

“The Ripple Effect in Action” Executive Summary

Citation

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Summary

Using rigorous qualitative methods, seven parent leadership initiatives from across the USA evaluated their work to assess its impact, identify successful practices, and enhance its effectiveness. Carefully designed participatory assessment yielded deep insights into their work and found that investment in family strengthening and healing- centered engagement led to transformational impact on parent leaders, their families, and communities.

Background

In 2014, the Connecticut Commission on Children, in collaboration with the Hagedorn and Peppercorn foundations, convened a series of meetings among parent leadership initiatives, funders, researchers and community organizations, to discuss how to assess the impact of parent leadership initiatives. The participants agreed that:

1. Initiatives to develop parent leadership had not been well documented or understood;
2. New evaluation methods and a theory of change were needed to capture its complexity and deep impact; and

3. An evaluation framework and appropriate metrics must be co-created with parent leaders across the country.

This report documents the measures taken to create evaluation tools for the field, and the findings when those tools were used.

Methods

Parent leaders and staff from the United Parent Leadership Network (UPLAN), a diverse coalition of initiatives, collaborated with researchers from NYU Metro Center to create and publish *Capturing the Ripple Effect: A Theory of Change for Evaluating Parent Leadership Initiatives* (2016) and then to develop an [evaluation framework, indicators and measures](#) (2017).



Figure 1. The Ripple Effect Theory of Change

To help the field use these new tools, NYU Metro Center partnered with Dialogues in Action, to create the Parent Leadership Evaluation Network (PLEN). Seven PLIs joined the network (see list below).

Members of the Parent Leadership Evaluation Network

- **ARISE:** A Resource in Serving Equality -- South Texas <http://www.arisesotex.org/>
- **COFI:** Community Organizing and Family Issues -- Chicago, Illinois <http://cofionline.org>
- **OLE:** Organizers in the Land of Enchantment -- New Mexico <http://olenm.org/>
- **Parent Ambassadors** -- Washington State www.wsaheadstarteceap.com
- **PLTI:** Parent Leadership Training Institute -- Rochester NY <http://parentswholead.org/>
- **Parents for Public Schools** -- Mississippi, with sites in nine other states <https://parents4publicschools.org/>
- **Parent Voices** -- California <http://www.parentvoices.org/>

During two in-person trainings, researchers coached the team members of parent leaders and staff to:

1. Develop and refine their indicators of intended impact using the Indicators Framework and the Heart Triangle™ process.
2. Develop and implement a qualitative outcome evaluation, through an in-depth interview protocol with a purposeful, stratified sample of parent leaders.
3. Identify major themes and findings.
4. Consider the implications for program improvement and innovation.

Typically, evaluators ask questions about what participants learned, how they used the information, and how they felt about the experience. The Heart Triangle™ process, developed by Dialogues in Action, probes more deeply to uncover the transformational effects of that experience, exploring how what they learned changed what they believed, how what they did changed who they became, and how what they felt changed their deepest commitments. Together, the 52 representatives from the PLEN member PLIs conducted 169 interviews with parent leaders; 78% were parents of color. On average, each organization had 24 interviewees and seven interviewers.

Although participatory evaluation yields findings that are immediately relevant to the work, and connects impacts to specific practices, this study has a few limitations. All data were collected from interviews. Some groups were under-represented (e.g. men and people from Native American and Asian backgrounds); each interview reflected a single moment of reflection on the subject's experience; and there may have been selection bias in who agreed to participate. To capture a fuller picture and add quantitative data, the research team also conducted a survey with a broader reach (preliminary results available online).

Findings

The stories told by the interviewees map the journey that parent leaders make as they move from seeing themselves as “just a parent,” a “victim,” or a “worrier,” to become “change agents,” “role models,” the “go-to person,” in their families and community. This transformation, as recounted by parent leaders themselves, was the force behind the many significant policy “wins” these PLIs have made over the past few years. For example: passing minimum wage increases, heading off deep budget cuts to services for children and families, passing the first ballot initiative in the country to expand access to affordable childcare, winning \$190 million in flood control to improve living conditions, and

replacing “zero tolerance” school discipline policies with restorative justice programs.

These findings of *impact* on parents were remarkably consistent across seven very different organizations.

1. They developed deep and supportive social connections resembling a “second family.”
2. They discovered their own worth and voice, and a sense of power to make change.
3. They stopped blaming themselves for their struggles and came to understand that policies and systems can create barriers to opportunity and advancement.
4. They learned to understand and appreciate differences across race, education, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and country of origin, and to create unity and agreement within a diverse group.
5. As their sense of agency and commitment to each other grew, their dedication to taking action in their community deepened.

6. They created a more positive sense of possibility for themselves and their community.
7. Their children and families saw them with new respect and are inspired to take action themselves.

