



People want to know how to get more parents like us to come to the table and work on issues and policies for families and children...

We're glad you asked!



COFI
Community
Organizing and
Family Issues



It's been a rough few years. And especially tough and traumatizing for Black and Brown families and their communities. COVID; police killings and brutality; Black Lives Matter and the ugly backlash of racism; immigrant families living in fear, and in Chicago, sleeping on police station floors.

Without a doubt, the communities where COFI organizes and our parent leaders live have been hit the hardest.

And yet—here we are. Stronger than ever. More than three years since the start of COVID, the resilience, commitment, and passion of parents is remarkable. Moms on a Mission is COFI's annual lobby day at the State Capitol, and **this year, more families than ever before banded together to win big policy changes**, like *Smart Start Illinois*, a historic initiative, to transform early childhood education and care.

And now here you are! There is a surge of parent leadership and organizing, not just at COFI, but across the country. We are hearing from many people like you who work in government, organizations, schools, and advocacy groups and want to know how to work better with parents.

We are asked: **How do we get parents to the table? What does it take to engage them? Will parents support our issues? How can the participation be real?**

You've come to the right place. At COFI, parents are partners in *all* that we do. This report comes from our experiences, and we have worked hard to share what we've learned. You will hear how parent leaders can move things



COFI's mission has always been to ensure that parents—particularly mothers and grandmothers—otherwise outside the centers of power, have a central voice in decisions that matter most to their families and communities. Our core value is that **those who are most affected by issues should be at the table making decisions on those issues.**



forward as partners in organizations and on issues. You will learn what you need to consider right from the start, with three key ideas to help you and your organization integrate parent leaders as a force for social change.

Most of all, you will get the nitty gritty on how to find and recruit parents, to welcome their leadership into your efforts, and to build a fruitful and powerful alliance.

Nearly 30 years of COFI organizing and supporting parent leaders has taught us what works. At the start, please recognize that **building a team of parent leaders requires an investment of time, money, and resources.** One parent or one meeting doesn't cut it. A survey or a focus group doesn't give you a voice-of-the-people badge. It isn't enough to have a single staff person siloed on "parent engagement."

We are glad there is so much new interest and respect for including parents' bird's eye view to make things work better for children and families. Phrases like *centering parent voices, equity and inclusion, parent engagement, lived experience, culturally relevant, parent empowerment...* are all in the mix.

We hear these as positive intentions; but what do the words really mean? **Truly, it all comes down to taking the time to build relationships that are real.**

What would it be like to get to know us—and for us to get to know you? If we are going to be effective together, we will both need to gain trust, and to really understand and respect each other. We have learned about this! Just like us, you will need curiosity and genuine interest. You will need patience, and a big heart. You can find connections, but it might not be easy.

But, wow, when it works, when parents can share and partners can take it in, good things will happen. Through COFI, we've been able to win real change for our families and communities. That happens when we are truly partners with those in a position to change policies and systems. People like you!

The very purpose of COFI is to make sure that parents like us have a powerful seat at the tables where decisions are made about our children and families. We seek out allies and decision-makers who want to hear what we know, respect our experience, and step into our world. If this is who you are—**we're glad you asked.**

Rosazlia Grillier
Past President, POWER-PAC IL
COFI Board Co-Chair

Liliana Olayo
Past President, POWER-PAC IL
COFI Board Member



One example of parent leadership that might be familiar to you

In Chicago, providers and policy makers struggled to fill preschool slots in communities where many of our parents live—despite strategies to connect with “hard-to-reach” families.

Parent leaders in our Early Learning Campaign took action, going door to door to find out why families weren't signing up. As trusted ambassadors, parents were able to identify barriers that providers could not.

The insights into how the programs themselves were hard to reach for the families led to policies and practices that filled—and continue to fill—available slots for preschoolers.

What can parents bring to your table?

Big impact!

Parents have the biggest stake in how their children can be safe, supported, and thrive in the world.

No one is more engaged, committed and passionate.

No voice is more powerful and compelling.



Parents can contribute as ...

Real-world experts

Parents can be policy wonks, too.

Meet **Rosazlia Grillier**. No one knows fees-and-fines justice issues like her. Recent Aspen Institute National Fellow and member of the City and County Fines and Fees Justice Initiative, Ms. Rose (as many affectionately call her) is the go-to parent leader in Chicago for the Mayor's policy team, the Chicago Community Trust, and state-level advocacy groups. How did she do that? She persisted through years of losing efforts to finally see change happen in Chicago and Illinois. She worked with hundreds of other parent leaders in Black and Brown communities all over the state. She's unstoppable, and now she is a trusted national expert on what works.

