

The COFI Way to policy and systems change:

Policymaker Interviews

Interviews with prominent decision makers who have worked closely with COFI parent leaders help reveal and illustrate the COFI way of parent-led policy change. COFI trains and supports parents to be effective, high-impact, and centrally involved in policy and systems change that makes a difference for their children and families.

COFI's groundbreaking model of parents building authentic relationships with decision makers has resulted in school discipline policies that help break the school-to-prison pipeline; restoring recess for all children in Chicago public schools; and new and effective programs to make sure all children have access to quality early learning.



José Alvarez

Former External Affairs Officer, Chicago Public Schools (CPS)
Chief of Staff, Washington, D.C. Superintendent of Education

“Moving the policy needle from good to great”

As an administrator for Chicago Public Schools, Jose Alvarez worked with local school councils and community based organizations across the city to communicate educational programs, initiatives and address constituent issues. With the relationships established between COFI, POWER-PAC and the district, if a problem did arise, all the necessary parties could meet to resolve it. Maintaining a good institutional and constituent relationship was most important to the district, COFI and POWER-PAC.

Parent involvement is critical for district leaders seeking to make changes on behalf of Chicago's students, parents, and stakeholders. The district's work with COFI's parent leaders was an important part of that process.

Early in my career at Chicago Public Schools (CPS), I first came into contact with COFI parents through the parent training academy and also through our work with LSCs. During my regular communication and experiences with COFI and POWER-PAC, I saw a unique parent group that is passionately dedicated to improving our school system for their children and their communities.

With a clear agenda and collaborative nature, I appreciated their willingness to not only hear and discuss matters that may not have been ideal but to help the district work towards a solution which met everyone's needs.

I still remember some of the parents who were always at table doing their part: Felipa Mena, Rosalva Nava, Nelly Torres, and Lynn Morton, just to name a few. These were zealous change agents who left an indelible mark in my memory and I fondly appreciated their honest feedback.

I recall when COFI made their pitch to School Board President Michael Scott about restorative justice. Scott believed in community and parent engagement. He made certain that time was set aside to hear directly from CPS' parents and that their comments were heard through various channels. COFI parent leaders were part of the district's policy change decision process.

A prime example of parent engagement was the public comments we received on the annual review of the Uniform Discipline Code. COFI participated in the process and lobbied for restorative justice to replace zero tolerance. When the district's law department issued a draft of the new policy, COFI provided substantial feedback on the draft and helped shape the final policy.

Parents can serve as an influential agent in policy change. Between parents and students, the answers are there to help shape policy and provide guidance on effective implementation. The room for error diminishes much more when you increase parent involvement. That can be the difference sometimes between having a good policy and a great policy.

Ultimately, my career began with parent training and education; I know and understand the importance of engaging parents. My experiences with COFI confirmed my belief that parents are the most important constituency, and COFI certainly empowers parents to be engaged in the district.



Carlos Azcoitia

Distinguished Professor of Practice, National Louis University
Member, Chicago Board of Education

“Developing local assets into ambassadors”

Carlos Azcoitia truly gets it. His two turns as principal along with experiences as a district official overseeing several units including community schools and parent engagement, have embedded deep values around parent empowerment. His commitment extended beyond his professional roles as educator and administrator and he was a founding member of COFI’s board of directors. Notable in COFI’s model, he says, are the progressive levels of leadership training that prepare parents to move from local organizing projects and into the policymaking arena for delivering outcomes.

So right from the beginning, when I first became principal of Spry Community School in 1990, and then again in 2003, I always had a big connection to community organizing to provide increased opportunities for students and families. We organized for a public library, playlot, community safety, home gatherings, a health facility and many targeted partnerships for neighborhood improvements. That took some time, organizing the community, getting the data, testifying before the commissioners, working with elected officials and planning multiple strategies to getting things done.

In 1995, I was hired to work out of Central Office, and one of the offices that reported to me was Community Schools and Family Engagement. Paul Vallas was CEO at the time and it continued with Arne Duncan. We always met with community-based organizations as a result of this unit reporting to me. And that’s where the partnership was really established. I invited COFI to join one of the district’s school and parent engagement groups, like an advisory board.

What stood out to me was COFI’s level of commitment to providing meaningful parent engagement to the schools in terms of including parents as partners in the education of their children, and including the family, as the best resource for student success. Based on their input at advisory group meetings, our office would follow up with them, their principals, their schools, sometimes taking a look at funding. That advisory board was oriented around making things happen.

We met once a month. Parents shared with us their stories about transformation with their families, with their children’s education, with their engagement in the schools. If parents had issues about their schools, they would rely on my office to follow up. COFI was working with schools in West Town and on the West Side.

I remember a number of successes. Keeping schools open longer and Saturday parent meetings where members of our office and myself would attend. Recess is a more recent success. COFI has been working on that for a long time. And it was successful because they started early.

Parents have to be included as part of the agenda. They have to have a voice. This is about a level of self determination, autonomy and self help along with an integrated approach to student success. How can you do that unless parents are at the table? The people in community—you build on those assets. That’s what COFI is about. You develop your assets and they become your ambassadors. That’s what distinguishes COFI from other places.

COFI was part of the conversation all the time. They were part of the solutions. District leaders paid attention and listened to them. COFI parents came up with action plans to address some of the issues confronting their schools and their communities.

I remember when they brought concerns to my office about challenges around developing working relationships with some principals, principals who considered them to be rabble rousers or dissidents. But remember, I come from a principal's perspective. So, I value parent input. I understand that parents play a key role in the transformation of schools. The integration of school, family and community is critical for student success.

To change something, parents need to be organized with data first. That's where organizations like COFI play a leadership role. You also want to do a collaborative approach. If you want to change and transform, you want to present what the problem is and then you want to present viable solutions. COFI presented that whole approach in a meaningful way.

What's also unique to COFI is the parent development piece, the leadership development and progression of parents. They wanted to have good relationships with schools and with the system to get things done. COFI has an organized process for parents to get training and development. There were graduation ceremonies. It was a formative process that ended up with some kind of connection to the agenda that they brought to the table.

COFI's approach with parent leaders has led to positive change. Many groups are always critical of everything, and they don't necessarily connect to something positive. On the other hand, COFI was trying to bring meaningful change by working with the system, and also being a community-based organization.

Those of us who connect to this kind of work firmly believe that the greatest influence on the child is the family. And the greatest influence on the family is the community. Unless you work with those three entities in a very close way, no change is going to occur. And I think COFI brings that. In most cases, I recall they had a good working relationship with principals. Principals saw their advantage in connecting to them as a leadership empowerment piece.

At principals' meetings, I would say, 'You have to see this role as an empowerment tool by connecting to parents, particularly if you're looking to impact student achievement. You are not going to be able to sustain it and to do it in a good way, unless you have parents as your allies.'



James Bebley
CPS General Counsel

COFI became "a trusted ally."

