships in early learning community collaborations:

*We all recognize the importance of having parent engagement, not just to get children in programs but after they get in programs, supporting those in their participation in programs. We know that parent engagement has a positive influence on child outcomes; we know that parent engagement in the preschool level is when parents really figure out how to do this, and, if they get positive feedback from it, they will do it throughout their child's school life. And that can only be good. For the child, for the parent, and really for the educational system.*

— Jan Stepto-Millett, Children's Home & Aid Society of IL

# Appendix

## About early learning community collaborations

Illinois Action for Children defines an early learning community collaborative as one that<sup>17</sup>:

- Has an early childhood focus (i.e. Birth to 5 or Birth to 8) or is part of a larger early childhood initiative
- Takes a cross sector approach and includes representatives from across the broad early childhood system
- Serves a defined geographic area (neighborhood, city/town, county, region)

IAFC observes that collaborations are created as a strategy for systems change, not an outcome or goal in itself. Collaboration is a means to create a stronger early care and education system.

Early learning community collaborations in Illinois—and elsewhere—have diverse origins. Each has a purpose and focus specific to its community context. Some are entirely voluntary. Some are funded to focus on a specific program or activity such as universal preschool or increased home visiting or coordinated intake. And some are linked to comprehensive community development initiatives.

They typically are comprised of early care and child development service providers, school district officials, government agency representatives, advocates, community representatives, and, of course, parents.

## Report methodology

Staff of Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) assigned to supporting parent leadership in one or more of its seven project communities were responsible for documenting the process and outcomes. This work includes recording reflections with parent leaders after each collaboration meeting and after each parent meeting. COFI also partnered with the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) of Loyola University, which conducted focus groups with parent leaders in the project communities and interviews with other collaboration stakeholders. Lastly, COFI staff and parent leaders offered reflections and learnings from their work to this report.

Illinois Action for Children fielded two surveys of multiple stakeholders in each Innovation Zone (Race to the Top) collaboration to gain their perspectives on roles and impact of parents. The surveys, which included open ended questions about challenges, opportunities, and results, yielded rich information for collaborations on practical strategies to increase parent participation and its benefits. IAFC staff also committed reflections and learnings from their work to this report.

Lastly, this report references occasionally to a third party evaluation of the Innovation Zones, community collaborations supported through a federal Race to the Top grant, conducted by the Institute for Education Research Council. The full citation: Bradford R. White, *et al.*, Illinois' Early Childhood Innovation Zones: A New Model for State Policy?, Illinois Education Research Council, 2017, at <http://ierc.education/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-1-Illinois-Early-Childhood-Innovation-Zones.pdf>

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<sup>17</sup> Illinois Community Systems Development Plan, 2014, at <http://partnerplanact.org/community-systems-development-the-illinois-plan/>

## **A brief description and history of Illinois Action for Children's work in building early learning community collaboratives**

In fall 2013, the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and Illinois Action for Children began efforts to engage local and statewide leaders to develop a vision and framework for a "local early childhood system" in Illinois. Through a coveted Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, IAFC created its Consortium for Community Systems Development to carry forth this visioning and framework development. The Consortium's charge: to complete a strategic plan for a statewide community systems approach that organized and extended supports for the more than 50 community collaborations around early learning and development.

The Consortium then piloted a training and technical assistance program for community collaborations to build capacity and capability to lead, pursue and realize systems change. Parent engagement is a key component of this work. Collaborations learned the "ABLE Change" Framework for community systems as a pilot effort to develop a statewide approach to assuring, per the State's Vision, that every child in the state enters kindergarten safe, healthy, ready to succeed and eager to learn.

The Early Childhood Innovation Zones, also funded through Race to the Top, served as laboratories for the state. These Innovation Zones sought to build and align community systems to improve outcomes for young children in Illinois to meet the state's vision. Each of 11 Innovation Zones implemented a work plan to support achievement of one or both of the following goals: 1) enrolling and serving more children from Priority Populations<sup>18</sup>; and/or 2) quality improvement in early learning programs.<sup>19</sup>

Collaborations from other networks of community collaborations also partnered with the Consortium for Community Systems Development in creating this strategic plan. The state-funded All Our Kids (AOK) Networks Early Childhood Networks are committed to enhancing a high-quality, well-coordinated, easily accessible system of services and supports that promotes positive growth and development of expecting parents and families with children birth to five. AOK Networks use systems building strategies to improve services, access, equity, capacity, quality, as well as families' satisfaction. Public funding also supports the Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visitation (MIECHV) and Local Interagency Councils, both of which develop or support regional or local early childhood collaborations. Illinois Action for Children, through the Innovation Zones and the Consortium for Community Systems Development, worked closely with all of these.