Persuasive storytellers

Parents capture hearts and minds by skillfully sharing their authentic lived experiences.

Sisters **Cyecye and Regina Simms** show how powerful stories from real life can be. They've become influential voices in negotiations with utility companies and the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC).

In testimony, the sisters gave a face to the thousands of families enduring skyrocketing bills and utility shutoffs. "We're about to be without heat. We will have to rely on electric space heaters to keep our family warm. This is dangerous and shouldn't have to be."

Their ability to convey reality with dignity and power turns passion into action. With other mothers, they have already successfully made the case before the ICC for debt relief and payment plans that are adjusted based on income and hardship.



Researchers

Parents can collect more in-depth data than you can.

Parents do their own research. They interview community members and peers, and get to the heart of the problem in ways that those from outside the community just can't do. For example, parents surveyed over 300 families statewide about their experiences with poverty, debt, and financial security issues. Their findings have informed a boatload of initiatives, including the Chicago Fines, Fees and Access Collaborative, the passage of an expansion of the Illinois Earned Income Credit, and the national Fines and Fees Justice Initiative.

Recently, parents, like **Esmeralda Martinez**, completed a thousand interviews across Illinois on children and family mental health and trauma issues.

The best messengers

Parents have credibility with other parents.

"We can tell it like it is. We listen. And, they trust us." –**Susana Salgado**
Parent-to-parent strategies include parents as paid ambassadors, staff roles as relationship builders, and leadership roles as Peer Trainers and Organizers.

Parents conduct door-to-door outreach around programs such as preschool enrollment or COVID vaccinations, for example. They engage in work as peacemakers in schools, and serve as trusted community health workers. Right now, leaders are testing a pilot program where mothers are coaching other new mothers around trauma. Parents are a critical resource for culturally relevant and trustworthy messaging, engagement, and information delivery.

Advocates

Parents are fierce advocates for their children and families.

As an immigrant to the U.S. from Mexico, **Liliana Olayo** became a passionate activist as she navigated the local public school system for her own children.

In addition to her statewide leadership, she is the chair of her school district's Bilingual Council. Over the course of two years, Liliana built the membership from 8 to 200 parents.

Teams of leaders

Teams harness the collective wisdom of diverse parents.

It is never just the one lone voice. It's all about the team working across communities, sharing insights, and wielding a collective voice. We do not believe in only inviting one parent, or "token voice," to the table—but truly gathering the collective wisdom of diverse parents. This is what makes their message and agenda transformational.



As Aretha said,

You better think!

At COFI, we've seen that the best partnerships with parents have some important dynamics in common. Think about how these might work for you.

Keep in mind that this is neither fast nor simple, but that is the nature of the work of advancing equity.

No matter how big or small your goals, if you ground your actions with parents in these attitudes and intentions, you will have more success.

We hope you will get grounded in **three key ideas** that will help us change the world – together.



We are the most helpful when we can be really involved in every step, no matter how small it might seem to you.



If you are trying to help, but you expect me to just do what you say, that's insulting. On the other hand, if you're willing to listen to me about what is important to my family and community, we can work together. We have a relationship.



#1 Share power

Right at the start, set the intention to have parents as equal partners and decision-makers in your effort. Think about how different this is from inviting parents to your table, but expecting them to simply fit into a preset agenda or an existing board or committee—someone else's idea of what they should do.

Can you commit to some letting go of some of the control and building power with a radically different group of people? Can you recognize parents as leaders with a wealth of experience and information that should impact decision-making?

Sharing power is how you will gain the most and the best of what parents can offer. Establishing a basis for mutual respect and trust will result in new and creative strategies. It's a partnership that will change how you approach problems and help you see issues that weren't even on your radar before.



If you can't translate the meeting into the language that I speak, I can't participate. But if you *do* translate for me, I can contribute and will feel seen, heard, and valued. It might take you a bit out of your comfort zone but you can meet me where I'm at.

If you invest in us, then we'll invest in you. We appreciate you approaching us with loads of intentionality and compassion, but we also will notice if you offer to reimburse my travel, or help with childcare, or provide a meal. We notice if you are putting your money where your mouth is!