When parents and grassroots groups meet with school district administrators, the encounter can be antagonistic. After all, whatever motivated them to step up and be heard is likely something that they are upset about. But over time, such relationships can change, if both parties stick it out and continue working together. During the time James Bebley spent with community leaders reviewing and revising the district's Uniform Discipline Code, he came to trust and respect POWER-PAC parents.

I met COFI parent leaders in the spring of 2004. I had been sent by the CPS CEO to work with community groups that wanted to weigh in on the review and revisions of the district's student discipline policy. Most of them supported replacing zero tolerance disciplinary policy with restorative justice.

At first, those forum committee meetings—which were convened by Juvenile Court Judge Sophia Hall—were pretty contentious. CPS was walking into an environment where people didn't trust the district and in some cases, didn't have any experience with CPS. About half of the people there had had negative experiences with CPS. The whole dynamic was initially shaped by those with negative experiences.

I was there to take the heat. I was there to help steer the folks in the room toward how they could affect change and be part of the process.

But as the process continued over 15 or 16 months, the relationship between CPS and some of those organizations changed. They became more trusting. By the time we drafted revisions to the policy—and decided to rename it the Student Code of Conduct—COFI had become a trusted ally.

COFI already had credibility with a key CPS administrator who said, ‘This is a good group. These are good people.’ Aside from that, these are real people. A lot of people come to the board with agendas. They don’t have children or if they do, those children aren’t students in the system.

I arranged the first meeting between Lynn Morton and other POWER-PAC leaders and Board President Michael Scott. I also connected them with Mary Richardson-Lowry, who was appointed to chair the board after Scott died.

Mike Scott and Mary Lowry were both interested in parents. Scott wanted to hear from parents at board meetings. He preferred hearing what parents had to say over hearing from advocates. He was especially impressed with the work COFI and POWER-PAC had done to start a Peace Center at Brunson Elementary and run it with parent volunteers. He liked that. He liked the restorative justice philosophy.

COFI was part of a group that brought in people from Minnesota who were effective with restorative justice practices in schools. COFI also told us about some discipline issues with children who had disabilities that could be better handled with restorative justice. At first, follow up on this issue fell through the cracks, but then a small amount of money was sent to some schools to work on this.

When I have an issue with COFI, I pick up the phone and call them. I trust that the conversation will be confidential.

There are a number of reasons why I’m comfortable and trusting of COFI. I can reach out to Lynn or Ellen Schumer and use them as resources. They have a collaborative approach and they tell you what they are doing. I can follow-up with school principals and hear feedback on what COFI is doing. They have institutional integrity and list goals on their website.

Parent involvement is critical to the school district. It’s important that they speak up in their own voice. Too often, I see advocates purporting to speak for parents rather than parents speaking for themselves. Organizing tactics work against advocates.

But COFI’s approach is to say, ‘Hey, there’s a problem. Let’s figure out how to solve it.’ And their parent leaders are the ones who give the perspective. As the Board’s legal counsel, I draft work from the district’s perspective. But I also have to consider what the parent and community perspectives are. I can get that from real parents who will say to me, ‘This is what’s going on with my kid.’



Barbara Bowman
Retired CPS Chief Early Learning Officer

“These people had done their homework.”

As the leader of early education programs at Chicago Public Schools, Barbara Bowman was invited to hear POWER-PAC present the findings of its door-to-door survey of parents in several low-income communities where preschool programs were under-enrolled. At the meeting, Bowman learned that the lack of transportation was among the reasons why children weren’t showing up. An innovative solution—walking school buses—was among the recommendations and a unique collaboration was born. However, the fledgling effort came with challenges of its own.

I got involved with COFI because I went to a meeting where they were talking about a report they put out. The report said that there were lots of children who were eligible for state pre-K and Head Start that were not enrolled, particularly in Englewood and Woodlawn and Grand Boulevard. I said, ‘You all could help us.’ And they agreed they

could help find the children and walk them to school and CPS could pay to have them walked in. I had for a long time been wondering about the walking school bus idea.

We worked with COFI for three years. They identified the families; they provided parents to walk children to preschool. But we were not able to find a way to identify and target children who were really at risk and needed the walking school bus. If we had, we probably would have continued to fund it. But the children in the program for the first two years were not particularly needy.

Another challenge in working with COFI was that some of their door to door surveying was done anonymously and we didn't have the names of families who were not being served. Also, COFI draws on volunteers more heavily in some communities than others, and that did not always coincide with where the greatest need was.

When families come to enroll their children in pre-K, we have an assessment that we use to determine risk factors. But for privacy reasons, we couldn't then share that information with COFI. So they had to identify the people who had disabilities or who had a new baby or something like that.

I met with POWER-PAC mothers who were involved in making the decisions as well as COFI staff who were organized and knew how to run a business. The mothers were obviously learning from going out and talking to people and being involved. They seemed very sure of themselves. That was a useful experience. It reminded me of the early days of Head Start, where community action programs really empowered mothers to get out in the community and demand things and organize their response.

The first POWER-PAC meeting I went to was very formal—Roberts Rules of Order, people making motions. It did give you a sense of comfort that this wasn't a fly-by-night group and that they were trying to get things done. I felt very comfortable that these people had done their homework. This was a well-organized group that had indigenous leadership, and people from the outside who were working with them, facilitating resources for them.

The whole point is the community presumably knows more about where the holes are in the system than people who just come in for the day. We know a lot, but we don't know everything.

My concern was whether this was an employment program or a community change program. If it's a community change program, you expect people to volunteer. It turned out to be a more professional, more distant kind of service. I'm not being critical, but it's not a good plan to help people to find jobs and to try to influence the institutional power structure to provide those jobs. It was not like we were throwing money out the window. It wasn't as worthwhile as I would have wanted it to be, but it was certainly worthwhile. But it wasn't volunteer mothers going out, bringing in the children of their neighbors who they thought needed to go to school and their neighbor couldn't get the child to school. I guess I started off thinking that's what it was going to be, so when it turned out to be expensive and more about jobs, it became less desirable.

Part of what's wrong in communities is that everybody is so depressed; it's hard to find somebody that's still got enough gumption and energy to want to do something like this.

I've been doing this sort of thing for a long time. Even when everybody wants the same thing, there can be a discrepancy between what you put your money on. I should know that, but that's what came through clearly from my interaction with COFI.

COFI's parent leaders were very sincere. They were very honest. They were very direct about what they wanted to accomplish, but not explicit about the employment component of it. I think that's what accounts for the distancing and the fact that we couldn't get people from the community's school to be involved in it.



Tawa Jogunosimi

Former Director of Education Policy and Partnerships, Office of the Mayor, Chicago

“Parent leaders bring a reality check to the policy table.”

Tawa Jogunosimi has helped CPS, City Colleges of Chicago and City Hall forge meaningful strategic partnerships with community organizations. COFI is one of the groups that she has been involved with at all three.

Just after Arne Duncan was appointed CEO in the summer of 2001, I landed a job in the strategic planning office, working for one of my former professors from graduate school. I worked for her for about a year and a half. Then Arne created an office of after school and community school programs, and I managed the community schools initiative in that office for four and a half years. Then I left for City Hall to work as Mayor Daley’s education assistant for three and a half years.

