



The Parent Leadership Training Institute

A Connecticut Commission on Children Family Civics Initiative

Connecticut Commission on Children
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Parent Leadership Training Institute

History

In 1992, The Connecticut Commission on Children designed the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). The strategy and curriculum to promote parent leaders evolved after two years of parent focus groups revealed that parents had deep interest in improving child outcomes, but did not perceive themselves as assets or a constituency in the public sector for children.

The American Leadership Forum partnered with the Commission to assist with resource development and a sustainable plan. The Education Foundation of America, Surdna Foundation, Hasbro Foundation, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and the State of Connecticut supported the Commission while building and testing the family civics model and its outcomes. The William Caspar Graustein Foundation, Liberty Bank Foundation and other private sector partners supported and embedded the model locally.

When the outcomes revealed strong civic skills development, significant increases in parent leadership within communities, diversity in participants across education levels, culture and race and policy leaders emerging on the local, regional and state level, national interest in replication took hold. The Kellogg Foundation offered a three year grant to test a national structure and network to go to scale. States and cities began to call on the PLTI to help agencies change their culture and attitudes towards parents. Others sought advice on how to braid proven policies for children with authentic parent engagement.

The Connecticut PLTI grew a National Parent Leadership Institute to provide the tested model in other cities and states. PLTI is now in 15 states with shared outcome data, supportive training and cross sector planning in family engagement.

Mission Statement

The Parent Leadership Training Institute enables parents to become leading advocates for children. Parents' opinions are often unheard. They lack advocacy skills, but not the motivation or will to change their children's lives. The PLTI teaches parents, who wish to improve the lifelong health, safety and learning of children, how to become practiced change agents for the next generation.

Parents define the curriculum and participate in its evaluation and outcomes. Family supports, such as child care, are included. Each class of parents mentors the next class, creating a pyramid effect of community caring and developing a coalition of parent leaders.

General Program and Purpose:

The PLTI program is a two-generation strategy to bolster parental involvement while promoting the lifelong health, safety and learning of children. The program integrates child development leadership and democracy skills into a parent curriculum. Parents attend a 20-week program. The application process is competitive. Family supports such as child care, meals and transportation are provided. Each class mentors the next, creating a pyramid effect of community caring and a developing coalition of parents. The classes are evaluated by parents for both short and long-term outcomes.

Parents are offered four phases of training built on interactive adult learning practices:

1. A retreat to develop group and define mission;
2. 10 weeks on parent leadership with focus on voice, difference, values and problem definition;
3. 10 weeks on how change occurs for children including best practice, data analysis, model policy;
4. A community project to practice the learning within a community context.

A graduation follows in a local civic setting and the State Capitol where parents receive diplomas with the state seal from the Secretary of State. Graduates participate in an Alumni Program that offers support and critical thinking among parents for civic participation.

Definition of Parent Leadership:

For the PLTI, parent leadership means the capacity to interact within civic society with purpose and positive outcomes for children.

General Parent Leadership Training Institute Goals Seek to:

- Help parents become the leaders they would like to be for children;
- Expand the capacity of parents as change agents for children;
- Develop supportive communities of parents within targeted regions of the state that will support one another in both their skills development and successful parent action for young children;
- Develop supportive communities of parents within parent-driven institutions such as Head Start and Title I programs;
- Facilitate parents' capacity to offer input into community efforts on the neighborhood, city, regional and state level;
- Facilitate systems change for parental involvement with increased utilization of parents in policy and process decisions; and
- Increase parent-child interactions and quality children's programs through parent involvement.

PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE CURRICULUM

Retreat: Creating a Caring Community for Children

Issues affecting children. Milestones in child and family development.

GOAL: Development of a parent group, begin understanding of when and how a community cares for children.

Class 1: Thriving with Diversity in the Group Process

What do we look like now? What will Americans look like in the future?
What are the strengths of separateness and integration?

GOAL: To acquire knowledge regarding diversity, ethnic, class and race differences.

Class 2: The Change Process

A look at change within our own experience. The tools we can use to change the environment.

GOAL: To understand what creates change within self, family and community.

Class 3: Parents as Change Agents:

How do our own experiences in family life influence our notion of the right to be a parent leader? What is our own self-image?

GOAL: To help parents perceive themselves as change agents and to understand obstacles to leadership.

Class 4: How to Define a Problem and Work Toward a Solution

A look at community needs from the parent perspective.

GOAL: To begin working through problems with developed strategy and conflict resolution skills.