I've been at many partner organization tables. Believe me, I know I'm not your typical board member. If you want me to feel welcome, create a plan that really welcomes me. Put it on your agenda!

At COFI, leadership training includes how to build relationships with each other, with policymakers, and with partners. We look directly at barriers and how to overcome real differences, and so we notice and appreciate when we're approached with the same respect.

We are so eager to share and have a productive relationship—but make an effort to make it easy for me to be there and contribute.

#2 Change the culture

We all know that adding new and different people to the mix *will* change the dynamics of how things get done. Whether it's planning a gathering for families or a board meeting, you can't control the change, but you expect it. Prepare to be surprised and to stay open to understanding that is happening.

Are you willing to change how you do business? Even better, are you excited to embrace a change in your group's culture? If your goal is to center the voice and engage parents, start by making your table and your effort welcoming! Think: Have you been invited to a meeting and felt left out or disrespected? How can you avoid doing that to parents? Hold the meeting bilingually? Open the meeting with an opportunity to share something about their families?

#3 Invest in parents

Like every endeavor to build stronger organizations and power, parent leadership requires a strategic investment of time and resources—time to build relationships and establish trust and respect—and resources to support parents' participation.

Parents will need their own space to develop as a team with confidence and a collective voice. When you work with COFI, our organizers support the parent-leader team development and navigate the partnership to make it as productive as possible. This high level of support is ideal. Bring in a group to your effort that can fill this role.

How do I connect with parents?

Where do I *find* parents?

How do I get parents to *show up*?

Share power

If you want to create new energy, a richly diverse mix of opinions and experiences, and a powerful voice at your table, **invite several parents**. A single person who is expected to represent “all parents” will understandably feel tokenized and unvalued.

Keep in mind that *parents’ gifts lie in providing a bird’s eye view, being the storytellers, and informing nuts and bolts decisions* about what will help families. As they join your table, you will be building a new source of power for your issue or policy.

Where and how do I connect with parents?

Go where parents are already gathering and comfortable. Look for Head Start parent councils, special ed parent groups, bilingual advisory

councils in schools, or other parent leadership and organizing groups like COFI. Introduce yourself to people personally, let them know about your project and how you think they can help. Invite them to participate in something specific. Once you make a connection with even one or two parents, ask *them* who else you should talk to.

If your work is embedded in a community, find parents where they are dropping their kids off at school or child care; sitting in a waiting room at the WIC office or health clinic; or at the laundromat. Go door to door and talk to people individually when other options are not working. Be strategic and use common sense.

This may be different from how you do other outreach work. Don’t rely on social media posts or expect flyers or community newsletters to bring success.

While some parents are online, most will likely never see your posts or flyers. Until you engage in a deeper conversation with parents, you are likely to find them overwhelmed and you will be competing with a lot of attention-grabbing factors.

Invest your time in building relationships. Take the time to get to know the parents one-on-one. Even when you partner with organizations in the community that already have strong connections with parents, you are still not off the hook. You need to really talk with (and listen to) the parents you want to bring into your effort.

Don’t expect easy success. **Experiment, be creative, and try new things.**

Change the culture

Invest in parents

Dos and Don’ts

DO be transparent about how parents’ input will be used in your time together. Share this information as early as possible.

DON’T expect parents to play roles that don’t make sense, such as very technical roles in the grant review process or asking them to analyze heavily specialized policy data.

DO work with parents you’ve recruited to connect with even more people. They know: their sisters, aunts, neighbors, and friends.

DON’T forget to translate all communications with parents including agendas and handouts.

DO ask parents to share their personal experience, perspective and story. And **DO listen to them.**

We were called 'hard to reach' by preschool and early learning programs. But our door-to-door and community research showed that the programs themselves were hard to reach.



It's essential: translate, traducir, همچرت

If you want parents from non-English-speaking communities to work with you (and given the changing populations in our communities, you should), then the #1 way to make them feel welcome is by translating *absolutely everything*. Make sure your invitation and any written materials (flyers, agendas, fact sheets) are available in your target languages.

Translation takes time and many organizations resist changes to their status quo. Translation can be a currency of participatory power to accomplish more in the arenas of social justice and equality. We believe it is critical to translate everything said at gatherings and meetings—and we do it consecutively so everyone can hear each other. Utilize a strong translator and be sure to pause frequently for the translation to occur.

