

Organizing for Change: Parent and Family Leadership in System Reform

FSI Work Group on Parent and Family Leadership

Draft Outline: Position Statement

A. Introduction

[Evidence shows](#) that (1) parent leadership is an essential but neglected aspect of parent engagement, and (2) parent leadership development can have a wide range of benefits for children, families, community professionals, and neighborhoods. When parents participate in leadership development, [they are empowered](#) to effect changes that benefit their children through individual and collective actions.

The Family Success Institute is committed to meaningful parental and family leadership. We believe parents can be effective advocates and civic change agents for their families, regardless of race, gender, class, or language background. We envision a state where all parents have the resources, opportunities, and support they need for their children to grow successfully from birth to adulthood. We strive to involve those most impacted by policy, funding, and practice in decisions that affect them and their children.

We believe that:

The parent - by which we mean any person who is the primary caregiver for a child - is the child's first teacher and best advocate. Researchers have shown that when parents are engaged as partners and leaders in programs, services, and policies that support children's learning and healthy development, children thrive and systems improve. To reform and improve systems, we must make sure:

1. Parents are at the Center: Agencies and systems center everything they do around families: listening to them, developing their leadership, engaging them at every level, and including them in decision-making.
2. Parents are Participating at All Levels: planning and implementing ideas, programs, and policies; making decisions, including how funds are spent; gaining career opportunities; influencing policy and organizing in their communities.
3. Parents are Valued as Experts: Staff and providers value parents of all cultures as experts. Parents know their rights and have the tools and resources to access opportunities for their children.
4. Parents are Powerful Leaders: Elected officials regularly engage with parents and the community and act. Parents develop their leadership and run for office. In partnership with those most affected by racism, parents with privilege advocate for equity.

[Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#)

B. Definition of Parent Leadership

All parents are advocates and leaders in the lives of their children. They advocate for their children's well-being, and as their children grow they develop as leaders and as parents. [Parent Leadership](#) is a strength-based approach to family support founded on the belief that parents are knowledgeable about their families and communities and can provide valuable insight into programmatic and community changes to benefit children and families. Parent leadership is successful when parents and staff collaborate to make decisions affecting families and communities, sharing power, responsibility, expertise, and leadership. Parent leadership begins when organizations support parents' development of leadership skills and eliminate barriers to active parent participation in organization dialogue.

C. Policy

To strengthen democracy and to improve policies for children, families, schools, and communities, bridges need to be built across differences. We need to deepen our understanding of what is affecting each other's lives, co-identify problems, and co-create solutions. Decisions and policies that affect families should be made to the needs and inputs of families. But too often arenas do not intentionally prepare to welcome parents to the table. And, too often, parents don't feel prepared or ready to join the conversation.

[National Parent Leadership Institute 2020 Evaluation Study](#)

The FSI Parent & Family Leadership working group proposes a two-pronged approach:

1. Opportunities for parents and family members to develop their leadership skills in a structured and accessible manner,
2. Training and technical support for all family-serving organizations to engage families and parents in leadership roles.

FSI Parent & Family Leadership working group supports the Parent Leadership Development Indicators Framework, produced by the [Parent Leadership Indicators Project](#) at the [Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools](#) at New York University Steinhardt.

According to the [Theory of Change of the Parent Leadership Indicators Project](#), parent-leadership groups, initiatives, organizations, and training programs can achieve five levels of potential impact.

1. Parent and Family Leadership Initiatives Build Capacity
2. Parents and Families Undergo Personal Transformation
3. Parents and Families Take Collective Action To Address Inequalities
4. Public Officials See Parents and Families As Assets
5. Parent And Family Leaders Share Power and Invigorate Democracy

Each level builds on the previous one, illustrating increasingly more significant effects-or ripple effects-on individuals, institutions, communities, and democratic systems.

D. Barriers or (Challenges) to Meaningful Shared Leadership for Parents and Families

The [Center for Healthcare Strategies](#) argues that "Incorporating the lived experience of families, particularly people from Black and Indigenous communities and other communities of color, into program design and policy development discussions can promote a shared understanding of health priorities and play a critical role in advancing health equity." [Research shows](#) that parent engagement in schools is closely linked to better student behavior, higher academic achievement, and enhanced social skills. In addition, parent engagement makes it more likely that children and adolescents will avoid unhealthy behaviors, such as sexual risk behaviors and substance use. Overall, there is increasing awareness and emphasis on the importance of family engagement and leadership in creating impactful system change." Initial [research by the Center for Policy, Research, and Evaluation](#) on the National Parent Leadership Training Institute's work shows "Statistically significant outcomes for graduates, immediately, and over time." These include growth in civic knowledge and skills, civic action, and personal leadership.

However, numerous barriers continue to undermine parent and family participation. Among them are:

1. systemic racism, gender inequity, and class discrimination
2. the absence of a family-centered ethic at the federal, state, and local levels
3. a reluctance among administrative and professional staff to accept parents as leaders
4. the perceived difficulty in having families involved in specific roles
5. the lack of family-friendly systems and procedures to foster parent involvement and leadership development
6. the refusal to compensate parents and families involved in advocacy initiatives

The Parent & Family Leadership working group of FSI believes we can eliminate these barriers by working together. Furthermore, it promotes ongoing documentation and research to help the public understand the relationship between family leadership and family engagement, identify compelling leadership development models, and recommend strategies for reducing barriers.

E. FSI Action Agenda for Parent and Family Leadership

10 Commitments

1. Invest in parent and community-based organizations to support their priorities
2. Commit to a strengths-based approach with families that honors local knowledge, embraces cultural histories, and values multi-generational experiences

3. Commit to professional development efforts that assist funding and support organizations serving families to develop their capacity to engage with families including time and support for staff members to build relationships with families
4. Invest robustly in parent leadership and advocacy
5. Address racial, cultural, and economic inequities that create barriers that prevent families from participating in Leadership activities
6. Ensure the integrity of parent leaders by identifying and securing non-staff members for these roles
7. Require all funding initiatives serving families to implement an engagement strategy built upon the
 - a. participation of a diverse set of families that represent multiple points of view
 - b. attainment of input from families on the identification of issues, development of strategies, implementation of programs and policies, and evaluation efforts
 - c. commitment to collaborative learning and sharing power
 - d. assurance of family participation in decision-making at all system levels
8. Compensate parents for their time and expertise
9. Commit to maximizing access by holding meetings at times that make sense for families and in locations that are easily accessible
10. Support and promote self-organizing parents as they create their initiatives, make decisions, advance their careers, and advocate and organize for policy change.