Mayor Emanuel’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Education brought me back to City Hall to focus on early college—things that fall into the alignment between K-12 and post-secondary options, college or career.

When I managed the CPS community schools, parent engagement was a key component of the strategy. Each community school program had a lead nonprofit partner. Some of them had specific models for parent and family engagement and some were less focused on it. COFI was hired to work with the lead nonprofits that needed technical assistance in that space.

Before coming back to City Hall, I managed strategic partnerships for City Colleges of Chicago. When I was there, COFI joined something called the Equal Voices Coalition, which was this coalition of community-based organizations that weighed in on different issues. COFI was involved with the jobs and immigration committee. COFI was at a meeting that the City Colleges Chancellor attended and the parent leaders shared their agenda. The chancellor invited them to become a part of the re-invention process.

Equal Voices Coalition wanted to insure that there was a community voice in the re-invention process. They felt like our community external advisory council really wasn’t community in nature. With a few exceptions, they felt like our community council was populated by people from grasstops rather than grassroots. I guess that was part of their agenda, to ask for a seat at the table. At the meeting, the Chancellor offered them a seat at the table, even though it didn’t yet exist in the structure we were operating in. Key external organizations sat on advisory councils. The heavy lifting was done by full-time employees on task forces. So we found a middle ground between task force membership and advisory council, because they wanted to roll up their sleeves and get in there. We ended up creating a community collaborator process. COFI had a parent on the small working group that was focused on student support.

I appreciated POWER-PAC leader Rosazlia Grillier. She always listened to both the constraints of a bureaucracy such as City Colleges, and what we were trying to accomplish. Rosazlia always seemed to seek a balanced approach to problem-solving, which I appreciated.

At City Colleges, we were known for these 25-page PowerPoint presentations. We were pointing at data. Rosalia was always the person who would distill it down to how it was going to help parents. The value that she brought was reminding us what all the re-invention was really about. If we produce all these reports and make all these recommendations and nobody understands what we’re talking about, or it’s not really relevant for their daily life, then we haven’t really done anything.

Policymakers and people who have the opportunity to make recommendations are going to affect large numbers of people. There’s often a tendency to make decisions based on what they think will be good for them. But there’s this other side, where people who would be affected might say, ‘I don’t really think that’s going to impact my life that much’ or ‘That seems like a great idea, but it doesn’t change my day-to-day.’ That is the value that Rosazlia brought to those conversations.

For example, the small working group on student supports aligned with a task force focused on the same thing. One of the things that they have really been focused on is creating a system for sharing data between colleges to equip advisors with what they need to help students. Advisors were stretched thin. Before re-invention began, there was, on average, one advisor for every 925 students. The new leadership cut that ratio in half, but it was still high. We were looking for what City Colleges of Chicago Chancellor Cheryl Hyman often called high tech, high touch solutions. We were looking at data systems that would cut down the amount of time advisors spent on mundane, bureaucratic tasks so they would have more time to work with students. So we were focused on making our employees lives more efficient.

But Rosazlia wanted to address how long students might have to wait before getting to talk to an advisor or what resources were available to a single parent who needed to complete just a couple classes to graduate but struggled with childcare issues. Rosazlia helped the City Colleges team keep the challenges of average students at the forefront and kept us focused on practical solutions.

That helped me in my role at City Colleges. There was a feedback loop. While there were some real difficult meetings and some hard conversations, there was value and something tangible that came out of each one of those small working groups.

Tom Layman

Vice President, Program Development
Illinois Action for Children

“Time for a cooperative organizing model”

Tom Layman has a long history in organizing in Chicago. He knows the real thing when he sees it. When he first heard about COFI’s family-focused approach, he wasn’t so sure, though. It was radically different from the traditional model he was familiar with for cultivating grassroots leaders and making change happen. But after working with COFI and POWER-PAC parents to find and talk to hard-to-reach families for early learning programs, Tom began to fully appreciate the value this these uniquely trained mothers and grandmothers brought to the table.

I first came into contact with Ellen when I was still director at North Avenue Day Nursery in the mid-90s. She was doing work in Logan Square and got in touch with me about an organizing model she was developing. I discussed it with her.

Then sometime after that, I left North Avenue Day Nursery and became executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children. I was there for about eight years and while I was there, I reached out to COFI for the Chicago Early Learning and Literacy Project. It was funded by the Department of Education under the Early Learning Opportunity Act. We applied to work in four communities. We put together a program that was basically aimed at bringing early literacy throughout the community; not just in preschool programs, but parks, libraries, medical clinics—the whole thing. It was at a time when CPS was also in an expansive mode.

So there we were in four communities, and we needed to know more about the communities and where the children were. So COFI was charged with doing a round of door-to-door surveys.

That’s how I got to know COFI again. I found them really useful. They had good contacts and relationships in communities. I’ve been involved with community organizing forever and what I saw was real community organizing.

Then I came to Illinois Action for Children where one of our programs, Community Connections, had urban and suburban sites. Community Connections is the program where we work with home-based childcare providers and connect them to center-based classroom experiences for their preschool kids.

At the time, I was new. It was 2006 or so. In the city, we had four Community Connections sites. For the most part, those programs were under-enrolled, especially Logan Square/ Humboldt Park in the Latino neighborhoods, and I wanted to know why. We had staff people who were out trying to get enrollment up. But they weren't getting anywhere. I was wondering whether there were enough children there to fill these places. So we decided to do a door-to-door survey with COFI. I called Ellen. I knew they had some people on the ground who could inform us.

COFI actually introduced us to the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, which did the door-to-door in Logan Square. And then COFI people did the survey in Austin, West Town, and Englewood.

COFI parents have supported Illinois Action for Children's policy initiatives, as well. These are statewide policy initiatives that are largely based on the state budget. I wouldn't say that we developed the agendas with them, but they knew about it and were involved. They've brought families to our lobby day in Springfield and come along when we visit legislators and things like that.

Then there is the Hard-to-Reach Families Committee of the Early Learning Council. There we really have worked with them on policy. Looking to figure out who are the families left out of preschool programs and what can we do about that.

Illinois Action for Children supports COFI's policy campaigns, too. Like their efforts to have recess in schools. We support that, but I can't say we're a major player.

The Hard-to-Reach Families work is interesting, though, because COFI put out a report, "Why isn't Johnnie in Preschool" that drew from the door-to-door surveys. When parents were doing those surveys, they asked me to meet with POWER-PAC to talk about the possibility of prioritizing early education in their work. So I met with them and so did [Illinois Action for Children President and CEO] Maria Whelan. After those meetings, POWER-PAC decided to prioritize early education.

I like the POWER-PAC group. It brings me back to my days of organizing. They are alert people, many of them are grandmas.

Around the same time, the city's Department of Family Support Services was having enrollment problems at some of its Head Start sites, the same way I was. They knew that COFI was doing door-to-door stuff. So they wisely got together with COFI and developed the Head Start Ambassador program, where their COFI people would go door-to-door and recruit. I'm pretty sure what they do is have Head Start ambassadors team up with somebody from the site that's seeking children and they go out together. They have successfully filled every program that they've worked on.