Class 5: The Intentional Use of Language

What are forms of communication and why do they matter? Active Listening and constructive ways to make a point.

GOAL: To understand the importance of using language to create a framework and express viewpoints.

Class 6: Learning How a Community Works

How to use and maximize community resources. Who has the resource information?
How do community meetings work?

GOAL: To begin mapping communities with increased understanding of assets, resources and communication flow.

Class 7: How Local Systems Work and How to Interact With Them

Who makes the decisions in the city, in the schools, at the library?
How do policies develop?

GOAL: To increase awareness of the structure of local institutions and systems through attention to budget, policy and communication.

Class 8: Networks

How to think about who should become part of the change effort. How to expand your partners.

GOAL: To further access goals for children and enable partners to reach goals.

Class 9: The Power of the Media and How to Use it

How to use social media and traditional media. Parents as messengers for children.

GOAL: To increase understanding of all forms of media, how they work and how to access them.

Class 10: Using Your Voice

How to speak publicly. How to present public statements with success.

GOAL: To bolster confidence, self awareness and the impact of self presentation.

Class 11: The Life Cycle of the Child and the Functions of the Family

How does the life cycle of the child intersect with the life cycle of the family and family functions?

GOAL: A beginning understanding of family function, family structure and child development.

Class 12: Social and Economic Trends Affecting Children and Families

How to understand the demographic, economic and social trends. What are the assets and needs of children and families in our region?

GOAL: An understanding of social, economic and demographic factors impacting child health, learning, safety and care-giving.

Class 13: What is Public Policy?

A look at the role of government in democracy, the meaning of policy, types of policy and how policy happens.

GOAL: An understanding of public policy as a vehicle for democracy, citizen input and change for children.

Class 14: How the State Works

A look at state government – structure, communications, resources, policy impact and governance.

GOAL: An understanding of how government can be utilized by citizens to effect dialogue and change for the public good.

Class 15: How a City Works

A look at town and city structures, policies and resources.

GOAL: An understanding of how parents can interface with elected officials, city departments and school boards to communicate and effect change for children.

Class 16: How do we Understand the Law

An overview of children's law to assess the impact of state and federal code in protecting and enhancing the lives of children.

GOAL: Demystification of law, with increased comfort reading children's law.

Class 17: Budgets – From Wallets to State – It's all Money and Priorities

An introduction to budget design and analysis within state, city and schools.

GOAL: Increased comfort level with fiscal analysis of children's policy and programs.

Class 18: Evaluation, Outcomes and Accountability

An overview of goals in policy and program to improve outcomes and public accountability. What is an outcome measure, a benchmark, a result?

GOAL: A beginning understanding of benchmarks and longitudinal tools.

Class 19: The Magic of the Unexpected: Forming New Alliances

Forging new alliances and expanding partnerships to create broad impact for children.

GOAL: An increased understanding of the dynamics of policy change, coalition-building and social climate.

Class 20: Language: Packaging and Moving Agendas

How to design initiatives: how to clarify goal, purpose, outcomes with vigor, art and impact.

GOAL: Improved understanding of media and language and its impact; and the connection between language and clarity of goal and constituency.

Who the Parents are:

Parent participants represent the demographic profile of their region. Their ages span from teen parents to grandparents raising grandchildren. They are single parents, married parents, stepparents, foster and adoptive parents. Classes are comprised of 20-25 parents. There are occasionally regional symposiums attended by approximately 100 parents.

Parents as Beneficiaries

There is no single or special interest policy agenda underlying the PLTI. The goal is to dignify the role of parents as change agents within community and government by building their capacity. Parents use the tools developed to address social policy issues of concern. Parents are taught the tenets of democracy and their rights to utilize government optimally in the best interest of children. Public policy, media and outreach are demystified and fully explained.

Children as Beneficiaries

Parent participation in children's issues bolsters parent-child relations and outcomes. Parents feel stronger about their own capabilities as they develop leadership skills. This increased sense of self-regard and belonging in community enhances parent-child communication. Children sense the potential to effect change in their own lives and other lives. Hope increases in a time of diminishing expectations.

Systems as Beneficiaries

Similarly, institutions, through parent leadership training, improve their capacity to work with and empower parents. The PLTI has worked with early care and education programs, social services institutions and cities to improve: 1) parent involvement policies; 2) consumer-driven service delivery; and 3) leadership opportunities for parents. Frequently programs do not see how to involve parents. Training or parent leadership can offer a shift in attitude and arouse new interest in parent potential.

