



Making the Link

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Parent Organizing as a Strategy for Sustainable Policy Change

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INTRODUCTION

Low-income parents are an essential component of any network or coalition striving to effect local, state and national policy change on behalf of their children and families. Yet, the number of low-income families that vote is significantly less than that of higher-income families because, too often, low-income families feel intimidated by the political system.¹ Subsequently, low-income parents, particularly parents from low-wealth communities of color, frequently find themselves marginalized in the political process and are notably missing from advocacy efforts at every level. As state and federal funding for low-income children continues to drop at an alarming rate, the absence of a united and strong parent voice in policymaking arenas leaves a significant void. To address this gap, a number of state-based parent organizations have developed over the past several years. With that growth has come a rise in the number of foundations who have expressed interest in learning more about these successful, state-based, parent-led and parent-run organizing models. In fact, in Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families' (GCYF's) 2010 Field Survey, parent engagement/organizing was the one issue grantmakers specifically asked GCYF to provide training and technical assistance for in order to improve their grantmaking.

To provide funders with a better understanding of this emerging field, this *Making the Link* will

- (a) Discuss the efficacy of grassroots organizing as the most promising strategy to impact policy by providing a brief assessment of various social change strategies
- (b) Compare and contrast parent involvement, parent engagement and parent organizing as three distinct ways to include parents in key budget and policy decisions that impact their families
- (c) Showcase three parent-led statewide organizing models that provide low-income parents with the training and skills they

need to advocate on budget and policy issues related to child care and early learning

- (d) Recommend steps funders can take to learn more and take effective action to nurture and support parent organizing on the local, state and national level

ORGANIZING AND OTHER POLICY CHANGE STRATEGIES

In a barebones comparison of philanthropic strategies to effect policy change, including direct service, public issue education, advocacy and organizing, it is organizing that holds the most untapped promise for sustained broad-based grassroots efforts. Direct service programs help meet an immediate need but do little or nothing to impact root causes. Likewise, public education campaigns that seek to spread awareness about an issue can be powerful messengers. However, as a sole strategy, their impact on behavior is indeterminate. For example, the general public has certainly become more aware of the "epidemic of obesity," but even the most effective commercials can only reinforce a behavioral decision to exercise and eat healthy.

Advocacy is generally defined as acting on behalf of others to impact policy or create institutional change. Frequently, advocacy and organizing are used as interchangeable terms. Both have the goal of influencing public policy and promoting institutional change. Nevertheless, important distinctions emerge when such issues as who is setting the agenda, who is doing the advocating and how they are engaged are examined in relation to how best to determine priorities and ensure long-term commitment to implementing and monitoring the policy change.

When parents engage in organizing other parents, they are capable of bringing to bear significant grassroots power, sophisticated solutions to polarized policy options and long-term dedicated attention that holds public servants accountable. It is this latter characteristic that is often the missing ingredient in policy change strategies that employ advocacy campaigns

because there is no strong grassroots organizing component. Parents demanding accountability before, during and after a positive change in policy is what sets the stage for long-term accountability, proper implementation and sustained carry through. Grassroots organizing can lead to the improved responsiveness of public institutions and can become the nexus point leading to an integrated approach that encompasses the whole range of social change strategies mentioned previously.

Table 1. Social Change Strategies

Strategy to Effect Social Change	Parent Involvement	Parent Engagement	Parent Organizing
Direct Service	X	X	X
Public Issue Education	X	X	X
Advocacy		X	X
Policy Change Directed by and for Constituents (Organizing)			X

THE CONTINUUM OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT, PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND PARENT ORGANIZING

Grantmakers use qualitatively different terms such as “parent involvement” and “parent engagement” to describe what they believe to be support for parent organizing. However, these terms can best be seen as lying on a progressive continuum.

Parent involvement, parent engagement and parent organizing lie on a continuum, but are most significantly differentiated by the level of power or governance afforded constituents, the depth of their involvement with establishing priorities and ultimately the focus of their accountability. At a recent convening, 15 parent leaders from three statewide parent organizing groups were asked what distinguished their involvement with organizing from other forms of involvement. Most pointed to the “passivity” of roles, as “go fors” whose actions are proscribed and directed by others, versus “leaders” who are trained and cultivated for self-direction and collective action. The latter are essential hallmarks that elevate parent organizing. It makes it a more effective way to authentically include parent voices.²

Rather than relying exclusively on focus groups or professional expertise to select issues and develop strategy, parent organizing groups use staff to support and build the capacity of parents to take on these tasks as leaders. Through training, these parents become leaders who can shape agendas, strategize and be their own voice and that of their children. Without strong parent leaders to guide the organization’s decisions and keep it linked to

the desires and aspirations of its constituent base, these organizations would dissipate their power, lose their effectiveness and eventually cease to function.