Then there's our contract with the Chicago Housing Authority to do enhanced childcare referrals for CHA residents. Same situation—you don't just put out a phone number and people call; you have to go tell them what's going on. There was door-to-door work associated with that. So we had COFI helping us locate where they had people who could go door-to-door, and they had people in Cabrini and a few in Altgeld. They also had some people in West Haven, which is the old Henry Horner. We may have had another one or two developments. Our charge was to serve CHA residents.

So we got the CHA project started up and that actually turned out to be a nice synergy between us and what COFI could do for us and also the Head Start Ambassadors, because they were interested in those same communities.

A short time later, they expanded our contract to do some parenting training with CHA residents. So we went to COFI and asked if any of the residents would be good parent trainers. We ended up hiring two residents—one from Cabrini and one from Altgeld—who were COFI people, and they worked with us through the end of that contract.

Now we're up to the present. We have a new Department of Family and Neighborhood Partnerships. We're expanding our programming with families and working directly with parents. We have sent one of our staff people from that new department to COFI training to learn about their family-focused organizing model. And now, our staff is using it, along with a lot of materials from the National Black Child Development Institute.

COFI and POWER-PAC are authentic. Their organizing approach really does capture the concerns of the people in the communities. It's important to have the real voice of the community because if you're in an agency and not listening to the community, you're sometimes going to be wrong.

I'll give an example. When Paul Vallas was CEO of Chicago Public Schools, he started the program called Parents as Teachers First. In early learning circles, we all knew Parents as Teachers, which is a well-respected home visiting program with a curriculum. Paul thought that would be a good way to reach families that were not enrolled in preschool. It was too expensive to fully implement, though, so CPS developed their own version, Parents as Teachers First.

For a long time, I felt that it wasn't a real program. Then I came in contact with the COFI grandmas, many of whom worked for that program, going around to homes and reading to kids. I heard about what they did and it rang a bell with me. I was impressed with them and impressed that they were doing more than reading to kids. They were really changing the way the parents valued early education, which will have more to do with kids' success than just reading to them.

Listening to the community doesn't always mean action can be taken, though. The POWER-PAC moms, noting the eligibility obstacles that families face, recommended that the process for enrolling children in childcare and preschool programs should be similar to public school enrollment. You just go and sign up without all the checking of eligibility. But that's one suggestion that just can't be done at this time. Everyone would be eligible and it would cost too much.

When I spoke to Ellen many years ago about the model for family-focused organizing, I was a bit skeptical. I came up through Alinsky organizing. Simplify and personalize. That's what I thought organizing was. COFI's approach was to combine organizing with parent training, and to organize in conjunction with the schools, which could also be the target of parents' organizing efforts. It didn't seem like it was going to work.

But since then, the world has changed. The more confrontational organizing, the older style doesn't achieve as much it did then. The press got tired of it. People got tired of it. The time is right for a different model that is cooperative.

Looking at COFI's efforts with hard-to-reach families, their work has practical value. Before Head Start Ambassadors, the City of Chicago was saying that Austin was saturated with programs. 'We don't need programs in Austin.' The fact that COFI is able to go out there and find the kids and get them into programs really changes that view of where programs are needed. So COFI is contributing to what we, as an organization, are very interested in: Focusing on high-need communities where families are left out.

As the city is now rebidding of all of their Head Start and preschool programs, COFI has helped raise awareness of the need to pay special attention to communities of concentrated need. If programs were underenrolled, it wasn't necessarily because there was no need. It was more likely because programs need to reach out to families in different ways. COFI and POWER-PAC basically proved that the kids were there.

Another strength for POWER-PAC parents is that they have each other. The group itself is important. They develop an approach and a point of view collectively that's informed by all of them. And then there's the staff and support they get from COFI.

It sure helps to have those networks of families that you can tap into. We got a phone call from a production company that was doing a report on early learning for the PBS NewsHour. We put some statistics together that showed the city's 12 highest-need communities and how many children were in preschool and how many were in home based childcare and how many didn't have access to preschool or childcare. They were really interested in talking to someone in that last hard-to-reach group. They were going to be in Chicago in a few days, and as it happened, they arrived just in time for a blizzard.

So I called COFI. Ellen called her staff and we found some families in Cabrini through a group of COFI-trained parent leaders. When there are parents on the ground who know each other, trust each other, then they will trust us if one of the parents brings us in.

I've always valued the judgment and the voice of real families in communities. It helps me see the limits to our current drive to professionalize and institutionalize. We make families into clients instead of partners.

Organizing is not as authentic when it looks like you're paid to promote a certain point of view. Or when parents are recruited to advocate for a program that they're using. There's nothing wrong with that. But that's not what COFI's doing. They're starting in a much more on-the-ground place. Like what's happening in your life and your community and what are the issues.

Maria and I have a sense of the knowledge and strength of parents in the communities. It's foolish to propose services and agendas that don't build on those strengths.



Illinois State Senator Kimberly Lightford

Assistant Majority Leader, Illinois General Assembly

“Vital role model for education advocacy”

State Senator Kimberly Lightford worked with COFI-trained parent leaders to pass a legislative resolution creating the Recess in Schools Task Force. She became a leading advocate for Recess for All! legislation in the Illinois State Legislature.

During my 14 years on the Senate Education Committee I have met many people and interacted with many parent groups who want to make a difference in Illinois' public education system. One of those groups is COFI. The group has played a vital role in education advocacy for many years.

One of the issues I have worked with COFI on is Recess for All legislation. We have been trying to implement recess in Chicago Public Schools and all schools throughout the state. We started the process by trying to convince former School Board Chairman Rufus Williams and former CPS CEO Arnie Duncan that all the schools should have recess. Though they agreed that it was a good concept, they focused on talking to individual principals about recess instead of pushing a district-wide policy. This process took two or three years, but we made some significant progress. Then, President Obama tapped Duncan to become Secretary of Education, and we found ourselves back at square one because we had lost a key ally.

After our negotiations with CPS were reset, I suggested that we switch gears. I passed legislation in the General Assembly that created the Illinois Recess for All Task Force. I brought in COFI parents because I thought their voices needed to be heard beyond the public comments portion of CPS Board meetings. COFI came and testified in favor of the task force, bringing students who helped them lobby legislators on the Senate Education Committee and in the House.

The task force was a great success. COFI helped us come up with some great ideas. After the committee submitted its report, I drafted new legislation creating mandatory recess. However, though it passed the Senate, it stalled in the House. I have not let the issue die though—it is still on my radar. Now that I have passed a law requiring kids to start school by age 6, I think it might be time to revisit recess for all.

Another issue I have worked with COFI on is zero tolerance policies. The idea of zero tolerance emerged after the tragedy in Columbine. Like in many cases, people overreacted to a very real tragedy. They thought that kicking kids out of school who exhibit violent tendencies would help keep our kids safe. But the policy had some unintended consequences. We found that African-American, minority and low income students were affected by zero tolerance more than children from other communities. It resulted in more African-American kids being expelled than seemed right or fair.

