



## Policy and Systems Change **The COFI Way**

**How a diverse group of moms  
and grandmoms, raising their  
families in some of the toughest  
neighborhoods anywhere,  
engage decision makers**

**and win**

**A dozen prominent policymakers were interviewed to learn what happens when COFI parent leaders are in the decision-making mix.**

*“I have seen COFI play a very effective role because COFI parents are on the ground...*

*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.”*

**—State Senator Kimberly Lightford**

**“You can’t go and put something in place for people and think it’s going to work if you’re not including those people. Every stakeholder needs to be a part of the decisions and the implementation for a program to really work.”**

**—Rosazlia Grillier, Parent Leader**



Lynn Morton, left, and Nelly Torres, below, are the founding co-chairs of POWER-PAC, the citywide organization for parents' action and power. Nelly and Lynn, and the many other leaders in this report, are among the thousands of parents trained by COFI.

*Parents themselves know best what will really work in their families and communities. When decision makers listen, parents offer creative and down-to-earth ways of solving complex challenges.*

Dear Friends,

Grassroots parent leaders are influencing big policy changes and they are doing it with an innovative and collaborative approach that works in today's complex world. We're excited to share this story with you.

COFI's leadership and policy change model has been a work in progress for nearly 20 years. Through continuous testing, learning, and experience with thousands of low-income parents, we have an established training curriculum; a sophisticated leadership ladder; and hundreds of local victories and parent-led projects. **Our track record, and what we learned in interviews with allies, advocates, and other policymakers, allow us to articulate the key steps for high-impact parent-led policy and systems change.**

The COFI model of building parents' power is informed not just by the tenets of community organizing, but by long traditions of women's self-help, community building, and mutual support.

**Before the professionalization of social services and education, many community-based efforts were led by mothers and grandmothers, driven by the communal values of nurturing relationships, support, and interdependence. They brought people together in both formal and informal community systems to serve those in need, including children, the elderly, and new immigrants. These same core values and principles are profoundly relevant today and guide our work.**

What is distinct about the COFI model is the depth of the leadership of the parents who, in turn, lead the building of relationships with policymakers and advocates. Using storytelling, one-on-ones, collective visioning, and collaboration, parents cross barriers of race, class, and professional status to make themselves heard, not as so-called clients, consumers, or needy victims, but as passionate, informed, and committed experts on the issues and systems that impact their families and communities.

**Building leadership and power in challenging communities is not easy work. It's messy and complicated, but this report articulates a step-by-step process that has proven to be effective.** Here you will read a cross-section of the many voices of people who have been "at the table" together. Learn how and why the authentic experiences of low-income parents lead to practical and effective public policies and programs.

We know many of you as allies and supporters of the amazing and courageous work of parents. Thank you for making a difference now and for the future, and thank you for your interest in our work.

In partnership and appreciation,

Ellen Schumer  
Executive Director

Veronica Anderson  
Co-Chair, COFI Board of Trustees

Nelly Torres  
Co-Chair, COFI Board of Trustees

### Letter from the Executive Director and Co-Chairs of the Board of Trustees



Ellen Schumer



Veronica Anderson



Nelly Torres



**COFI commissioned a professional journalist to interview a dozen policymakers who have worked closely with COFI parent leaders.**

Elected officials, advocates, top leaders and staff at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and in the offices of the Mayor and the Governor articulated strong agreement about how and why COFI parents are effective in changing the way things get done on the issues they bring to the table.



*Note: Quotes from policymakers appear in orange throughout this report.*

# Policymakers told us that COFI parents are...

## connected

with each other, as a collective voice for social justice, and within their communities. Parent-to-parent outreach has been singularly effective and high impact in a range of programs that serve families and children.

*“COFI parent leaders... 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 we don’t have everything that you want, but it benefits your kid and this is how I know.’”*

*“A 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.”*

*“I like the POWER-PAC group... many of them are grandmas... They had good contacts and relationships in communities.”*

## authentic

and able to share what their lives are like, their day-to-day experiences of raising families in distressed communities.

*“COFI brings a voice that isn’t at the table.”*

*“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.”*

## well-informed

about the issues they seek to address. Parents bring their own experiences, but also engage experts to find creative and workable solutions.

*COFI parents “know what they’re talking about.”*

*“COFI participated in the CPS process and lobbied for restorative justice to replace zero tolerance... COFI provided substantial feedback on the draft and helped shape the final policy.”*

*“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.”*

*“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.”*

## collaborative

and seek positive solutions with institutions and advocates. Parents are intentional about sharing their stories, building relationships, and finding common ground with people who may be very different from them, but share a commitment to families.

*“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. So COFI is contributing to what we, as an organization, are very interested in: focusing on high-need communities where families are left out.”*

*“The world has changed. The more confrontational organizing, the older style doesn't achieve as much as 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.”*

*“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.”*

*“We see COFI and POWER-PAC as partners... 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.”*

## effective

in producing meaningful change and participating in program implementation.

*“What's unique to COFI is the parent development piece: the leadership development and progression of parents. COFI's approach with parent leaders has led to positive change.”*

*“COFI parents are system builders. They are systems changers. They actually echo what we're supposed to be about.”*

*“They have successfully filled every spot in every early learning program they have worked on.”*

## persistent

and have dedicated themselves over several years to developing new policies on issues including recess, access to quality early learning, and changes in school discipline codes that are helping keep children in school and safe.