When you invest the time and resources to make your effort more accessible to folks in communities you're trying to reach, you will see results. Even if you are not fluent in the language, you can learn to greet people, welcome them, and invite them to the next meeting in their language.

We call it "Turnout"

How do I get parents to show up?

Personal contact is key. Call each parent. They have busy lives, and most are not on email all day like you might be. Call and make sure they have all the information they need—date, time, location (make it clear if it's virtual), and tell parents if there will be **food and refreshments, childcare, transportation or transportation reimbursement, and translation.**

Invest in parents

If you want parents to have something prepared to share or talk about at your meeting, tell them. If there is a staff member available to help, offer that. Give plenty of notice so that there's time for folks to prepare and make arrangements. *Ease the barrier to entry as much as you can with the parents.* And, then call again the day before to remind them and let them know how much you value their role.

Parents will notice when you make an extra effort to invite and welcome them. In turn, you will have parents who are informed, prepared, and ready to engage!

When partners say they want diverse parent engagement, but then make no effort to translate and make it easier for us to communicate and understand, it tells us that they don't really care about what we have to say. They just want to check a box.



PARENTS AT THE TABLE

Helping transform a school district

In Skokie, Illinois, a small suburban school district, teachers and administrators recognized that the community had changed. Once a predominantly white district, the student body is now overwhelmingly composed of children of immigrant families. Families are from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and south of the U.S. border. Wanting to know why these families weren't participating in parent meetings, they asked COFI.

We offered parent leadership training to a diverse group of mothers and, with help from the school district's language interpreters, we held the training in 6 languages consecutively—Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, Aramaic, Spanish and English.

And what was the first thing that the parents wanted? More recognition and celebration of the diverse cultures they brought to the school district. Parents met with district leaders and proposed the creation of an Intercultural Affairs program. Spanish Family Liaison Sandra Herrera, who participated in the training, explains: "The idea was such a hit that the district has made it permanent, and parent leadership development is now institutionalized into how the district welcomes new families."

PHOTO COURTESY SKOKIE - MORTON GROVE SCHOOL DISTRICT 69

Great questions!

How can I welcome and integrate parents?

How do we start strong?

What changes do we need to make?

What do parents expect?

I am not a datapoint. I am a person and my story might bring insights that your data does not reflect.



Before your first meeting

Your first meeting with parents is likely a make-or-break moment, so be intentional. Set the stage for parents to be respected, and to demonstrate what they have to offer. Here are some questions to consider:

- Is the space equally comfortable and welcoming for parents, or is it set up with a head table and rows? Can you set up a more comfortable circle or tables in a rectangle so that everyone is on a level playing field and can look at each other? Even if you are in an auditorium, you can bring the head table off the stage and down to the audience level—or you can bring the your group onto the stage and hold the meeting there.
- Can you consult with the parents about the agenda so they can have a say even before the meeting has begun?
- How can parents lead the meeting or parts of the meeting? Can they co-facilitate? How about giving them the opportunity to report out to everyone, just like other committees or departments?

Change the tone of your meetings

Many groups we partner with on parent leadership have exclusively professional staff paid to do this work. That is great—we need professionals focusing on social change!

However, if this is you, you must pay particular attention to your culture. Paid staff tend to have a culture that suits them but may not build real relationships with parents. The first step is to recognize your culture (“the way we do things around here”) and then **ask yourself if you are willing to change to build genuine relationships with parents.**

Do your meetings tend to get right down to business items? Limit personal or family sharing? Keep to a tight agenda? Focus on academic and quantitative data/information? Or focus intensely on a set of action items?

Don't get us wrong. Nothing is wrong with these things that serve your paid staff and the professionals on your board. However, your meetings need to meet parents where they are.

Change the culture

Dos and Don'ts

DO engage in active listening with parents. Take notes, avoid interrupting, respond to what is said, and validate parents' ideas.

DO celebrate the diversity of experience and voice at the table, and be willing to sit back and listen.

DON'T accept classist, racist, or sexist behavior. Intervene appropriately if there is behavior that is shaming or condescending towards parents, or you notice microaggressions or “parent-splaining.”

DO make a good first impression at your first meeting with parents, and follow up with them when the meeting is over. Be diligent, include and consult with parents at every turn, listen, and learn.

DON'T forget about parents' basic needs. Again, provide food, drinks, and childcare at meetings. Provide transportation or transportation reimbursement. These are simple ways to show families that you care about their well-being.