COFI helped me ask the question “Why do we have such a high percentage of African-Americans being expelled, especially boys?” That led me to zero tolerance policies, which in turn made me start to ask questions about why kids

were coming to school with weapons. I discovered that bullying was the root cause of many of these problems, and I started taking legislative action to make things better for our kids.

Outside of legislative issues, I have seen COFI play a very effective role in our schools because COFI parents are on the ground. They are part of day-to-day activities, extending themselves from parenting to volunteering at schools. Parent involvement is such an important part of the education process. COFI parents will walk kids to school and involve themselves in their children's education at school. They know the environment. They know the kids. They know the parents. You can respect their judgment and believe what they say. They are willing to work in the trenches, not just show up for photo-ops.

Parent involvement is crucial. It helps kids succeed. It helps teachers succeed. It helps our schools succeed.

When you look at Chicago schools, there are amazing disparities. CPS has four or five schools of the top 20 high schools in Illinois, but at the other end, CPS has many of the bottom 100 schools. There are not many schools in-between.

COFI parents, especially those on the West Side, recognize that CPS has issues with resource distribution. They ask important questions about why some schools are flourishing, while other are struggling and why there are new turnaround schools and charter schools while neighborhood schools are closing.

I share COFI parents' passion for trying to do what is best for their children. I appreciate their involvement in the policymaking process and their understanding of community needs.

I also really appreciate that COFI parents understand that crafting good policy can take years. When they see an issue they believe the state or city needs to address, they stick with it and see it through to the end. COFI leaders are committed, dedicated and steadfast.

Another one of COFI's advantages is that it is not a huge organization. It is a small parent group with consistent leaders. Working on the issues is so much easier when you get the chance to build real relationships with people, when you see them regularly, communicate with them regularly, and learn their stances on the issues.

I value the fact that COFI parents can speak to the day-to-day challenges CPS students face and that they know the concerns of other parents in their communities. They let me know that I have a whole group of parents or a whole school community on my side. A lot of parents become education reform advocates when their kids are in school, but let things slide once they graduate. I respect COFI parents because they care about our children and our community regardless of whether or not their kids are still in school.

More than anything, COFI parents have helped me stand my ground and delve deeper into the issues facing our schools. COFI has not forgotten about recess for all kids. They are already asking about next steps. COFI did not stop at pointing out the problems with zero tolerance policies. Its members helped me discover that bullying is really at the root cause of a lot of behavior problems in our schools.

I also appreciate that COFI parents are willing to play an active role in the legislative process. They have come to the education committee ready to answer questions about how legislation will affect the kids in Chicago Public Schools. They were prepared and comfortable and ready to answer any questions that were thrown their way. More than that, COFI parents can provide institutional knowledge about some important topics because they have been following them for so long.

I do not have to reach out to COFI because COFI reaches out to me. COFI parents are persistent. They are not shy. I see COFI parents at all kinds of education meetings.

What COFI parent leaders do is important. I want to thank the mothers, fathers and concerned members of the community who have stepped up to fight for our children's future. Without their grassroots influence, our kids would not be as well off as they are today.



Ernesto Matias

Former Principal, Wells High School

“Parents bring a sense of urgency.”

When her son, a graduate of Wells High School, was shot and killed, Felipa Mena decided to direct her advocacy efforts toward preventing more violence. At a time when student conflict at Wells had careened out of control and more than half of the students transferred out to other schools, Felipa went to Principal Ernesto Matias to suggest that he consider using Peace Circles as an alternative to suspensions. He agreed and the Peace Center’s work has been growing at Wells High School ever since.

Thinking about Felipa’s idea, I said to myself, ‘We can suspend kids—and we do—but are we really equipping them to make good decisions out there? We don’t. The Peace Circles run by COFI parents provide students with tools to de-escalate potentially violent conflict. They also offer rehabilitative consequences that involve reflecting on what was done wrong and how to make up for it. That’s a different approach.

Changing the climate at Wells to safety and security was the priority. The big question is how do you move kids from hopelessness to hope? A lot of what we see is not kid created. But you label kids at-risk, and then expect them to behave when they come to school. And the backdrop to their life has been people who let them down. The result? Hurt kids hurting other kids. So the challenge was getting our kids to reflect so they actually think that they are players in their lives instead of bystanders. In a culture of poverty, we let things happen to us. We’ll say it’s destiny rather than making decisions that might propel us to a different counter narrative.

When I came here in 2008, the kids thought discipline was discipline and that’s it. We’re trying to empower our kids so they know they have a choice about how to react to negative situations. Just because someone mean mugs you doesn’t mean you give them a fist to the face. That’s where Peace Circles come in, helping our kids reflect on their actions and also realize that they can decide how to respond to those stressful situations.

It didn’t take much to sell me on the Peace Center idea. Felipa mentioned similar efforts in Austin that I was familiar with. Anything that helps our kids that’s not a duplicate of something we’re already doing was worth investigating. We had a meeting and I said, ‘Yeah, let’s get it going. What do you need?’ We identified a room for them to hold the circles and that was it. I’m not much on red tape.

That’s how it started. Now we’ve got Peace Circles two days a week—Tuesdays and Thursdays during lunch. Felipa and two other COFI parents run the Peace Center. Anywhere from 15 to 20 kids are involved, depending on what’s going on. We’re working on tracking results more closely, but overall, our misconducts are a little bit lower than they were. It’s hard to track prevention. The Peace Center usually catches students before they come to blows.

I think it could expand. Staff needs to be trained so they know the Circles are an alternative to suspension. It’s hard for people to digest. We are an eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth society, and to get away from that towards mercy and love and repentance, that’s a big step. Yet you’ve got to go toward that if you’re going to revive our kids. They already know about revenge and punishment. But grace and mercy? They don’t know what to do with that.

I learned to respect parent voices when I was an assistant principal at an elementary school and worked with a principal who valued and listened to them. Before learning better, I just assumed parents were blindly advocating for their children and didn’t know what they were talking about.

Where the parents are sensible and on point, there’s room to include them in school decision-making. Through working with COFI, I’ve been enlightened around restorative justice and social justice. Their voices are consistently humming about alternatives to suspensions and zero tolerance—a policy that doesn’t work. That’s one thing COFI and their parents do really well. They are persistent on the issue and are respectful about working with us to find solutions because we’re losing too many kids.

When it comes to policy change, parents bring a sense of urgency to an issue because they deal with it every day. COFI represents the parent voices that are often ignored. Too often, it's not until parents start screaming and hollering that people notice. And they shouldn't have to do that to get what most parents want—help to solve a problem. Screaming and shouting will get you noticed, but it's not effective.



Vanessa Rich

Deputy Commissioner, Department of Family and Support Services, City of Chicago

“Community messengers”

COFI and POWER-PAC entered Vanessa Rich's professional life with a jolt. When their report about hard-to-reach families was released in 2009, Rich got calls from aldermen and the press looking for answers. Why were these poor families with young children not able to enroll in preschool? She invited parent leaders in and, together, they have grown a close and productive partnership. One effort to train community parents to go out and sign up the most needy families for publicly-funded Head Start has become a national model.