*“COFI parents are not shy. I see COFI parents at all kinds of education meetings.”*

*“That's one thing COFI and their parents do really well. They are persistent on the issue and respectful about working with us to find solutions because we're losing too many kids.”*

*“These were zealous change agents who left an indelible mark in my memory and I fondly appreciated their honest feedback.”*

## The results are striking!

COFI and POWER-PAC have made *big* changes in public policies and systems:

**The Elementary Justice Campaign** led to new district policies of restorative justice and implementation of programs like Peace Centers inside schools. Parents took on zero-tolerance discipline policies because they have seen the direct connection to a higher risk of criminalization and dropping out of school.

### **Recess for All!**

In a big victory, COFI-trained parents led the campaign to restore recess in Chicago public schools.

### **The Early Learning Campaign**

catalyzed dramatically new approaches like *Head Start Ambassadors* and *Walking Preschool Buses* that have improved access for low-income children to quality early care and education programs.

# Who was interviewed?

**High level decision makers shared their perspectives on working with COFI-trained parents.**

**Read the complete interviews at [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org).**

## **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 aide to the President and CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, José Alvarez worked closely with COFI-trained parent leaders. He believes that the involvement of parents is “critical for district leaders seeking to make change.”

## **Carlos Azcoitia**

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

*“Developing local assets into ambassadors”*



Carlos Azcoitia has worked as a Chicago school principal and district official overseeing community schools and parent engagement, among other efforts. Now a university professor and school board member, he was a founding board member of COFI and notes that COFI prepares parents to move from local organizing projects into the policymaking arena for delivering outcomes.

## **James Bebley**

CPS General Counsel



*COFI became “a trusted ally.”*

James Bebley, CPS General Counsel, met COFI parent leaders in the spring of 2004 when he was assigned 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. He has worked every year since with parent leaders at the table to strengthen Restorative Justice in the discipline code

## **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.

## **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 worked in three public roles, helping CPS, then 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 in all three positions.

**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. When he first heard about COFI’s family-focused approach, he wasn’t so sure, though. 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 that these uniquely trained mothers and grandmothers brought to the table.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

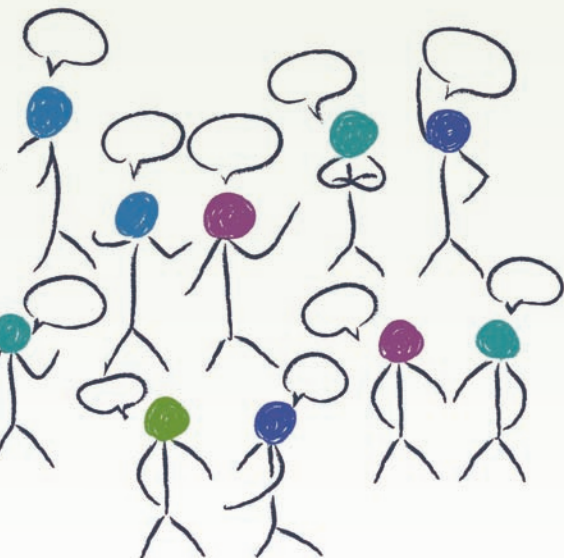
# The COFI way to policy and systems change, step by step

# 1

## Build relationships of trust among parents across communities

COFI trains and organizes parents in many settings and many neighborhoods. Then, we bring together graduates of COFI's two-year intensive program. These parents are leaders. They have learned to set and achieve goals for themselves and their families. They have worked in teams with other parents and community members. And they have made things happen in local schools and communities.

The first step towards policy and system change is building deep and trusting relationships among truly diverse parents. We face the reality that, for many, life experiences have made it risky to step outside their trusted circles. We use the astonishing power of sharing personal and family stories, getting to know each other parent-to-parent, and sharing hopes and dreams to sow the seeds for common ground across neighborhood, racial and ethnic, and language and cultural divides. *COFI creates a safe space and a positive process where trust and community can grow.*



# 2

## Parents create a shared vision and focus on positive change

Out of their shared stories and leadership experience, parents identify common struggles and challenges. They talk through what they believe needs to change to make a difference in their lives, families, and communities. The issues they take on resonate in their own lives and experiences. To date, parents' campaigns include access to early learning, refashioning neighborhood schools into community centers, eliminating punitive discipline that pushes kids out of school, and fighting for the basic right to recess for *all* children. Through dialogue and deliberation around a table of trust, parent leaders build a shared vision for *positive change*.



# 3

## Parents do their own research to inform recommendations for policy and systems change

The problems are big and the solutions are complex, but COFI's central premise is that *parents themselves know best what will really work*. Our successes rely on the fact that parents themselves often have the most creative and down-to-earth ways of solving complicated issues. We invest in parents taking the lead in research, and they dig deep to understand and define tough problems. Eventually, parents articulate what needs to change in bigger systems and public policies to really have an impact on their children and communities.

Research and recommendations develop through parent-to-parent and door-to-door conversations to collect data and deeply understand the problems. Parents build relationships with professional advocates and experts working on the issues to gather a range of perspectives. They use COFI's unique "Web of Support" exercise to do strategic planning and power analysis. As a result, parents identify recommendations for "what needs to change."





# 4

## Parents build relationships with policymakers who can influence decisions

Parents, following their own instincts, have intentionally built relationships with “insiders,” many of whom become allies and even champions. Parents win this kind of support through organizing meetings that begin with sharing their personal stories related to the issue at hand. Then, they present their research and recommendations for policy changes that are fresh, innovative, and deeply informed by real people. Rather than coming in confrontationally with a set of demands, parents believe that decision makers need to listen and hear them out. Deep connections are made. Sometimes people in power have personal experiences not so different from the parents, perhaps growing up in the same communities, or raising their own children in challenging circumstances.