Be curious, just ask the parents, and listen

From the opening introductions, ask parents to share something about their lives and experiences. At COFI, we often start meetings with a go-around to introduce yourself and share one thing about your family. You and others at the table can share, too.

Ask parents other questions that can inform your table. And, listen to what is shared. Be ready to hear things that might not align with your view of the issue. Now is not the time to say, “Well, that will never work.” Hear parents out, acknowledge and honor what they bring to the table.

Recognize that parents know the issues well—they live them! Remember that in challenged communities where people have to struggle to survive, you will find resiliency and creativity. As the parents say: “We’ve had to take a dime and make a dollar.” Let parents know how their input will be used.

Establish a new pace and experience

You can’t get around it: meetings will look different.

Your meetings may take longer or move slower. Taking your time and ensuring everyone can speak and be

A focus group is not a dialogue. We are not ‘lab rats.’ Why not a conversation where we can talk about what’s working, what’s not working, and what we would like to see changed? And, when you are done with your study, share back what you learned and what’s next.



heard is crucial. **Factor in time to get to know each other and for deeper questions and story sharing—it’s about building relationships and seeing one another as people.**

Remember to have fun. Everyone might benefit from a team-building game or activity, or a healing-centered practice, like breathing, stretches, or just time to acknowledge the impacts of trauma.

Don’t let jargon or acronyms get in the way. Use language that is accessible and community friendly. Stopping for translation will slow the pace of the meeting, but consider how that could be helpful for everyone. The insights from truly hearing all voices will balance out the extra time it takes.

Invest in parents

Share power

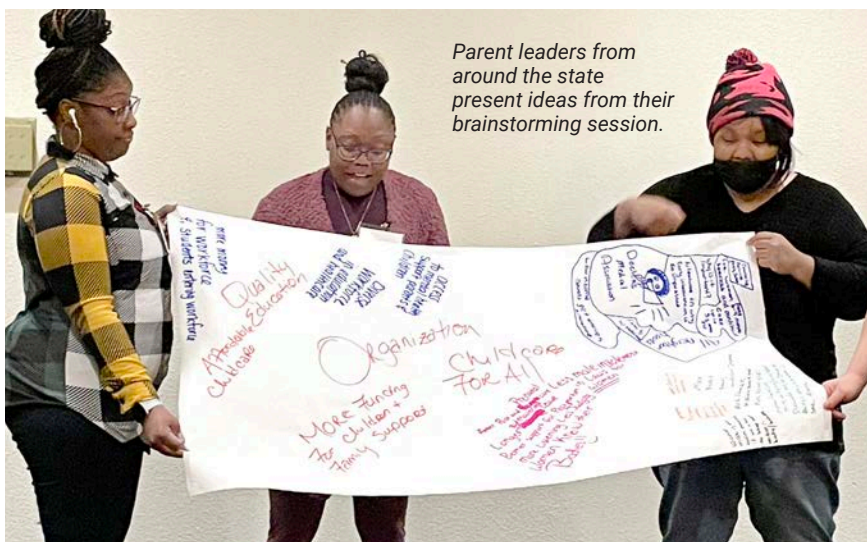


PARENTS AT THE TABLE

Parent experience leads to new, progressive policy

Donna Carpenter lives in Englewood on the southside of Chicago. She cares for her grandchildren and her adult son with disabilities. And she is a parent leader and co-president of POWER-PAC Illinois. Ms. Donna is at the table of Economic Security for Illinois, an advocacy coalition committed to making the state’s economy the most equitable and inclusive in the country.

Harish Patel, Vice President, Economic Security Project, explained, “We aim to craft policy solutions that reflect what we hear from those closest to the issue, but the reality is that crafting policy is fast-paced and full of confusing legislative jargon; it can be difficult for parents to feel included. That’s where COFI differs. When we were debating the priorities of our Child Tax Credit in Illinois, Ms. Donna was already an active part of our coalition; she felt comfortable suggesting including families, like hers, who care for adult children with disabilities in addition to families with young kids. We are proudly fighting to include these families in the Illinois Child Tax Credit.” Way to go, Ms. Donna!



Parent leaders from around the state present ideas from their brainstorming session.

How do we make this powerful?

How do I make a **powerful impact** with this effort?

Should we **pay parents**?

What do parents need **to be leaders**?

