

## About the Series: Briefings from the Ground Up

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

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

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

### Parent leaders are putting their ideas into action

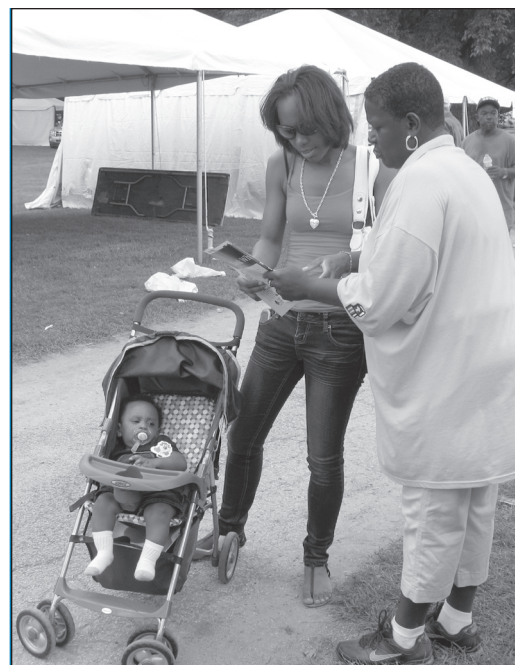
This series of policy and practice briefs comes from COFI—Community Organizing & Family Issues—the umbrella organization that supports the parents in this work. These briefs describe innovative, parent-created pilot programs that are increasing participation of at-risk, low-income children in quality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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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





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

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

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

## Parent engagement, every step of the way

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

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

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







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

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

### **Building relationships of trust and respect: *partnerships are key***

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

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

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

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

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

## CASE STUDY

### Parent leaders put their ideas into action. Result?

### A 25% increase in preschool enrollment



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



#### “What are YOU going to do?”

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

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

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

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

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

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





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







## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

### Why isn't Johnny in preschool?

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

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

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

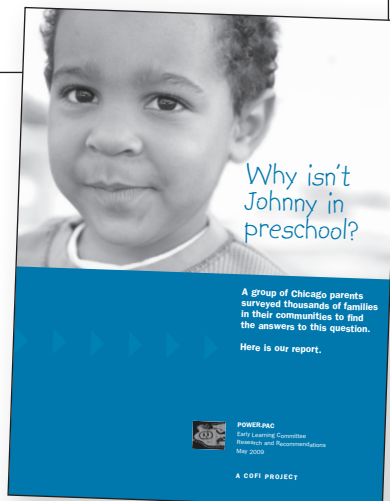
## Key findings

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

**Best solution?**  
**Streamline the maze.**

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

The full report can be found on our website, [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org)





## Acknowledgements

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

Writing and design:  
Kate Peyton and Axie Breen



**COFI**  
**Community Organizing**  
**and Family Issues**  
1436 West Randolph Street  
4th Floor  
Chicago, Illinois 60607  
312 226-5141  
[www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org)



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

## You can help spread the success of these pilot programs

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

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

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

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

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

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