Working hand-in-hand with insider champions—while still keeping outside pressure on them whenever needed—parents negotiate innovative solutions and ultimately help implement them. *These insider relationships have proven to be key to the success of the parent-led policy change.*



# 5

## Parents win, implement innovative and successful solutions... and the circle of policy change continues

*Winning on an issue is really another beginning in the policy change process.* For parents, implementation matters and often their innovative solutions depend upon parents working on the execution of new programs. Thus there is an even deeper engagement of parents in the system; they become the on-the-ground, go-to experts on the issues that matter to families.

The circle of policy change continues. Parents go back to their system insider allies and bring new insights, pushing the work further along. Parents take on more and more campaigns as they win and move on to something new, while continuing the intentional work of bringing more and more parents into the the COFI leadership development process.



# The COFI way to policy and systems change: A closer look

## 1

### Build relationships of trust among parents across communities

**Nuts and Bolts** Organizing parent leaders to change policies and systems begins by creating a sense of hope, trust and community through thoughtful and intentional relationship building. Relationships, and the skills to build them, are the foundation for parents' power down the line. We invest the time and set up a safe space for diverse parents to get to know each other deeply, first and foremost as parents—who all want the best for their children and families.

Relationships are built among parents who share experiences as leaders in local neighborhoods, and as graduates of COFI's two-year core leadership program, *Family Focused Organizing*. In *Phase 1: Self, Family & Team*, parents learn to set and accomplish goals for themselves, their families, and their schools and communities. They begin to see themselves as leaders and to work together in teams to strategically accomplish goals. In *Phase 2: Community Outreach & Action*, parents speak with hundreds of neighbors and community leaders, develop a community action campaign, and win local level change.

Trained and accomplished leaders come together across communities and share real stories of their experiences, and discuss what they learned in COFI training. They find common struggles and celebrate their accomplishments together. In relationships, they find shared strengths, visions, passions and values across differences of race, culture and community. COFI makes sure that all of these conversations are held bilingually so, regardless of primary language (in our case, Spanish and English), all parents can fully participate.



### This is how it looks in practice:

Fifteen years ago, 10 parent leaders from 10 school-based parent action teams working in diverse Chicago communities got together for the first time. They shared their experiences and their goals for themselves and their families: Maria had enrolled in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) course. She shared... in English. Carmen had started a business selling crocheted items that she made in her home. And Bernadetta, a grandmother, had begun walking to improve her health. They also all shared team accomplishments: In Austin, they established a Walking Club. In West Town, the teams had succeeded in getting their schools to stay open into the evening to offer adult education, youth recreation and social services to the community.

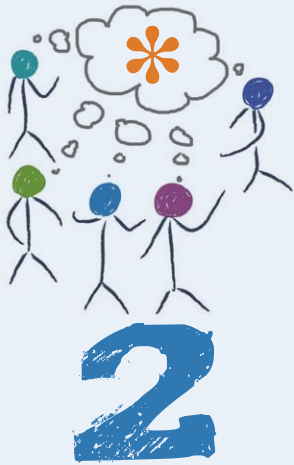
Every parent had something to say about the challenges of living in communities wracked by violence and the fears they had for their children. Though intense and sad, the shared experiences were not surprising. What was striking, though, was parents' positive approach. They came up with an idea: to work together across communities and host a safe and fun event for themselves and their children.

Calling it the Celebration of Hope, they invited 50 parent team members to "celebrate with families from other communities, share our victories and struggles, find some common ground, and have fun." At the event, each team presented a banner or display that they created to share their team's accomplishments.

*"A 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."*

*Now in its 16th year, the annual parent-organized Celebration of Hope Family Picnics brought together more than 250 children and parents from 15 Chicago communities to celebrate progress, get to know each other, and share food and fun across cultures and communities.*





## Parents create a shared vision and focus on positive change

**Nuts and Bolts** By sharing their stories with one another, parents identify common struggles and a shared vision of what needs to change. Their visions are focused on positive change rooted in their experiences—what really matters to them, their children and their communities.

*“COFI and POWER-PAC are authentic. Their organizing approach really does capture the concerns of the people in the communities.”*

*“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.”*

*“Through working with COFI, I’ve been enlightened around restorative justice and social justice... When it comes to policy change, parents bring a sense of urgency to an issue because they deal with it every day.”*



### This is how it looks in practice:

“I remember how it started. Fifteen or sixteen of us met several times at the COFI office, starting in 2003. We were from different neighborhoods, but had all been through COFI training. We had worked together and won a commitment for community schools. We wanted to think about what was next.

As we’ve done many times since then, we shared our personal stories and struggles. More and more, the subject turned to violence. As parents, we were frustrated and afraid. We were seeing our children, especially young sons, getting caught up in street violence: Daisy came in one day in tears. Her son, a freshman at Clemente High, was refusing to go back to school. He had been beaten in the locker room by other boys who had put their gym locks in their sweat socks and turned them into weapons. The school’s response? Suspend both her son and the other boys. No discussion. Her son feared for his safety and dug in his heels. He would not go back.

Paula shared that she had seen her three sons—one after another—go through similar experiences. Now all three were in prison, one of them leaving behind an infant son who she was raising. ‘When is it going to stop? How do we protect this next generation?’

We kept meeting and talking, and I remember Audie telling us his niece was suspended from kindergarten! Nelly’s 10-year-old son was threatened with being suspended for looking out the window, and Lynn’s 11-year-old foster son was nearing expulsion. More than half of us had a story of our child being suspended, being labeled as a ‘bad’ kid.