Will parents **talk to the press**? What else can they do?

Now that you have a few parents at your table, how do you make sure their input is leading to real change? To build parent power, use strategies that support parents in strengthening their leadership skills and prioritizing their agenda. Provide space and time for parents to meet and collaborate with one another. Provide leadership training.

Allow parents their own space

This is not the same as siloing parents. Don't fall into the trap of creating a parent advisory committee that does not connect in a meaningful way with the decision-making table and has no power. But, **if you can support parents in building their own powerbase that does intersect with decision-making, you will have the best of both worlds and a powerful impact!**

Share power

You can gather parents separately from your main table to get to know each other, to strategize, and to discover what they, as a collective voice, want to bring to the larger decision-making table.

You can do this by partnering with groups, such as COFI, that already convene parents collectively to identify what matters most to them, or you can engage a staff person to support this effort (preferably someone trained in community organizing and facilitation—see below). Don't over-structure this. Let it evolve. The more opportunities parents have to formally and informally collaborate with each other, the more focused and strategic they will be at your table.

Consider what else your parent group can bring to your table

Parents are amazing as participatory researchers that can cut to the chase about the nitty-gritty of how a public system or public policy is really playing out at the ground level.

Dos and Don'ts

DO allow parents to develop relationships with each other in small groups, build a cohort, and share their experiences and ideas together.

DON'T allow the parent group to be siloed from the rest of the process with no power or relationship to the other tables.

DO keep parents informed throughout the process, and when you ask them to provide their perspective, give them time to reflect and respond.

DON'T "plug in" parent input at the last minute (for example, after the proposal/plan is written but just before it is submitted/shared). That only tells them that their opinions are an afterthought.

DO be consistent and transparent in compensating parents. We recommend *Engaging Community Members: A Guide to Equitable Compensation* at CHCS.org for guidelines.

DON'T push the group to have structure and titles that work against the collective mindset. As the group grows, there might be a need to add structure and clarity around roles, but first, let the group find its bearings around its values, goals, and actions.



Parents lobbying state legislators

Parents can talk peer-to-peer with their neighbors, family and friends and gather information you might otherwise not access. Once you establish a new program, policy or practice, parents will be key to implementation—by getting the word out in their schools, communities, etc.

One organization shared that “Parents’ experience can be a gold mine. They know more than just what families need; they know the hoops and challenges that limit access to even the most well-intentioned resources. They are motivated to solve problems, and hard to beat as community ambassadors and peer-to-peer connectors.”

Continually deepen your relationship with the parents individually and as a group. Build trust.

The building and deepening of relationships with the parents is ongoing. Reach out on a regular basis. Hold one-on-one conversations and attend group meetings. Listen deeply.

This might come easy, or it might feel intimidating. That’s okay! The nature of this work is to build bonds between people who share the values of making things better for children and families—across some of the biggest

divides in our nation: race, class, ethnicity, gender, work, and more. This takes a big heart, but building relationships with parents of mutual trust and respect opens all the possibilities for “good trouble”.

One important skill is the ability to get yourself out of the way. Whether it’s privilege, habit, or cynicism, be aware of assuming you know more, know better, or know it all. Let yourself learn new things from your relationships with the parents. Another skill is to take care of yourself. It’s important to acknowledge that this can be emotionally overwhelming work. Hearing parents’ stories may stir up your own pain and trauma. Recognize this when it happens.

Accept that parents are likely to see you as part of the system that has worked against them for a long time—and you can neither control that, nor should you try. Be patient and use empathy. Relax, and ask open-ended questions. Hear their story and let the story unfold. Share your own story. Respond honestly—but you don’t need to react to everything.

A common habit is to “relate” with your own experience or to try to solve problems. This does not help. If there is a resource that you can refer them to, go ahead, but maybe the problem they are sharing is really systemic. Can you work with them or the larger table to solve the problem at its roots and not put a Band-Aid on it?

With the parents, follow-up matters. If you say you can do something, do it; if you can’t, be honest. One of the biggest things we hear from parents is that they were asked for their opinion or input but never heard back. Did it make any difference? What is the next step? Make sure you establish a feedback process.

My hope?
That you will listen and believe us, trust us. Respect what we bring to the table and show compassion. That will build a real partnership.