I knew COFI before I came to work for the City of Chicago. I've been here for seven years. COFI Board member Jackie Grimshaw is a friend of mine, and so I had heard of COFI. I never was involved with them then. I knew they were out there.

When I started working for the city, my involvement with COFI became more direct. They did a report on hard-to-reach families for Action for Children and released it in May 2009. I remember that one senior alderman got the report and came straight to us. We're sitting over here going, 'Well, that's not the information that we have.' We hadn't seen the report at the time and so we reached out to COFI.

The alderman's reaction to the report was basically, 'Why aren't you out here getting these kids?' We didn't know we weren't getting the kids. We knew that we had unmet needs but the way it was presented left us a little off guard. Ambushed.

Because it was explosive, the report also got press. And we literally still had not seen what everybody was talking about.

So that was when we said, 'Okay, so what can we do?' Whether we believe it's true or not, there must be some perspective out there that does believe it is true, so we need to address it. That's our job. To try to figure out what it is that you're saying and how we can address it.

We did reach out to COFI after we had a conversation about what they found. We also got a copy of the report. We were able to see what they were talking about, and we agreed. Services that were being requested by families were not being developed. But they were right: COFI was able to reach out to families and have conversations with them in a much more in depth way than we had the capacity to do.

So we decided to take lemons and turn them into lemonade. COFI parent leaders knew where to find hard-to-reach families, had good relationships in communities and were able to have conversations. So we started working with them. We asked them to go back on our behalf, find out what these families needed and give them information about childcare services enrollment.

That's how it was able to work. This is something we hadn't tried in recruitment and outreach. It's clearly something that we need. Using COFI's data and information, we gave that back to the Head Start recruitment contractor. We didn't tell anybody they had to hire COFI.

The other thing we found out is that COFI didn't understand all of the limitations on enrollment eligibility that we were dealing with. They were simply looking at the numbers and listening to the parents whose doors they knocked on saying, 'I have a two year old and I can't find full day care.' They weren't dealing with the fact that the parent may not be eligible for services because they weren't working.

So there were lots of pieces that we then put together with the contractor who gave COFI parents all the information. We got them trained so that they would know the next time they went out to talk to families which ones were eligible and what alternatives might be available to them. And we learned a lot from POWER-PAC parents. For one, it often takes more than one visit to figure out how to help families.

That was pretty much how we started what has developed into Head Start Parent Ambassadors, which is now a national model. Oregon and Washington states have a very large parent ambassador program. The State of Illinois now has an ambassador program. These are all parents who have been trained to either do recruitment, to do outreach and advocacy, and to really work with parents at a different level than we normally do with parent involvement.

Recruitment is a multi-faceted process. We do radio ads and billboards. There's also the training that happens at agencies so that they then know how to do outreach. COFI also plays a part in partnering with them. They may sit with the early learning Head Start delegate or they may go alone on our behalf. It's everything from going to the recruitment fair to going out door-to-door. When an agency is having enrollment problems due to language barriers, COFI can train that agency's staff if needed.

Parent ambassadors go beyond what our office and agencies would normally do. They bring the parent-to-parent, peer-to-peer approach, which is what we're looking for to bring in hard-to-reach families. The ambassadors also bring with them existing ties within communities. You have people who are embedded in the community who are working with you to help recruit and talk to families.

COFI parent leaders also have shared experiences with the families we are trying to reach. It's like when you walk up to the Weight Watchers table and hear from someone who's used the program and lost 75 pounds. That makes a whole lot more difference to the person who's picking up the pamphlet and thinking about joining. So these are people who can say, 'I had my kid in Head Start. I know the community. I know the benefits of getting my kid in there. I know that it may not be easy because we don't have everything that you want, but it benefits your kid and this is how I know.'

It's value added, and it gives us another tool. COFI parents are not the only tool that we have, but they are a tool that we can use for multiple purposes.

COFI parents are system builders. They are systems changers. They actually echo what we're supposed to be about. We are supposed to be change agents and we work with community and parents in order to do that.

We see COFI and POWER-PAC as partners. When we look at how collaborations or partnerships evolve, quite often you start with a business arrangement. As you move and work together, through the levels of partnership and collaboration and coordination, it really requires everyone to give up something. This is where we really are in partnership with them. We are part of the establishment. We need them to do what we do in response to the community. And they need us in order to make those system changes that can support their advocacy roles. It's really a journey into where we can hear them and they can hear us. And they really do make a difference in systems.

Looking at what POWER-PAC has been able to do. The recess thing is amazing. They've had significant impact at CPS that I thought were like miracles. They all benefit our families.

Right at the beginning of this relationship, before we really had a partnership, we went over to COFI's office for a tour and a meeting. They were talking about the high school deterrent and then they had playground recess on the table. They had formed a parent coalition (POWER-PAC) in order to move these things through. Early childhood was part of the discussion too.

The parent leadership. POWER-PAC. They've done a good job. It hasn't been the same once. That's one of their strengths. We were looking for reasons why most parent leadership organizations don't work. It's because you get one good leader and you don't develop them any further, and you don't encourage them to move on beyond your organization. So they are stuck in this dead end place. I would never say that about COFI. We have seen faces come and go. We have seen faces who have stayed and rotated positions. They do a really good job of not just training people, but giving them lots of opportunities, pushing them out the door, and then welcoming them back when there's something else that might be appropriate.

There are three faces we've seen constantly over the years, but they are not always the leadership voices. That's the interesting thing. That's why COFI and POWER-PAC are an example of a good organization. These three have been there, but they have moved in and out of various roles.

The bigger impact that COFI brings is the voice of parents who have young children. Like it or not, the first and most important teacher for young children is the parent. They are the change agents in our early learning community. They are the customers. They are the policy drivers. We really have to learn to listen to them and learn how to work with them. 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 so it can be used. Parents know how to do just about anything that needs to be done. Our job is to figure out how they can make that difference.

COFI and POWER-PAC bring that important voice. Otherwise we're just a bunch of wonks sitting around talking to ourselves. We drink our own Kool-Aid. When I sit down and think we can't put a childcare center in Cabrini. There's no location, there isn't any money, there's no provider. Then I listen to parents who are saying, 'This is something that needs to happen. We have to figure out how to make it happen.'

They're out there advocating for the things that are going to benefit children and families. They can make things happen. We are bureaucrats and we are on this side of the fence.

Head start, that's our job. We have always been required to have parents in leadership roles, to hire them if they are qualified. Parents are on advisory committees. You can't get a budget through if you don't get a parents signature.

Anybody can get the alderman's attention. All it takes is a phone call. But it's the respect after you have the attention. Often, the expectation is that you'll get 1,000 people shouting and yelling, and you show up and figure out how to make them happy so they'll be quiet. That's the standard. But to show up and then hear a group of people like POWER-PAC making sense because they are organized and professional. That's when public officials start thinking, 'Wait a minute. I better start taking some notes.'