Our meetings got a clear focus: Stop making criminals of our kids. Stop kicking them out of school. Stop the school-to-prison pipeline.”— Lynn Morton and Nelly Torres, Co-Founders of POWER-PAC’s Elementary Justice Campaign

**“At a Chicago Public School Board meeting, we told them about one of our members. His five-year-old niece was suspended from kindergarten for five days for pushing a little boy who had been picking on her. The Board President was mortified. [Then CPS CEO] Arne Duncan told someone to grab us after the meeting and get our information.” —Parent leader Nelly Torres**

# 3

## Parents do their own research to inform recommendations for policy and systems change

**Nuts and Bolts** Parents themselves become experts on the issues and create a clear set of recommendations for what needs to change. They use the COFI “Web of Support” tool to look strategically at who else knows about the problem and who else is doing something about the problem. Then they invest themselves in community outreach, conversations with experts, and continuous discussion and reflection on what can work. They envision innovative solutions and a clear way to move forward.

*“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.”*

*“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.”*

*“Some... 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.”*



### This is how it looks in practice:

To address rising suspension rates in Chicago public elementary schools, parents asked their school-based team members to share stories about their children’s experience with school discipline—both positive and negative. Parents also spoke with teachers with whom they had built relationships over the years. And they spoke with friendly school administrators.

They built a list of advocacy groups working on school discipline and juvenile justice issues and began to set up meetings to better understand the issue. One such meeting was with a nationally-known advocate and activist. They called her office to request a meeting—which took some time since her handlers screened her calls. With persistence, they got a meeting after several months. Twenty parents filled a conference room and got the message that time was limited.

Parents firmly but politely stuck to their agenda. Each parent shared her story— young children suspended, sons in prison, kids who were afraid to return to school. They shared their vision for ending out-of-school suspensions as one way to break the school-to-prison pipeline.

The personal stories changed everything. “I’ve been waiting for you my whole life,” was the expert’s reply. Deeply familiar with the issues as an advocate for juvenile justice, the new ingredient was parents ready to stand up and fight back.

She talked to the parents about “zero tolerance” policies mushrooming across the country, pushing more and more young students—especially young men of color—out of school. She explained concepts of restorative justice and recommended other advocacy leaders in Chicago who would love to work with the parents.

Over the next three months, the parents systematically met with each of those recommended advocates and came back to their planning table weekly to unpack what they were learning about policies that needed to change and what new ideas they had for addressing the problem. Soon, they had outlined five recommendations for moving toward their vision for the Elementary Justice Campaign.

*Parents identified restorative justice practices as the most child and family friendly strategy for addressing school discipline and violence. Shown below, a Peace Circle at Wells High, run by COFI and POWER-PAC parent Peacemakers.*





## Parents build relationships with policymakers who can influence decisions

**Nuts and Bolts** Parents seek out people in policymaking roles who will take the time to truly listen. Indeed, these decision makers report being changed by the parents' stories. The "professional" across the table connected on a personal level; perhaps they, too, grew up in a low-income community of color. Perhaps they had experienced the loss of a loved one to violence. Or, maybe, they struggled as a single working mother to find good child care or to gain respect at their children's school. Parents build relationships with policymakers who understand them at a gut—and heart—level.

In the process, policy "insiders" become champions for the parents' ideas and vision. They connect the parents with others and invite them to the decision-making tables—appointing parent leaders to councils and task forces. Working hand-in-hand, parents and professionals negotiate and then implement innovative solutions.

And, when extra pressure from outside the system is needed, parents rally their advocacy allies, the media and other groups to build necessary political will. In this inside/outside strategy, parents provide cover for key insider allies working to make the change happen.

Throughout, COFI staff work with both the parents and the policy professionals, to assure that nothing gets lost in the translation—whether that is literal translation from English to Spanish and back, or just helping people who live in different worlds to hear and understand each other.



### ▶ This is how it looks in practice:

"We had done 5,000 surveys door-to-door with families in our neighborhoods to find out why so many toddlers and preschoolers weren't in a quality early learning program. *Why Isn't Johnny in Preschool?* reports on the problems, and our recommendations for change.

Now we wanted to bring our data and our recommendations to the top policymakers in Chicago early learning. We met with the head of Early Childhood Education for CPS and the Deputy Chicago Commissioner over Head Start.

We told them the stories we heard at the doors: grandmothers watching several grandchildren who couldn't get their preschoolers to a half-day program while also taking care of infants; undocumented immigrant moms who felt panic when agencies asked questions while enrolling kids, worried that their answers would lead to an immigration investigation. And we told them of young mothers in our communities who went to enroll their children, only to be asked personal questions about the 'baby daddy'—scaring the teen moms away.

But we had ideas about how to solve each problem!

We proposed peer-to-peer outreach to families, where we could talk about the importance of early learning, address their fears, and explain the enrollment process. We proposed parents be Walking Preschool Bus conductors, to help address transportation and safety concerns.

Both Barbara Bowman at CPS and Vanessa Rich at Head Start helped make these things happen. Now, we have a five-year track record of Head Start Ambassadors helping achieve full enrollment in their communities, and CPS has Walking Preschool Bus programs at ten schools."

—Gloria Harris, Laurella Scaggs and Felipa Mena, leaders of the POWER-PAC Early Learning Campaign

*"I spent a couple of hours visiting COFI and it was really transformational for me."*

Parents' research and recommendations on early learning broke new ground. Their findings are detailed in the report, *Why Isn't Johnny in Preschool?* (right).



# 5

## Parents win, implement innovative and successful solutions... and the circle of policy change continues

**Nuts and Bolts** Winning a commitment to change a policy or to fund a new program is not the end of the policy change process. From the parents' point of view, it is the beginning of the solution. COFI parent leaders make sure that local communities, schools, and agencies are *truly* implementing the policy as parents envisioned.