These parent leadership initiatives see the work they do as a tool for making positive social change by cultivating the self-worth, agency and dignity of parent leaders. The PLEN teams identified five *practices* that led to these profound and transformative impacts:

- Meeting parents’ individual needs and goals through a commitment to fostering families’ well-being and building on their strengths.
- Creating a community that feels like a family, one that is welcoming, supportive, and free of judgment and stigma, and that appreciates, validates and affirms their efforts.
- Developing solidarity across racial, economic, and cultural differences, by creating a sense of positive identity and pride in one’s culture, and practicing

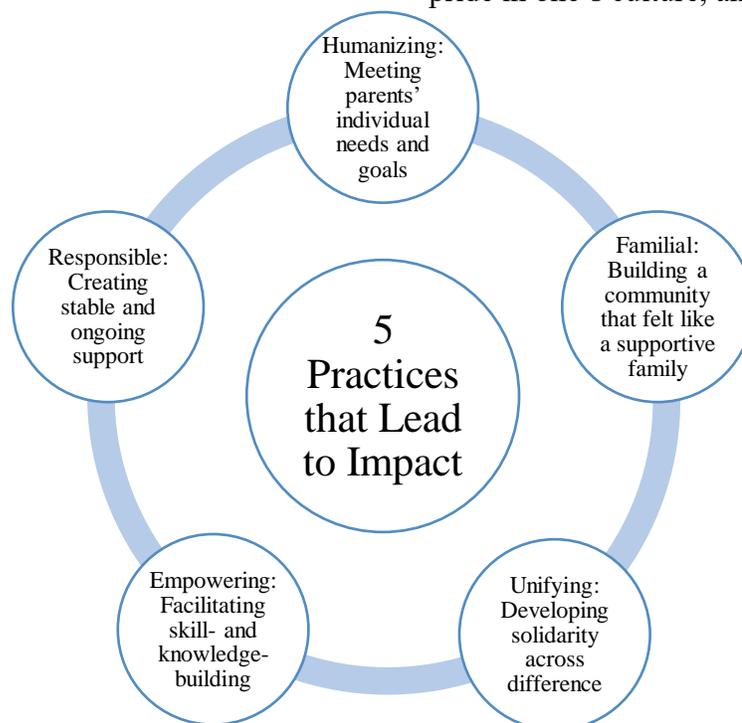


Figure 2. 5 Practices of Parent Leadership Initiatives Leading to Impact

consciousness-raising about inequities in society.

- Empowering parents through skill- and knowledge-building, and then using that information to interact directly with community leaders.
- Creating stable and ongoing support and serving as a safe haven where parents are always welcome back.

Again with considerable consistency, the PLEN members identified *responses* to these findings that would strengthen their initiatives:

- Become more explicit and intentional about working toward racial equity and social justice.
- Formalize their powerful practices more broadly.
- Offer more pathways to continued and higher-level leadership for alumni.

Conclusions

Many “evidence-based” programs that focus on families produce measurable short-term effects, but not durable change. As the authors state, such programs “...may influence what parents feel, know and do, but not what they grow to love, believe, and become.” (p. 233) Instead of seeing such personal growth as “soft,” this study concludes that longer-term investments in human development build power in ways that are essential to lasting, transformational change.

What does that mean? An organization or campaign may “win” a policy change or new resources, but that victory alone will not guarantee that the benefits will be fully and fairly implemented. There also must be a redistribution of power so that parent leaders have a voice in implementation and a role in holding officials accountable for results. For example, after a “win” to expand access to early childhood programs, parent

leaders can serve on committees to inform what kinds of early childhood settings are needed and what their key features should be, testify before legislative oversight hearings that are monitoring progress, and serve as staff to be the “eyes and ears” for program administrators.

Transformational change not only alters parents’ sense of identity and purpose, but also shifts power relationships so that parents can use their newfound confidence to speak out and demand better opportunities for their children and families. The study identified two key elements of this transformation:

- “Healing-centered engagement,” which builds on people’s strengths, develops healthy identity, and fosters a sense of agency to recover from personal or historical trauma. (Ginwright, 2015, 2018)
- “Strengthening families.” (Browne, 2014) All seven PLIs seek to strengthen families and promote their well-being, such as by offering social connections, concrete support in times of need, and knowledge of parenting and child development.

Although each PLI in this collection is unique, all seven had a dual focus on individual and social change. Each aims to enable positive, personal transformation in parent leaders. And all view the redistribution of power from established elites to parents and communities as a fundamental goal.

Significance

This study takes a deep dive into the conditions needed for interventions with families to be both profound and sustained, with implications for any setting that serves families. Most programs to engage families in improving children’s outcomes offer

knowledge and skills, as well as opportunities to practice them. This study strongly suggests that such efforts would be more successful if they also created a “second family” environment, a welcoming, safe space for parents to connect with others and share their struggles and issues. Such a space can strengthen families by affirming their contributions and personal value, connecting them to economic and social resources, building their capacity to support their children’s learning and development, listening to their ideas, and developing their voice.

References

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Figure 3. The Parent Leadership Evaluation Network, Denver, 2018