



SUCCESS STORY: COFI SCALES PARENT ENGAGEMENT WORK TO NEW COMMUNITIES AND CONSTITUENCIES – WINS LOCAL AND STATEWIDE CHANGE FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN



Executive Summary of Results and Learnings of COFI's Expansion and Replication Project 2014 to 2017

In seven communities across Illinois, from spring of 2014 through fall of 2017, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) recruited, trained and supported 591 low-income parents of color in becoming civic leaders. These communities were new to COFI, which had for 20 years worked primarily with elementary school parents in Chicago neighborhoods: the expansion sought to test COFI's effectiveness in diverse communities and with younger parents of children ages 0-8. After three-and-a-half years we can convincingly say that *“Yes, the COFI model translates well to a broad range of constituencies – urban, suburban, and more isolated smaller cities across the state and teen parents, fathers and families with very young children”*.

The COFI-trained parents in this initiative reported dramatic impacts on themselves and their families, setting and achieving goals to help improve learning, earning, and health outcomes. They formed 20 parent teams to work collectively to make their neighborhoods safer, their children's preschools and schools better, their families more economically secure, and their communities more engaged in civic life. The parent leaders are actively participating in early learning community collaborations and in broad based community development collaboratives, informing agenda setting and policymaking. And COFI-trained parent leaders across the state came together across race and cultural differences to create a statewide organization to impact broad policies that affect low-income children and families, including issues of access to quality early care and education and family economic security. Policy and systems change successes won by the parents include:

- Working across the state to gain public policies of benefit to children and families, parent leaders from expansion communities:
 - Won a new statewide Parent Engagement Framework for the Illinois Early Learning Council including the creation of a new Family Advisory Committee to fully include parent voices in child development and early learning decisions at the state cabinet level;
 - Helped to win restoration of child care subsidies to over 200,000 Illinois families;
 - Launched the Early Intervention Redlining campaign to ensure that low-income families of color have equal access to early intervention resources;
 - Championed and won a new law preventing the expulsion of young children from early learning programs;
 - Conducted research and released the report: “Stopping the Debt Spiral” which addresses the crushing impact of debt on Illinois’ lowest income families; and
 - Supported Illinois’ new “Trust Act” making Illinois a ‘sanctuary state’.
- COFI-trained parents also pushed for expansion of the COFI Early Learning Ambassadors program (trained parent outreach workers) in all 7 expansion communities have reached out to and
 - Knocked on 92,608 doors, spoke with families about the importance of early learning, and identified and referred 7,893 2-4 year olds in need of a quality preschool or Head Start programs;
 - Spoke with over 1000 families and helped 326 children ages 0-5 to get developmental screenings; and
 - Referred 32,974 children to summer meal program sites;
- And finally, thanks to parent leaders’ voices in the expansion communities,
 - 200 East St. Louis children are offered bussing to and from preschool;
 - 3,000 Aurora children are bused to and from preschool and school;
 - 22 children will have Children’s Savings Accounts set up in Evanston;
 - A monthly developmental screening site was established in Englewood;
 - Peer-to-peer outreach programs were created in 7 communities where parents distributed materials about child development and early learning in English and in Spanish (where needed); and
 - Hundreds of parents participated in events to learn about utility bills and rights around utility debt and shut-offs, restorative justice in schools and preschools, neighborhood safety, and Children’s Savings Accounts.

At a time of much turmoil in our national lives, COFI-trained parents are building relationships across geography, race, and ethnicity; fostering mutual respect among themselves and with decision-makers; and assuring that the voices of those farthest from the centers of power are heard and listened to.

Learning: low-income parents of color can indeed become effective, engaged leaders in improving the lives of low-income children and families, if presented the opportunity to participate, a process through which skills can be developed, and a place at decision-making tables. Community Organizing and Family Issues implemented its three-phase *Family Focused Organizing* model in the seven project communities and found in them, as in its 22 years' of previous experience in implementing the model in Chicago neighborhoods, that its process effectively recruited, trained, and engaged nearly 600 more low-income parents of color throughout the state in advancing programs and policies that will improve life outcomes for their children. This process has been rigorously documented and evaluated; more information is readily available at www.cofionline.org.

A particular project focus became that of creating space at new decision-making tables – in local early learning and maternal and child health collaborations in the seven communities and, ultimately, at the statewide level. In several communities, this was a slow and major task: collaborations comprised of professionals were unused to meeting at times convenient for parents, to recognizing the unique perspectives of parents, to speaking with a minimum of policy jargon, and to providing translation in bilingual communities. By project's end, however, all participating collaborations were 'won over' by the authentic voices, unique contributions, and effective outreach capacities of the participating parent leaders. And by project's end, the parent leaders had won a major state level victory – the formal creation of a Family Advisory Committee within the Illinois Office of Early Childhood Development.