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18 Context described on page 5 also. These populations included children of teen parents, mothers age 19 or younger, children in families in poverty or deep poverty, children in homeless families or experiencing housing instability/mobility, children/families with child welfare involvement, children with disabilities, limited English speaking household and other families that experience significant barriers based on language, and children of refugees, migrant or seasonal workers.

19 The Innovation Zones were diverse in geography (urban-suburban-downstate), race-ethnicity (predominantly African American, predominantly Latina, predominantly white, and mixed), origins (several were pre-existing, including some that were part of the AOK network and, some, part of a home visiting initiative; others were newly created), and histories of parent engagement (from strong to non-existent). A description of the Innovation Zone sites can be found at Bradford R. White, et al., Illinois' Early Childhood Innovation Zones: A New Model for State Policy?, Illinois Education Research Council, 2017, at <http://ierc.education/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017-1-Illinois-Early-Childhood-Innovation-Zones.pdf>

One additional contribution of Illinois Action for Children to building parent engaged early learning community collaborations: IAFC has long served as a key member of the Illinois Governor’s Early Learning Council, a statewide advisory group comprised of advocates, providers, and elected and appointed officials created by law to “coordinate existing programs and services for children from birth to 5 years of age in order to better meet the early learning needs of children and their families toward the goal of fulfilling the vision of a statewide, high-quality, accessible, and comprehensive early learning system to benefit all young children whose parents choose it.” Over the past several years, IAFC has chaired and staffed the Council’s All Families Served Subcommittee. This work identified priority underserved populations of children and families and documented access and quality barriers from the perspectives of parents, laying the groundwork for the development of parent leadership in community collaborations ... and, more recently, in the Early Learning Council itself.

Toward the end of the Innovation Zone grant, parent leaders from the COFI-supported Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew—Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC Illinois) from across multiple community collaborations came up with the goal of creating a Family Advisory Council, a formal voice for parents within the Office of Early Childhood Development. To vet this idea thoroughly, the Early Learning Council created a Family Engagement Subcommittee, which Illinois Action for Children chaired and staffed. This past spring, the Family Advisory Council became a reality.

### **And a brief description and history of Community Organizing and Family Issues work in building parent engagement in early learning systems change**

Founded in 1995, Community Organizing and Family Issues exists to develop the public leadership capacities of low-income parents of color. COFI’s founding assumptions, borne out in 22 years of actual experience, are that a) low-income parents of color can become effective civic leaders, if given the opportunities, and b) in their leadership, they will prioritize issues, actions, and policies that will improve the lives of their children.

Through its unique leadership development model called *Family Focused Organizing*<sup>20</sup>, over 4,000 low-income parents are today engaged in their children’s schools and preschools, working in small teams to improve their local communities, and coming together across communities to win systems changes of benefit to low-income children and families. COFI-trained parent leaders have won millions of dollars in new after-school programs, play-lots, and safety improvements in over two dozen local communities (most of them on the West and South sides of Chicago), reinstated recess for 266,000 Chicago elementary school children, replaced ‘zero tolerance’ school discipline policy with ‘restorative justice’ to shut down the ‘school to prison pipeline’ for low-income children of color, and significantly increased enrollments in quality early learning programs.

Indeed, increasing the numbers of eligible but unenrolled low-income children in quality early learning programs has long been a priority of the organization of

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20 The three-phase training model and its manuals are accessed at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).

COFI-trained parent leaders called POWER-PAC Illinois. Ten years ago, parent leaders surveyed over 5,000 families with eligible but unenrolled young children, identifying enrollment barriers from parents' perspectives, and, from those data, developing a set of systems recommendations for increasing access<sup>21</sup>. Testing out some of those recommendations—parent-to-parent outreach and education, the creation of the Englewood community early learning collaboration with parents in the lead from the outset, streamlined preschool enrollment processes, transportation assistance, program environments welcoming of parents—and advocating for their adaption systems wide has been the focus of POWER-PAC's Early Learning Campaign<sup>22</sup>.

COFI was asked by the Governor's Office of Early Childhood to train the MIECHV, some AOK, and the "Hard-to-Reach" pilot collaborations in its model of parent engagement in 2011, 2012 and 2013 and soon after that, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's path-breaking Family Engagement Initiative afforded COFI the opportunity to build on this work, expand more deeply into downstate communities, create new seats at early learning decision-making tables for parent leadership, and, in so doing, demonstrate to the early learning policymaking field that parent leadership is vital to making systems truly 'work' for low-income children and their families.

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21 *Why Johnny Isn't in Preschool* at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).

22 *How We Got Johnny, Jada, and José in Preschool* at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org)





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