PARENTS AT THE TABLE

City policy built with parent experiences

The City of Chicago thought it had good options for residents to get on payment plans for ticket debt owed to the City, but as City Clerk Anna Valencia shared:

“When we decided to establish a new Fines and Fees Task Force with parents at the table, our **City officials heard story after story of obstacles that we did not realize existed.** We joined with the parents and hosted listening sessions to gather even more experiences. Working with the parents, we came up with a new payment plan system and other reforms in City debt collection, including the elimination of driver’s license suspension at the state level for municipal debt!”

PARENTS AT THE TABLE

Partner organization underscores what works

One large national foundation asked our advice as they were considering creating a new Parent Advisory Council for their work. Three years later, with the council up and running, they shared: “I can’t tell you how important your message was that we always provide a ‘feedback loop.’ Whether we are able to say ‘yes’ but also when we are having to say ‘no’, it has been so critical that **we always get back to the parent group and let them know we heard them and this is what we are able to do and why. It has built tremendous trust!**”

And now...

#1 Share power

Define the scope with the parents
Formalize the inclusive structure

Pulling it all together



Parents at your table or in your effort will only have genuine decision-making power when it's built into the process and formalized. With parents, discuss and define your group's scope, anticipated results, and timeline. Involve parents in all aspects of the work from agenda setting, to data collection, to celebrating and implementing the wins.

If you can support parents meeting in their own space and building their own power base, do it! Hire or designate a staff person or a community organizer to support that. Bring the decision-making

questions to the parent tables for them to discuss and strategize on, and make sure there are formal representatives from the parent group who are designated to bring the parent group's thoughts and recommendations back to the larger table.

Give parents the information that will enable them to make decisions effectively and be prepared to provide additional support and context. Take time to ensure that what you are sharing with the parents makes sense to them, and that you are leveraging their strengths.



Parent leaders in Chicago at a gathering to celebrate their wins and make plans for more campaigns.

#2 Change the culture

Buckle up and embrace it

Centering the voice of parents is about change. It will be messy. Expect some chaos and be open and ready to change how you do business.

Parents *will* upset organizational cultural norms. That might get uncomfortable, but it will be worth it. Recognize and prepare for the changes as they happen and celebrate that diversity is doing its work. Your work and your organizations will only benefit.

Our culture (be honest, “white/western” culture) puts a lot of stock in moving fast, solving problems quickly, and relying on professionals. Diversity requires taking the time to listen and understand new voices. This takes patience. Listen. Parents’ stories often reveal new angles on the impacts of programs, systems, and policies designed to help them but, far too frequently, these efforts to help are not working for families. Dig in with parents to find out why and ask about solutions. You will hear creative ideas for change.

The path to changing the culture may be winding and bumpy with obstacles along the way. Expect this. You might see everything from internal opposition to awkward situations to even resistance from parents themselves. Success is not only measured by what goes well, but also by what you learn from the setbacks along the way. Remember, when it gets messy, don’t give up! You are doing the hard and real work that it takes to make an impact on families and communities. You will find a new status quo.

If you really want to know what I think, you need to get to know me. There needs to be trust and respect between us. That takes time.



#3 Invest in parents

Provide resources for parents: staff, training, practical support

None of this is free. It will take staff time. It will take your time. Be thoughtful about providing resources so parents can bring their best selves to the table. This includes leadership training; translation both oral and written; and staff support for parents. It also includes practical support, like covering child care and transportation costs, or a stipend, honorarium, or compensation to value parents’ time.

At COFI, we often staff the parent leaders at the policy tables similar to the way that, say, the White House policy team will “staff” the President in official meetings. COFI trains its organizers to be experts in this process.

Staff roles can include gathering and sharing research with the parents. There may also be advance work to do to prepare the partner’s table to understand what the parent leaders will need. Staff can prep talking points with the parent leaders and brief them on who they will be meeting with, set and review goals with the for the meeting, and debrief those goals after the meeting. (What did we learn? What did we accomplish? What are the next steps?) *We staff the parent leaders, not to accomplish our agenda, but to support them in accomplishing theirs.*



Want to center the voice of parents? Keep them at the center of all you do.

Parents at the table

A case study of three years and powerful impact

“I am so excited about the success and the impact of the Parent Advisory Council in Kane County. These mothers are doing amazing work and making sure that the needs of the growing Latinx and immigrant communities are at the front and center of school-based and county-based decision-making.”