This is in contrast to organizations and advisory committees that seek parental involvement merely to inform parents of school priorities and needs, and enlist their energies and resources in meeting those needs. In these organizations, parents are not looked to for fundamental critique or to advise on school policy, curriculum, improving educational outcomes or the whole range of core operations. Their involvement is passive and mainly used by these organizations to garner support and disseminate information, not to engage parents as active shapers of policies. Similarly, parental involvement in the policymaking arena usually means that state and national advocates either try to speak “for” parents when presenting testimony or meeting with policymakers, or they bring one along. Rarely are parents invited to present their own testimony or help plan the meeting agenda.

Although parent engagement means more power and decision making beyond what is found with parent involvement, because parents are often joining an existing structure (e.g., as a “parent representative” to an education advisory group, curriculum advisory committee or school board), they have a limited role in defining the agenda, and generally are limited to voting on policies not developed by them. As a result, these positions also lack accountability to the constituents that parents are selected or elected to represent.

Table 2. Distinctions Between Involvement, Engagement and Organizing

Type	Recruited to	Participation in Governance	Accountable to
Parent Involvement	Support set priorities	None	Recruiting school or committee assignment
Parent Engagement	Advise on set priorities	Some	Board or institution
Parent Organizing	Set priorities	Equal partner	Community

THE POTENTIAL FOR STATEWIDE PARENT ORGANIZING

Most parent organizing models are limited to a single city or school district, or even a few schools. The three state-based parent organizing models represented here focused on early childhood education and care, are emerging models of parent organizing networks on a statewide level that are led by parents, for parents. This reflects a significantly new level of sustained



parent leader power and influence in the public policy arena. Each of the three parent organizing models discussed next involves extensive and sustained leadership skills development, including organizing; teaching parents the mechanics of how local, state and federal budgets and policies are developed; training parents to write and give effective testimony at hearings and other public forums; and helping them learn media advocacy skills such as writing effective editorial letters, organizing press conferences and doing media interviews.

PARENT VOICES

Partnering With Child Care Resource and Referral Centers

A project of the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, Parent Voices has 1,500 members through chapters housed in local child care resource and referral programs across the state. Through these centers, which refer parents seeking information on a variety of child care issues, they've effectively engaged thousands of parents in advocacy at the local, state and federal levels to effect positive change. This grassroots organization uses a variety of community organizing strategies and innovative tactics to provide advocacy and leadership training through an ongoing series of actions and events for parents to express and develop their leadership potential. Parent Voices represents an effective, parent-led and replicable organizing and advocacy model that embodies a vision of protecting and expanding access to quality, affordable child care for all families.

Examples of recent accomplishments:

- **2011:** Convinced the new governor and legislature to restore \$256 million for the CalWORKs Stage 3 child care program, which provides care for children whose families are transitioning off of welfare, in April 2011. Organized against further proposed cuts to CalWORKs child care and worked with advocates to restore \$200 million in cuts from the June 2011 final budget, including preserving child care services for 11- and 12-year-olds in the program and eliminating increases to parent fees.
- **2010:** Successfully advocated to prevent the wholesale elimination of state funding for child care and CalWORKs/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs in the state budget. On October 8, 2010, Gov. Schwarzenegger line-item vetoed funding for the CalWORKs Stage 3 child care program effective immediately, impacting 60,000 children and 50,000 working mothers. Parents quickly began to organize against the cuts. In addition, Parent Voices Oakland was a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the state that kept the program operating through December 31, 2010.

PARENT AMBASSADORS

A State-Based Head Start Association

Parent Ambassadors is a grassroots organizing program operated by low-income parents housed within the Washington State Association of Head Start and the Early Childhood Education Assistance Program. The program is based on an empowerment model of peer-to-peer training and education. Each year, approximately 20 parents from geographically diverse locations across the state are selected to receive training in communications, leadership, legislative and budget advocacy, and grassroots organizing. These parents, in turn, are then responsible for training parents in their local programs and participating in advocacy efforts on both the state and federal level. Former Parent Ambassadors have formed an alumni group and continue to act as trainers and mentors and participate in actions and events.

Examples of recent accomplishments:

- **2011:** Ambassadors, by providing testimony at legislative hearings and visiting with key legislators, played a pivotal role in defeating the governor's plan to drastically cut child care assistance. Ambassadors have provided regular testimony during hearings on key issues that impact children and families including funding for early childhood education, TANF, and WaKIDS—a kindergarten readiness assessment process.
- **2010:** Successfully advocated for the creation of an Early Childhood Education Assistance Program entitlement so that all low-income children in Washington will receive high-quality early learning services by 2018.