**Implementation really matters. Often, parents themselves are on the ground, executing new programs and policies.**

- Parents advocated for and then implemented parents-in-the-classrooms programs to mentor students.
- Parents fought to restore recess and now work as recess monitors to assure quality implementation of this new district-wide policy won in 2012.
- Parents campaigned for restorative justice practices in elementary and high schools in Chicago and then worked to demonstrate how suspensions can be avoided by utilizing parent-led Peace Centers (or peace rooms) in the schools. Parents are trained as Peacemakers, leading students in peace circles and helping young people to unpack their behaviors and learn to resolve conflicts.

**“I went to the meetings that the Juvenile Court Chief Judge was hosting. I was one of only a few parents. I could not speak English, so a COFI staffer translated for me. There was a lot of disagreement in those meetings at first, but when people started to notice that a parent was asking for Restorative Justice programs and making it clear that those programs were working, they paid more attention.”**  
—Felipa Mena, parent leader and Peacemaker



### This is how it looks in practice:

“When we began our Recess for All! Campaign, 82% of Chicago public elementary students did NOT have daily recess. Can you believe that? We knew from our experience and research that this was falling most heavily on our kids—African American and Latino students in poorer neighborhood schools. The schools *with* recess were in well-off areas of the city and magnet schools. This is what led to our Recess For All! Campaign.

We took our concerns to the district administrators but budget issues and red tape held us up. Our insider allies counseled us that we needed to build the political and public will. So we did.

We persuaded individual school principals to test recess restoration at some of our schools. We won new playgrounds at schools so there would be a place for our children to have recess. We talked to neighbors, advocates, and the teachers' union. We raised the issue with our state elected officials. And we built a list of allies and partners and won their support. Our state legislators worked with us to introduce a bill to mandate recess. We got front-page coverage in Chicago's daily newspapers. For five years, we kept the pressure on—working inside and outside the system until we successfully negotiated a new Recess in School Policy at the district level.



But as it was implemented, we saw the problems. Schools that did not have playgrounds held recess in classrooms. Students were threatened with the removal of recess if they didn't behave in class. Some schools implemented recess but it was regimented with calisthenics and fitness workouts.

We had spent long hours with district administrators to clarify that recess was to be downtime for students. Time to run free. Time to de-stress. Time to get fresh air. It was written into policy that restricting recess as a disciplinary practice was forbidden. But the rubber hit the road at the school level, so we initiated a parent outreach effort. We educated parents about the *real* recess policies and we helped teach parents how to help support their schools in implementing recess the *right* way—including helping parents to become recess monitors at some schools. Now we work with the district Wellness Coordinator to assure that school staff and parents are trained and recess is appropriately implemented!” —Rosazlia Grillier and Graciela Suarez, leaders of the POWER-PAC Recess for All! Campaign

**The circle of deepening policy change continues. Our model of parent engagement creates a snowball effect.**

Parents engaged in the work become experts on the solutions. More and more community members learn about and embrace the broader parent-driven vision: less use of punitive discipline measures; enrolling more infants, toddlers and preschoolers in early learning programs; expanding recess and physical activity for all young people, and more.

The circle of policy change continues, digging deeper on the issues, repeating the process of research, relationship building, finding new allies, organizing pressure both inside and outside the systems, and winning change. Then, celebrating victories, implementing new programs, learning more, and repeating the process again, we *continue the intentional work of bringing more and more parents into the mix.*



*“We see COFI and POWER-PAC as partners... 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.”*



## Community Centers in Schools

*The first COFI-trained parent-led citywide campaign aimed to secure sustainable resources and policy support for school-based community centers in Chicago Public Schools and across Illinois.*

### Background

In 1996, when this campaign began, virtually all of Chicago's public schools were shut down by mid-afternoon when classes ended—and yet, many parents identified the school building as the only community institution they felt to be safe.

### Recommendations

- Allow the use of school buildings as community centers open for a range of programming for children, parents and families during afterschool, weekend and summer hours.
- Assure parent and community involvement in decision making regarding the planning and oversight of these school-based community centers.
- Include services for parents such as job training and leadership training.
- When workable, prioritize parents and community residents in hiring and employment at the community centers.

### Highlights and Victories

In 1996, a COFI-trained parent team at Funston Elementary opened the first community learning center in partnership with Logan Square Neighborhood Association. A year later, parent leaders from across Chicago came together to create the Citywide Parent Policy Committee to support opening more community centers within Chicago Public Schools. Parents developed and released a concept paper on the need for public funding and supports for community schools.

By 1998, the parent leaders collaborated with Voices for Illinois Children to create the Illinois Community Schools Partnership

and traveled to New York to meet with the U.S. Department of Education and inform the creation of the 21st Century Community Learning Center program. Parent leaders worked with CPS officials to revamp CPS's application for program funding and won \$250,000 in new dollars from the district to open five parent-run community schools.

By 2000, parents were running 12 community schools with over \$1 million in funding and providing services and activities to thousands of children and their families including adult education, youth sports, arts, music, homework help, college-bound programming and family events and trips. Parents lobbied the Illinois legislature in support of the Illinois After-School Initiative Task Force and helped create a coalition which grew into the Illinois Federation of Community Schools. A parent leader has served on the Illinois Federation since its formation.

In 2002, parents met with the then new CPS CEO Arne Duncan to negotiate changes to the CPS After School Counts program and, with coalition partners, persuaded him to commit to opening 100 school-based community centers. The Campaign to Expand Community Schools in Chicago was born and quickly grew to 150 schools. CPS officials signed a Declaration of Support endorsing parents' recommendations for parents as partners in Community Schools in Chicago.

COFI and its parent leaders continue to provide leadership training for parents and training on parent engagement for school and community center staff. Parents fulfill many roles at the centers. They serve on oversight committees and as resource coordinators, program developers, security staff, childcare workers, paid or volunteer tutors, and mentors for adults and children alike. They survey families, community leaders, and school staff, and welcome community leaders to the centers.