Kathy Ryg
Former Illinois State Representative
Retired President, Voices for Illinois Children

"It was transformational for me."

An opportunity to learn more about COFI's parent leaders and their efforts to organize around schools became a paradigm shift for Kathy Ryg. As she listened to their stories, she found herself mesmerized and impressed by what they'd been able to do to improve their schools and communities. She helped connect them to people and projects across the state of Illinois.

I knew about COFI when I was a state representative. But there is such a disconnect in Springfield. I didn't represent any part of the city and often representatives of districts like mine were not included on issues related to Chicago even though we were dealing with them, too. COFI leaders did not make a point to see me. I served north Cook and

Lake County. No one ever connected the opportunity for city neighborhoods to be engaged with suburban or even downstate districts with similar demographics or similar challenges.

It was a missed opportunity. If it matters to me in Lake County and it matters to the neighborhoods in Chicago, then it probably matters in East St. Louis. That's a much broader opportunity to get legislators working together, and that very rarely happens.

My real introduction to COFI came a bit later, when I was working for Voices for Illinois Children. I attended one of COFI's meetings and it was so impressive to hear the stories of the moms and what they had accomplished. One mom told the story of getting a speed bump installed in front of her children's schools. How everyone had said speeding was creating a dangerous situation—"We really need that speed bump"—but they couldn't get the attention of the alderman. This mom told us step by step-by-step how she engaged the alderman and now that alderman is a really strong participant in anything that goes on at the school.

She was a Latina mom who also told a great story about what often isn't understood regarding cultural differences. When her kids went to school, she wanted to be a part of the team that supported the schools where her kids were enrolled. But when she started going to meetings, her husband objected. She said it was important though, and they worked it out. She became a real leader in the school community.

Some other moms talked about their children who had been killed in violence and how they turned their experience into being very involved in restorative justice and Peace Circles.

It only takes one or two people who become leaders and get support to find success. Then they bring others along. I spent a couple of hours visiting COFI that day and it was really transformational for me.

Community advocates need to know when something is pending with a bill, and then they can connect what that bill does to what it means to families and community, especially for legislators from those communities. Marry those two, so people are always empowered with their own stories and experiences. People undervalue how that's heard. Legislators often legislate by anecdote. So I remembered this mom's story. I can't tell you the neighborhood, the school, the mom's name or alderman's name, but her story was enough to convey the significance of her experience.

The meeting with COFI leaders was really informative and helpful. In that one session, I could see what they were doing at the school level in the city, and I learned how restorative justice was being used at a local level.

And at the time, the moms were very focused on getting mandatory recess time. I could give them feedback on the recess efforts in Springfield and some names of people who might be responsive.

Since our meeting, COFI always resonated with me. On the Governor's Early Learning Council that I was appointed to, I sat with Gloria Harris from COFI. At Voices' Kids Count Symposiums, we always made sure that COFI parents were invited and welcomed their participation. They asked excellent questions of our panelists, including the Secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services and high-level state officials or other national experts. COFI always made the discussion real.

I always felt a really strong connection with COFI moms because I didn't grow up professionally in the policy world. I have complete respect for people who can think policy and develop policy, but they also have to be able to articulate it and bring people onboard.

That's an opportunity for groups like COFI to bring about change. When moms would come to a Kids Count Symposium, whatever information they took away from those sessions, they became the ambassador to put that information in front of people who couldn't be there. They can talk about it in plain language and they can point people to the fact that it's not okay just to complain, and it's important to ask questions that explore and inform. They could make sure that people know what the problems are and then stay in touch with them to keep problem solving.

Speaking honestly, the best way for parents to get a legislator's attention is to call on people one by one, or to sit in a committee room and listen to the discussion and be a resource. Go to people who may not understand an issue and say, 'Here's what you need to know about how it affects my life, my family, my community.' Those opportunities are not always in Springfield, and they're not always about your own legislator. There's a lot more effort that needs to be put into knowing who the policymaker leaders are on issues because in the General Assembly, you can't be all things on all issues. You find your niche and you know everybody else's niche and look to each other to be better informed.

Legislators and advocates need parents to explain what it's like when they need services and can't get them or can't find them. The best way to understand if you're having an impact is to have a feedback loop. As a legislator, I chaired the Disability Services Committee and parents would come and say, 'I should be able to get home-based or community-based services for my child, but I had to go to this agency and fill out all the paperwork and they sent me to a place that's not the closest or most convenient place.'

Legislators may think things are working that aren't, and parents are sometimes too intimidated to speak up. It's a natural reaction, but I was always shocked when people would say, 'That legislator was really nice. I didn't expect that they would really sit and listen.' You know what? Legislators are real people. Very few of them are really arrogant—there are some—but most of them welcome feedback. It's the stories that they remember and they use those stories when they ask questions of the experts. Parents have the stories. They need to know, you have everything you need to do advocacy work because you're not making it up. You're not trying to convince people of something other than your own experience, so just use it. And then use it collectively.

COFI is a great example of going to where people already are and using resources that already exist.

I always thought that I was supposed to know about issues and I was hesitant to convey that I didn't. Before I was a state rep, I served on the village board. I went to every meeting completely prepared. I read my entire packet. I asked questions of the staff. I listened to the discussion. Then I made an informed decision. In Springfield, I was just completely unnerved by the fact that there was no way to be completely prepared on every issue.

So when I realized I couldn't know everything that I needed to know, I met families who didn't demand things of me and I could rely on them and have dialogues with them. Not a town hall meeting where I'm stating my positions and saying please vote for me, but more like, 'Tell me what's going on for you and I'll tell you what's going on in Springfield. Let's see how we put the two together.'

Advocacy organizations are also huge resources when something's going on in Springfield. If you're in the House, it's hard to keep up with what the Senate's doing. But a parent from COFI who is working both Chambers might help connect House and Senate legislators' efforts.

I also learned when I needed to seek out the experts. Everyone thinks you have staff that can tell you everything you need to know. Not so.

I give the moms so much credit. At times I felt intimidated working on the Early Learning Council because I was not an early childhood educator. Being at General Assembly hearings is intimidating too. The whole situation is set up that way. I just think it's so great that COFI moms are at these tables. I give them such credit. When they experience success I'm reminded this is where we can make change. And you know their kids are more likely to learn how to advocate with their moms as their role model. That's huge.

It's very empowering for kids to learn how to speak up. You can tell some of them are getting good opportunities at home to talk back and forth on issues. Then when they are invited to speak up in another meeting, they will. Other kids may not. But by being exposed to it, it's such a good learning process.



Nancy Shier

Retired Vice-President of Illinois Policy
Ounce of Prevention Fund

“You have to dedicate time. That’s what COFI does.”

Nancy Shier and her staff worked closely with COFI staff and POWER-PAC parent leaders on early learning policy, particularly those related to hard-to-reach families. The organizations came together after POWER-PAC published *Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?*—a report that detailed the findings of a door-to-door survey of 5,000 low-income parents in African-American and Latino communities. At a subsequent forum in Englewood, POWER-PAC presented its recommendations for overcoming the preschool access barriers they had uncovered in their research.