—Kate McCormack, LCSW, Manager, Children’s Mental Health Initiatives, Kane County Health Department

In Kane County, Illinois, a booming exurban community about 50 miles west of Chicago, health care professionals in the county health department were aware of a growing mental health crisis among children and youth but just were not sure how to best reach and help families—especially the large numbers of new immigrant families in the area. How do parents see the problem? What works best for them?

The Department reached out to COFI, which had been training parents (mostly Mexican immigrant mothers) in the community for 10 years. Parents suggested forming a Parent Advisory Council on Children’s Mental Health. The Council recruited parents who either had direct experience navigating the mental health system or who were COFI-trained mother leaders who knew little about the system but were concerned about

the emotional lives of their children and other children in the community—especially amid the COVID pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020.

COFI provided *The COFI Way* leadership training for the Parent Council, which eventually selected a small group of mothers from their ranks to sit on the Kane County Systems of Care Children’s Mental Health Implementation Team to inform and guide the Health Department’s work.

In just three years, parents secured a quarter-million-dollar state grant for a community healers project to address trauma. Parents are at the table with county board and school district officials, working on new restorative justice practices and social and emotional programs for young people. Kane County serves as a model for statewide parent engagement.



Parents present the findings of their mental health surveys to a wide range of community stakeholders.



Parents conducted more than 400 one-on-one conversations with neighbors, friends and families about the impact of COVID on their children and family's mental health and shared their results with the community.



In Elgin School District U-46, parents won funding for and created an afterschool arts program staffed, in part, by community mothers.



In Aurora School District 129, parents pushed for and informed a new restorative justice focus in the elementary schools.

Parent power!
Improving life for families in Kane County

Parents partnered with NAMI, the National Association for Mental Illness, to get themselves trained in mental health first aid.



A "Community Healers" project designed by parents, is a peer-to-peer education and support model to reduce the stigma of seeking help for mental health.



"Peer support around mental health is a game-changer. We're thrilled to help the County and school system tap into parent power to address trauma."

— Marisol Luna, Parent leader on the Kane County Parent Advisory Council on Children's Mental Health

Still have questions?

Training for parents and for you

The COFI Way

Training parents to be leaders

COFI offers intensive and extensive leadership training and coaching for each leader to grow their skills and build a power base within a parent organization.

Over its history, COFI, in collaboration with the parent leaders, created *The COFI Way*, a three-phase and approximately

three-year process of training and organizing that helps parents identify goals for themselves, their families and their communities.

It builds skills of relationship-building

and outreach. It provides tools for community organizing, group facilitation and strategic planning. And, most importantly, it helps parents to build their parent power organization—called POWER-PAC IL | COFI (Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council, Illinois).



Training organizations how to build parent power

The COFI Center for Action and Learning is a national training center that can help organizations to go deep in building parent power. Training participants learn how to build parent leadership and power with the field-tested process we call *The COFI Way*.

We want to help catalyze your efforts. We hope to see parent power popping up in all corners of our nation—and worldwide!



COFI Center
for Action and Learning

You, too, can build parent power

Get in touch with us. You can find much more on our website. Send us a note or give us a call. We look forward to hearing from you.

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Pathway to Family and Parent Leadership:

Parent Leaders can collaborate with states, organizations, and communities in a variety of ways to promote change. Systems must build their capacity and change practices in ways that provide opportunities for parents to advise, collaborate and lead efforts at the same time, or at different points in time, depending on their interest and availability.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR

Family & Parent Leadership

Powered by: Early Childhood Investment Corporation

www.ecic4kids.org

This is COFI

ADVISE

- Provide input through surveys, focus groups, and interviews.
- Participate on advisory boards to help guide program, agency, and/or system decision-making.
- Parents can see how their and other families' input is being used.

If this is the only leadership role parents are invited to engage in, it can feel disempowering.

COLLABORATE

- Sit "at the table" and collaborate with system leaders to make decisions, set priorities, co-design programs and strategies, and carry out actions.
- Co-facilitate trainings and partner on community outreach efforts.
- Serve on boards of organizations and coalitions locally, regionally or at the state level.

This role is more empowering because parents have more direct influence over decisions and actions affecting their lives and those of other families.

LEAD

- Serve as change agents to transform systems and communities by directly leading efforts to identify local needs.
- Set their own agendas and priorities, design strategies, and carry out actions.

This role is most empowering for parents as they are the ones driving change. It also helps to build community capacity to pursue bigger types of change.



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