## Elementary Justice

*Breaking the school-to-prison pipeline was the goal of the parent-led effort to change the overly punitive discipline policies within Chicago public schools to a culture of dignity and respect, based on the philosophy of restorative justice.*

### Background

- In Chicago Public Schools, African-American males, though representing only 23% of the school population, represented 48% of suspensions and 57% of expulsions.
- In a series of community forums hosted by POWER-PAC, 37% of participating parents had had a child suspended and more than 2 out of 3 reported that they were not notified appropriately of the suspension.
- Students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out by the 10th grade than their peers that have never been suspended.
- A child who has been suspended is more likely to commit a crime or be incarcerated as an adult.

### Recommendations

- End out-of-school suspensions, except in the case of serious threats to student safety.
- Reinstate recess and breaks, including more physical education in school day.
- Implement violence prevention programs and programs based on the philosophy of restorative justice.
- Provide training on discipline policies to parents, school staff, and administrators and provide information on school discipline policies in a more parent-friendly format.
- Provide school discipline data school-by-school and involve parents in oversight and accountability in creating and reviewing discipline policies.

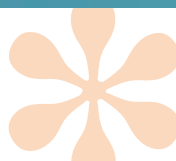
### Highlights and Victories

Parent leaders first presented their recommendations to the Chicago Public School Board of Education in 2004. Michael Scott was Board President and, in 2005, he committed to support parents and fund parent-led research. In the next year, more than 160 parents came to three community forums, providing data about their experiences with school discipline. CPS also supported POWER-PAC leaders trips to Minneapolis and Los Angeles to learn about restorative justice and peace-keeping efforts taking place in elementary schools there. The first changes were made to the CPS Student Code of Conduct in 2006. Parents won funding and opened the first

### POWER-PAC Citywide Leadership Council, 2013-14

Charlene Campbell, Concepción Escobar, Rosazlia Grillier, Gloria Harris, Deborah Hope, Christina Martinez, Felipa Mena, Lynn Morton, Marietta Morton, Rosalva Nava, Mable Rogers, Concepción Saldivar, Maria Sanchez, Laurella Scaggs, Regina Simms, Nelly Torres, Treyonda Towns





parent-led Peace Center in an elementary school. Since then more than half a million dollars has supported parent-led restorative justice programs in schools.

In 2007, the CPS Student Code of Conduct was rewritten to replace “zero tolerance” with a philosophy of “restorative justice” with alternative options to using overly punitive discipline. Pre-K and kindergartners were excluded from out-of-school suspensions and mandates to call the police for certain behaviors were removed. Each year since this victory, the Code has been revamped to include more support for “restorative justice.”

COFI published POWER-PAC’s *Parent-to-Parent Guide to Restorative Justice in the Chicago Public Schools* in 2010, providing peer-to-peer training to over 500 parents on their rights, the practice and philosophy of restorative justice, and how to push for it in their local schools.

POWER-PAC was appointed to the Council of State Government Justice Center’s Discipline Consensus project in 2012, informing federal guidelines on school discipline released in 2014 by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice to reduce racial disparities in school discipline and encourage the use of positive discipline approaches. A POWER-PAC leader testified in Washington, D.C. at a Congressional briefing on her work as a Peacemaker in Chicago schools.

More major changes in the Code of Conduct were passed in the summers of 2012 and 2014. Now, suspension may only be used as a “last resort” and the maximum a student can be suspended is 5 days (reduced from 10). Students in preschool through 2nd grade cannot be suspended and POWER-PAC won a ban on group punishment, including silent lunch which was used to punish entire student bodies in some schools. Mandatory expulsions are eliminated for students in 5th grade and younger and, also in 2014, POWER-PAC and its partners won the citywide release of discipline data to improve accountability and passed a similar law at the state level.

### Early Learning

***Access to high quality early care and learning opportunities can be difficult for low-income children and families. Parent leaders pushed for the creation of a seamless system for all children ages zero to five, which includes quality, full-day, year-round and universal preschool.***

#### Background

- In some pockets of Chicago, as many as 60% of preschool-aged children who are eligible for public-funded early education programs are not enrolled.
- The effects of quality early childhood education include higher reading and math scores, higher high school graduation and college attendance rates, and lower grade retention and dropout rates.
- Children who attend quality preschools develop stronger social and emotional skills and increased self-confidence.
- Over a lifetime, children who participate in quality early childhood education are less likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system or become teen parents, and they tend to have higher incomes, lower crime and incarceration rates, and lower unemployment rates.
- 90% of a child’s brain growth occurs before their 5th birthday.

#### Recommendations

- Provide transportation to get children to and from preschool including van and bus service or creative solutions like Walking Preschool Buses.
- Adjust preschool schedules so they can accommodate family and work schedules.
- Support parent-to-parent outreach to families with the message about the importance of early learning and to help connect them to quality programs.
- Fund home-visiting programs that bring resources, education, and support to parents and caregivers.
- Reduce co-payments for child care for low-income families so that they can afford all-day combined preschool and child care programs.
- 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.
- Help families who receive child care subsidies to understand how they can still enroll children in preschool or Head Start.
- Create more slots for children where they are needed and support recruitment efforts where slots are not filled.

### Highlights and Victories

In 2008, parents partnered with Illinois Action for Children and others and went door-to-door in 19 low and moderate-income communities to talk with over 5,000 parents and caregivers about why participation in early childhood programs is so low. Parent leaders organized forums in Englewood and the West Loop that brought parents, educators and policymakers together to develop recommendations to address access barriers. One long-time POWER-PAC member and mother and grandmother from the Austin community, was appointed to the Illinois Early Learning Council.