Learning: low-income parent leaders of color bring unique talents, perspectives, and energy to efforts to improve programs, practices, and policies to improve life outcomes of low-income children of color. We have adapted a framework to document parent leaders' impact based on the Center for Schools and Communities' framework (<https://www.center-school.org/fssr/documents/ContibofFam.pdf>). Parent leaders trained and supported by COFI through this project are:

- 1) *Connecting with families other service providers cannot*, instituting Ambassadors programs, Parent Early Intervention and IEP Advocates, and Spanish language partners with school districts, increasing developmental screenings and preschool enrollments.
- 2) *Bringing the voices and perspectives of families to inform program, policy, and practice*, identifying enrollment and attendance barriers as parents/caregivers see them, bringing the earlier research and recommendations of POWER-PAC to collaboration tables today, and participating in POWER-PAC to create state level systems changes.
- 3) *Connecting the program/collaboration/policy team to the communities served*, tapping residents' knowledge of resources to inform outreach strategies, conducting community surveys, hosting community forums, providing Spanish translation, connecting early learning community collaborations with broader community development initiatives.

- 4) ***Proposing new ‘green light’ vs ‘red tape’ solutions to longstanding problems***, using simple and creative methods fully grounded in parents’ authentic experiences to find solutions to seeming intractable problems. Examples: Ambassadors, Parent Advocates, Walking Preschool Buses, new placement of crossing guards and bus stops and parking spaces.
- 5) ***Strengthening advocacy for children’s programs, systems, and budgets by organizing grassroots participation in such efforts***. Within the participating communities, Ambassadors, community surveys, and Town Halls all served to raise levels of awareness about the importance of strong early learning systems and of residents’ participation in efforts to champion these systems.

Learning: parent leaders, not limited by policy silos, are able to create solutions of benefit to low-income children that span policy, practice, and program arenas.

Neighborhood violence, immigration fears, suburban sprawl, the limitations of caregivers with disabilities, access of immigrants to healthcare services, financial pressures on low-income parents: parent leaders identified these challenges *as* early learning participation barriers and, thus, moved to address them in the context of increasing enrollments and attendance.

Parent leaders also identified challenges ‘upstream’, pushing early learning collaborations to address gaps in the maternal and child health system so that more children entered preschool ready for it. Englewood parents were the first to observe that too many young children were misbehaving in preschools *because* they had yet-to-be identified and treated developmental or health problems. They researched available developmental screening and early intervention resources and found them ‘redlining’ their community, with screeners essentially afraid of it. With professional and policy advocacy allies, the parent leaders created a role for trained parent advocates in helping families access these services and launched a campaign to gain early intervention resources in their community. Other project communities have followed suit.

And parent leaders identified challenges ‘down the road’ that they wanted to address even as they worked to improve life outcomes of very young children. In several project communities, parent leaders enthusiastically embraced Children’s Savings Accounts as one way that low- income families could begin to save and enable their children to aspire to and eventually participate in post-secondary learning. Project parent leaders advanced legislation on this issue and came close to passing it in the spring of 2017; next year, they will try again. And parent leaders in Evanston convinced the Evanston Community Foundation to pilot the idea.

Learning: in working together to improve their children’s lives, low-income parent leaders of color build understanding, empathy, and genuine relationships across race, ethnicity and geography

COFI intentionally seeks to build leadership capacity and action across communities of low-income parents of color. Sociologist Jennifer Cossyleon observes that COFI’s leadership model is explicitly designed to support the social transformation of low-income women of color, and, in connecting their personal struggles with public ones, speaks to the common ‘lived expressions of intersecting oppressions’ among diverse racial and ethnic groups¹. With 20+ years of experience in bringing largely-segregated African American and Latino communities together, this project created a new opportunity for COFI to connect parents in even more isolated communities of predominantly one race or one ethnicity with others, statewide, to pursue common action goals. Cossyleon observed² “African American, Latina, and white motherleaders went to immigration summits and rallies together, attended events focused on de-criminalizing youth, and rode buses to Springfield, in mixed-community groups to visit each other’s representatives and senators. Importantly, parents who participated in COFI’s organizing trainings learned about institutions that have oppressed them—the education system, legal system, police, and media— and identified laws and practices that hindered progress for them and their families.”

This impulse to connect across race, ethnicity, and geography gained momentum through the life of the project and helped fuel the creation of United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN), a nationwide network of low-income parent leaders of color and the organizations that support them, which the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and others have generously funded. In contributing to UPLAN’s racial and ethnic diversity, as well as its action agenda (the proposed Office of Parent Engagement in the U.S. Department of Education comes right out of the POWER-PAC Illinois Family Advisory Committee experience.)

¹ Jennifer Cossyleon, ‘Coming Out of My Shell: Contesting Fear, Vulnerability, and Despair through Family Focused Organizing’, *Socius: Social Research for a Dynamic World*, forthcoming, pp.1-2 of manuscript dated August 22, 2017

² Cossyleon, pp. 11-12.