After they did that report, we were very impressed. We thought it would be very helpful to the work we were doing on the Early Learning Council that was related to hard-to-reach families. We reached out to them—or they reached out to us, I don’t remember. But we decided we should work together.

On the Early Learning Council, there was a decision that we had to get some parent participation that was authentic and involved parents who participate in or who are eligible for the programs. That’s how Gloria Harris [of POWER-PAC] became a member, and other parents joined the Council’s hard-to-reach work group. COFI really brought a lot to the work group and played a very important role. Recommendations from that work group went on to the full Council.

We’ve had some involvement with COFI’s efforts around the recess campaign, giving legislative advice and trying to connect them with others who were interested in the issue. It’s a bit of a challenge to be successful when you don’t have a full time person in Springfield. You’re taking on big powers and trying to regulate their behavior. That’s always hard.

The success of COFI’s model is tied to the effort they’ve put into starting at the beginning, where parents are in their lives, helping them get involved and exposing them to various things. Then COFI brings parents along to the next level of involvement, and then the next level of involvement, until they are ready to be an active participant around policy.

Bringing parents through the process that COFI does has shown success that I haven’t seen much of elsewhere.

Most of the policy work in early childhood—and on K thru 12—is driven by professionals in the field—advocates and program people. What missing, though, is hearing from parents, the target audience that the education programs are intended to serve. We need to hear about the issues and the strengths and the barriers that they see. We need to hear parents’ insights into why it’s so difficult to engage parents in certain programs.

Often it’s challenging to engage one or two parents sitting on some advisory committee where a lot of the language is jargon and acronyms. You have to dedicate time to support parents. That’s one of the things that COFI has the capacity to do and does well—working with parents before meetings, making sure they’re up to speed, and then debriefing with them afterward.

We have some parents on the Council’s home visiting task force. We provide financial support by paying for babysitting and transportation. But we don’t do that kind of support before and after the meeting that is really critical. There’s another work group that is completely dominated by childcare providers and advocates. There are no parent members. Whenever they want to try and get the parent voice, they go to the most active providers and have them convene some sort of parent meeting. This is the perfect example of a system that is completely about parents and their voice is really not heard.

When parents' voices are missing, policymakers don't know what parents want. At budget time, we make decisions all the time about what's important and what's not, about what to cut and what to keep. But none of that is informed by the voices of the people who participate in the program.

Another underrepresented voice in early learning is from immigrant parents, particularly in childcare and early intervention services. It would be very good to hear the voice of the people.



Elizabeth Swanson

Deputy Chief of Staff for Education, Office of the Mayor, Chicago

“We had easy common ground.”

In her role as Mayor Emanuel's point person on all things education at City Hall, Beth Swanson recently revived a relationship with COFI that began more than 10 years ago at Chicago Public Schools. Back then, their mutual interests centered on community schools. Now the focus is on early childhood programs.

I first met COFI around 2000, when I was working at CPS and heading up the after-school programming and then we launched community schools. We handled everything that was outside the regular school day. In the community school work, one of the big tenets was to engage parents. So I met COFI through the work they were doing on the ground with parents around community schools.

At the time, we were trying to identify a number of parent advocacy groups that could help with the work. So we were looking for groups that were working strategically with parents. We looked at their work and best practices so we might share them with schools. Ellen was very helpful in thinking through how to empower parents and how to get their voices into the various initiatives we were managing. Often times, Ellen would bring parents to community schools meetings and events.

Being able to talk to the parent leaders directly, or bounce ideas off them brought a different lens to the work. You wouldn't get that if you were just making policy or creating programs in isolation. COFI's parent leaders were great about giving open and constructive feedback. Some assume the worst of CPS and through years of miscommunication or mistrust—for whatever the reason—it's hard to get people to put it all aside and just say, “I really just want to talk to you. Let's just try and make this work from this point forward.” COFI always came to the table with that. I was just so appreciative. It was easy to work with COFI.

Conversations were always open. COFI wanted to partner, to collaborate. They were very sincere about it. ‘We're all trying to get at the same issues. We were speaking about a lot of the same things.’ All of the organizing and programs they were doing at the time were very much in line with the things that [then Schools CEO] Arne Duncan had envisioned for community schools and parent engagement. So we had easy common ground.

Just recently, in my role as chief of staff for education for Mayor Rahm Emanuel, I reconnected with COFI around early childhood. I met with them and we talked about some of their priorities and their program to help get children to preschool—the walking preschool bus.

Early childhood is a priority of the mayor's. We've done some analytical work and we're starting to roll that out with the overall goal of increasing access and quality. So with COFI, we talked a bit about the quality of programs and how to help parents understand what a quality program looks like. COFI told me a bit about how they judge quality in early childhood.

From that conversation, we did have someone follow up and look into scaling the walking preschool bus effort. It was incredibly cost effective. I was surprised about how little it costs to get kids to their programs. City Hall doesn't

own a program, but obviously it does have a great sphere of influence. A lot of my job is finding interesting ideas and thinking through how to get bureaucracies to respond or pay attention to a new policy or program if it seems to make sense for where we're trying to go overall.

After meeting with Ellen and COFI, I think they're going to be helpful, insightful. They bring a voice that isn't always at the table. They bring a perspective that is often missing. Policy conversations happen all the time with folks who work downtown and think they know what's happening on the ground. COFI parents bring ideas and solutions to problems. Just go back to the walking school bus example. There's a tangible program. If the overall policy discussion is about reaching more hard-to-reach kids, that meeting with COFI teed up at least one practical solution that can be brought back to the policymaker table. That's when I go back to the folks that actually own that work—the city's Department of Family Support Services or CPS—and make a connection to help get things done.

I talk to the mayor all the time. We meet daily on education issues. He is constantly collecting data on education. I provide a summary of meetings—the highlights—and tell him about new ideas that are out there, what we're hearing from teachers, principals and parents.

The parent perspective is incredibly valuable. They bring a lens to the work that is very different. It becomes very personal very fast when you have kids in the system. I have three children in public schools. Parents have a different calculus looking at problems. No matter how good the policy or program, parents are truth tellers. They just want the best for their child. They don't care what side they're on to get it done. Parents can also make or break education reform, depending on whether they are listened to and truly integrated into the conversation. If they don't feel that they're part of solving a problem, it can be difficult to implement a change. The more you integrate parents into the policymaking process—early and often—the better.

I personally have a tremendous respect for COFI parents. They bring a lot of value to the table. I'm impressed with how detailed their work is and how committed the people are and how under the radar they are. They truly have a sincere desire to make an improvement for their community and their children. They're not organizing to make a splash at a board meeting. They're organizing parents to better kids' lives, consistently, over long periods of time.

We are grateful to the people we interviewed for their thoughtful and honest reflections, and the respect they have demonstrated for parents who are raising families in some of the toughest communities anywhere.



COFI
Community Organizing
and Family Issues

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