In 2009, the parents released *Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?*—a report that documents what was learned in parent-to-parent outreach about barriers to access and provides real-world recommendations to get more children into quality programs. That same year, they won funding from the City of Chicago to launch the Head Start Ambassador program, a parent-to-parent, door-to-door, outreach project to connect low-income families to early childhood resources and programs. Head Start reached full enrollment every year after the Ambassador project began.

In 2010, CPS agreed to support a pilot program for Walking Preschool Buses which in 2014 was expanded to 10 schools.

POWER-PAC’s recommendations helped Illinois leverage a \$3.5 million federal grant that included funding for pilot programs in six sites to test out POWER-PAC recommendations about improving access for “hard-to-reach” families to quality programs.

The results of these pilots then informed the Governor’s Early Childhood Development office and the Early Learning Council as they have integrated parent engagement and parent-led outreach into Illinois’ initiatives on home visiting, Early Childhood Action Partnerships and, most recently, the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge efforts statewide.

In 2012 and 2013, COFI and POWER-PAC released “How we got Johnny, Jada and José into preschool,” a series of policy/practice briefs that share the philosophy and practices of effective parent-led projects.

Finally, most recently, parents have been successful advocates with staff at the Mayor’s Office and the CPS’ Early Childhood Education Department, resulting in better access and a streamlined application process in Chicago’s new Ready-to-Learn initiative.

### Recess for All!/Health

*While working on school discipline policies, parents began to see that children who were denied recess or other breaks for physical activity during the school day were more likely to act out in class and that this detracted from their learning. After years of hard work, in 2012, parents won the return of recess for ALL 260,000 Chicago public elementary students!*

#### Background

- In 2005, 82% of Chicago public elementary schools did not have daily recess.
- Nationally, African-American students have less time for recess than their white counterparts.
- One out of every three African-American students in elementary school doesn't have recess, whereas one out of every six white students doesn't have recess.

#### Recommendations

- Reinstate recess and breaks, including more physical education in school days.
- Build allies in the children's health community, especially among those working to address childhood obesity.
- Actively ensure implementation of recess.
- Engage in other health justice issues including access to health foods, universal breakfast, and community walkability.

#### Highlights and Victories

POWER-PAC kicked off the Recess for All! campaign with a street theater press conference in 2005, and the issue resonated immediately with the media. By 2007, parents had identified legislative allies and introduced a bill to mandate recess statewide. POWER-PAC brought 100 parents and children to Springfield to lobby their legislators and testify in legislative hearings.

State legislation created the Statewide Recess Task Force in 2011, and a POWER-PAC parent was appointed by the governor to the group. The Task Force recommended reinstating recess throughout the state.

This strategy created a groundswell in Chicago, and, in 2012, the Chicago Public Schools reinstated recess for all 260,000 Chicago elementary school students. Since then, POWER-PAC and CPS have co-hosted forums on CPS Recess Guidelines and worked to assure parents across the city know that these policies, negotiated with parents, say that withholding recess is not to be used as a disciplinary procedure and that recess is to include free play. In 2014, CPS adopted a policy to return daily physical education to every student.

### Stepping Out of Poverty (STOP)

*Beginning in 2009, with the financial crisis of the Great Recession, POWER-PAC leaders set the goal of working to improve the economic security of low-income families and supporting policies to help families build long-term financial assets, especially college savings accounts, to end the intergenerational cycle of poverty.*

#### Background

- 43% of African-American female-headed households and 46% of Latina-headed households live in poverty.
- African-Americans and Latino families own less than a dime of wealth for every dollar white families own.
- 15% of families live below the poverty line and 27% do not have the assets to survive financially for three months if faced with an emergency.
- Children are six times more likely to attend college if they know someone is saving for their future and supporting their dreams.
- A college degree gives a young person more opportunities to build wealth over a lifetime, yet only 3% of Chicago City College students ever receive any college credits and overall 40% of City College students fail.

#### Recommendations

- Support policies such as a public-supported Children's Savings Account program that helps low-income families save for college.
- Eliminate asset tests and asset limits in all public benefit programs to incentivize savings.
- Support expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit and increasing the minimum wage to increase family income now.
- Improve access to free or affordable banking services for those who don't use or have access to banks.
- Encourage lending institutions and other community-based solutions such as lending circles to offer affordable alternatives to payday loans and help families to work together to save.
- Expand financial literacy programs for both adults and children.
- Expand advising and other student services at Chicago City Colleges to maximize student participation and graduation rate in GED, college and job training programs.

#### Highlights and Victories

In 2009, POWER-PAC, in partnership with the Illinois Asset Building Group, hosted a forum, "POWER-PAC's Response to the Financial Crisis," where they provided financial literacy how-to's, resources around the Earned Income Tax Credit and other public benefit programs, and training on the historical context of the growth of the racial wealth gap in the U.S.

By 2010, parents succeeded, with legislative partners, in winning the creation of a Legislative Task Force to explore Children's Savings Accounts in Illinois.