OLÉ WORKING PARENTS ASSOCIATION

Combining Individual and Institutional Membership

The OLÉ Education Fund, whose mission is to expand the use of grassroots community organizing as an agent of change and to teach disenfranchised New Mexicans the art of organizing, formed the OLÉ Working Parents Association (WPA) to assist the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) New Mexico to win new rights for child care center teachers. They provided critical community support from organized parents and helped recruit and develop more effective organizers for AFT New Mexico. They helped organize a significant majority of the teachers, directors and parents in New Mexico's child care program to win increased funding for early childhood education, as well as a commitment to allocate a portion of the funds to benefit the state's 5,000 child care teachers and directors with new rights and compensation standards.

Examples of recent accomplishments:

- **2011:** OLÉ's parent leaders pushed legislation for a permanent state fund for early childhood education and care.

Although they had a powerful show and were nearly successful, because New Mexico has an extremely short legislative session (60 days in odd-numbered years, 30 days in even), the session ended without passage. OLÉ WPA will continue to introduce the legislation in the legislature until it is passed.

- **2010:** OLÉ WPA's parents, in an effort to educate and mobilize low-income and working-class families, contacted more than 3,000 households about budget cuts, and cuts in child care subsidies.

As a result of the grassroots organizing and leadership development training provided by each of these models, parent leaders experience a personal transformation that changes their lives—and, thereby, the lives of their children. Through their involvement with parent organizing they are striving to be not only good parents but also model parents for their children and communities. They have acquired a level of political sophistication and self-confidence that allows them to effectively interact with governors, legislators, educators, business leaders and the media to advocate for the needs of their families in all decision making arenas. In addition to taking collective action to improve outcomes for their children, they now have a large support network of other parents who rely on each other as teachers, mentors and friends. The personal empowerment they have gained has not only allowed them to develop successful parent-led, parent-run networks but has also produced strong and involved parents who are determined to make a better life for all children and to set new goals for their own lives.

HOW GRANTMAKERS CAN LEARN FROM AND SUPPORT PARENT ORGANIZING

Realizing the Return on Investment in Children, Youth, and Families

If these parent organizing models continue to expand within their states, and are replicated nationally, there is greater potential for revitalizing the nation's principles of participatory democracy through parent leaders with the skills, boldness and savvy to create a nation with an unwavering focus on policies that guarantee a healthy start and equal opportunity for every child. Grantmakers can help by:

- Supporting existing, effective parent-led, parent-run grassroots organizations to ensure their sustainability and expansion.
- Planning a site visit and attending events to observe parent-run organizations in action—they can observe how parent leaders interface directly with their lawmakers and provide effective testimony at the state and federal level by attending budget and legislative hearings that include testimony from parents.

- Observing parent leaders interfacing with print and electronic media by attending press conferences and actions organized by parent-led organizations—the media are eager to represent the voices of parents and often seek them out for interviews.
- Using their convening power to foster collaboration and cooperation—grantmakers can help parent-led organizations and programs learn from each other and increase their understanding of low-income parent organizing by networking and convening existing parent-led organizations and organizations interested in starting a parent-led program component.
- Inviting funder colleagues to attend convenings—this will not only provide a learning lab for funders to better understand how successful parent-led organizations operate but also may potentially encourage investments in this exciting new field.
- Following the convenings with a funder-only meeting to discuss the possibility of pooling funds to start a new parent organizing group or program.
- Taking action to support grassroots parent-led organizing—grantmakers can use their personal influence and leverage to assist parent-led organizations. Foundations have contacts in the media, business community and government and can arrange introductory meetings with key stakeholders on the local, state and national level. Leaders in these sectors may be more open to a meeting with grassroots parent leaders when they are approached or accompanied by a respected funder.

In a time of scarce resources, where additional cuts in spending on safety net programs designed to aid low-income and other vulnerable families are seriously being considered, now more than ever there is a need for a strategic and sustained advocacy effort—led by parents. Without it some of the proposed draconian cuts may actually pass in Congress and in state capitols across our nation.

Parents have the most authentic voice and need support to strengthen (or begin) organized advocacy efforts to ensure that young children and youth remain at the forefront of policy and budget debates. Parents need training to become educated and informed consumers of services so they can hold service delivery systems and elected officials accountable. With increased investment by philanthropy, this cadre of activists, who until now have been largely overlooked, can be mobilized nationwide to bring about positive outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Notes

- 1 "Voter Turnout," FairVote: The Center for Voting and Democracy. Retrieved from <http://www.fairvote.org/voter-turnout>
- 2 From unpublished interviews, Peppercorn Foundation convening of parent organizing groups, June 8–9, 2011.