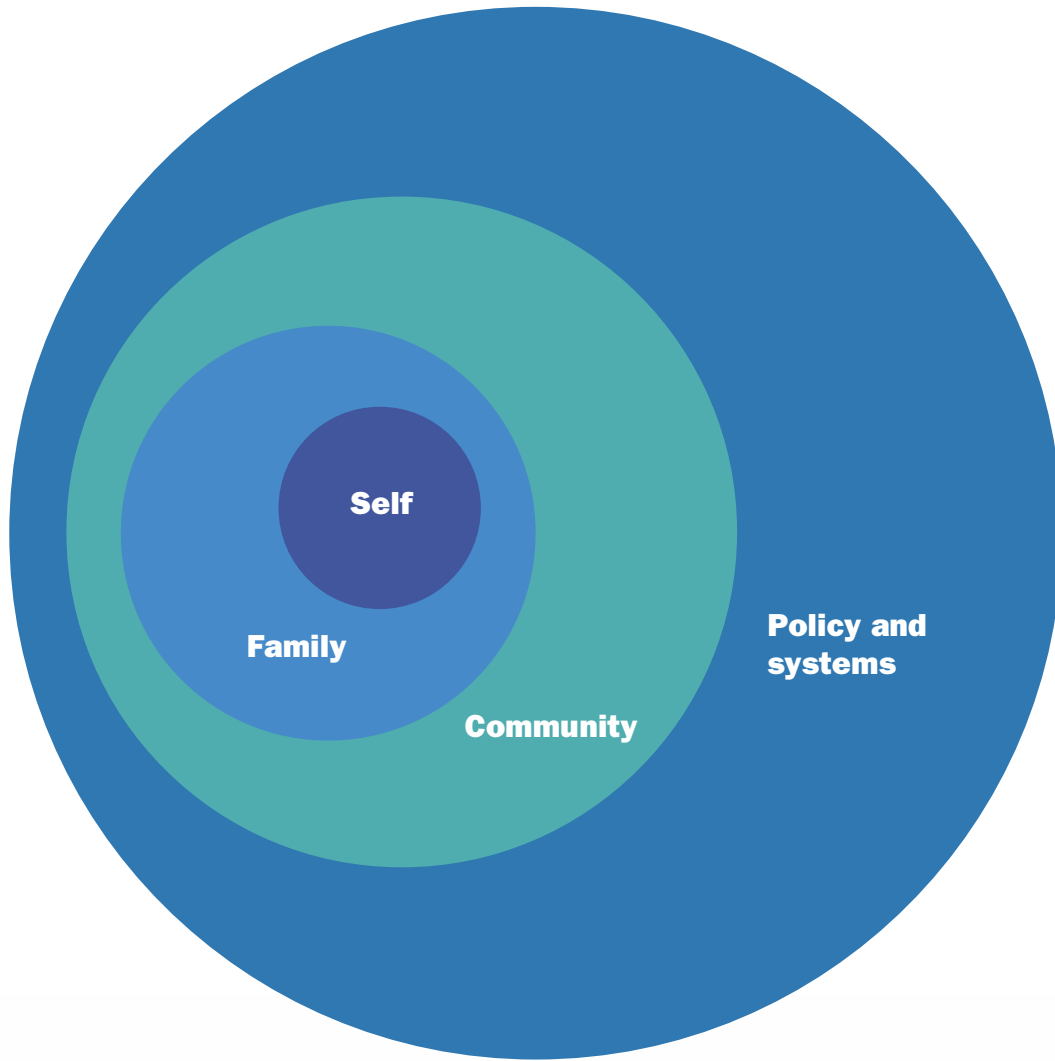
In 2011, parents collected and videotaped stories of families that have had to spend down savings in order to qualify for public benefits programs and parents testified about these experiences at national and state gatherings on asset building advocacy. Two years later, parents and their partners won the passage of new legislation to eliminate asset limitations in Illinois' Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.

POWER-PAC and its partners also persuaded the Illinois Comptroller to allow ITIN (Individual Tax Identification Numbers—used by undocumented immigrants) to be used to open College 529 Savings accounts in Illinois. They got the City of Chicago and 10 local banks to provide a new program offering free or affordable banking services for low-income and immigrant families.

Over the past several years, POWER-PAC leaders have co-hosted financial literacy classes for over 75 parents in Chicago and Racial Wealth Gap Roundtables across Illinois to build the coalition around asset building policies. In 2014, POWER-PAC surveyed its own members about economic security issues and learned that:

- 69% of the families live on less than \$20,000 per year.
- Most report that their monthly expenses exceed their monthly income.
- 45% are not employed, and
- 40% live with exorbitant levels of debt largely from medical bills and student loans.

This year, parents are redoubling their efforts to support a raise in the minimum wage in Chicago and Illinois, and focusing on food insecurity issues.



## COFI's Theory of Change

*The Core Values of Family Focused Organizing*

### **1. Self**

Leadership begins from within. Parents individually assess their needs, wants and values. They create supportive teams with one another, set goals, and establish plans for achieving those goals.

### **2. Family**

Parents become stronger leaders in their families. Parents support one another in gaining skills and confidence as family leaders, and also learn to set goals with their family members.

### **3. Community**

Parents work together to create change in community institutions such as schools, day care centers and social service agencies. To make their community more family-friendly, parent leaders meet with neighbors, find common ground, develop new programs, organize community-wide campaigns, and realize the power of a collective voice.

### **4. Policy and systems**

Parent leaders create a community-based policy agenda that starts with common concerns raised by parents, such as childcare, safety and school quality. Together, parent leaders organize to communicate their ideas and concerns to decisionmakers. They may change programs and challenge policies that aren't meeting the needs of families, and they build partnerships with professionals to develop programs and policies that work.

**Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)** embraces a mission to strengthen the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life—from local institutions and communities to the city and state policy arenas.

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

We organize low-income parents of color (mostly mothers and grandmothers) who, in turn, have built local and citywide organizations that are fighting for change around issues affecting families, and attracting attention nationally to their innovative policy solutions and organizing steps.

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



**COFI  
Community Organizing  
and Family Issues**

1436 W. Randolph Street, 4th floor  
Chicago, Illinois 60607  
312 226-5141  
[www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org)

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

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



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

A COFI Project

Appreciation and gratitude to POWER-PAC parents and to all of our donors, funders and partners, especially the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for funding this report.