HOW PLTI VALUES ARE REFLECTED IN STRUCTURE

The PLTI is relational:

The PLTI treats each parent with the depth of relationship that we expect of parent roles within family. Parent leadership does not emerge from slick curriculum, but from developed trust, substantive dialogue, skills building, hope and expectation. These ingredients offer parents, who seek to create change for their children and others, a ladder toward leadership.

The PLTI is building community:

Structurally, the PLTI selects each class as a community. Participants apply and receive a one hour interview. Each candidate enters on his or her own strength and special characteristics. Parents are selected for the class with consideration for how their participation will enhance the diversity, strength and learning of the group.

The PLTI focuses both on content and process:

The program curriculum relies on process, content and context. This form of analysis is part of each class or public engagement. Parents are taught to analyze the event, the process and their situation within it. Personal history, self-assessment, systems analysis and social economic understanding are blended into each class.

The PLTI is diverse:

A good leader is very comfortable with difference. PLTI assures difference among participants, trainers and the civic design team so that parents become deeply enriched by variety in culture, race and class. Varying narratives offer an untapped empathy and broader community resolve that infects long-term leadership with hope, equity and expectation.

The PLTI is intergenerational:

The PLTI offers leadership training to parents and grandparents. Children attend dinner and participate in quality child care while parents or grandparents are in class. There is a parallel leadership course for

the children, using children's literature. Children become comfortable in civic buildings and around public dialogue. They see their parents graduate at the State Capital and begin to envision their own potential.

The PLTI creates a pyramid:

Graduates serve as mentors for the next class of parents as well as ad hoc parent programs on capacity-building. Alumni attend graduations, facilitate retreats and offer program support to the next class. They advise, speak and mentor other parents and programs seeking to work better with parents as consumers.

The PLTI builds civic engagements:

A Civic Design Team is a core component on the local level. This Design Team is composed of community members who care about community, the family and a civic voice. They are people the community trusts such as the town barber, children's librarian, school teacher, bus driver. Civic Design Team Members select the parents for the trainings, arrange the meals, the location, the graduation and offer the parent leaders support.

The PLTI is parent-based rather than institution-based:

Parents are accepted through their own application. Institutions do not apply or purchase slots for parents to be trained in single-issue agendas. The PLTI seeks to bolster a constituency of parents that can access and utilize both government and community agencies optimally for children.

The PLTI is about Civics, Not Service

PLTI focuses on parents as assets who can partner with agencies and leaders for their children and to enhance the overall civic fabric of community life. There is no presumption of lacks or needs but a strong presumption that if families were engaged in participatory democracy, child outcomes in health, safety and learning, would improve.

RESEARCH ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The Evidence of Need – Initial Research

The PLTI two year research project found that parents, across race, gender, and class lines, are able to describe the needs of children and the obstacles to address them. Yet, they do not see themselves as capable of effecting change. The majority of parents do not know how to work within the city, school, or state system, nor do they believe they are entitled to do so.

There is a critical gap between need, desire and capacity to effect change.

Testing the premises of parent leadership, the Commission on Children spoke with state and national parent leadership efforts to ascertain and ask:

- 1) What are the crucial variables to parent leadership success?
- 2) What leads parent empowerment to be enduring? and
- 3) What are the significant processes to bring in parents interested in child outcomes?

The findings included the following:

Motivators leading parents to actively participate on behalf of their child(ren) are:

- (1) Knowing that their participation is part of something successful;
- (2) Knowing that they can make a difference in their lives and the live of their children;
- (3) Feeling supported, respected and acknowledged for their time and efforts;
- (4) Receiving hands-on training and guidance; and
- (5) Receiving family supports such as food, child care, transportation, etc.

Maintaining involvement and empowerment within a parent group entails:

- (1) Acknowledging efforts and inspiring next steps;
- (2) Developing realistic and attainable expectations and goals;
- (3) Creating a space where parents feel safe, comfortable and valued;
- (4) Seeing the progress in parents efforts; and
- (5) Creating a sense of ownership in the change process.

Structuring and building leadership in a program consists of:

- (1) Working with parents in a non-patronizing, inclusive environment;
- (2) Establishing rapport with other “leaders”, e.g., local and state policy makers;
- (3) Holding trainings that can be easily applied to a variety of settings;
- (4) Establishing a peer network among the group and with community contacts;
- (5) Following up on actions that take place outside of the group;
- (6) Scheduling a time for personal sharing and listening; and
- (7) Providing a network of mentors.

Ensuring involvement of people on a local level includes:

- (1) De-mystifying the political process;
- (2) Making friends;
- (3) Creating a list of contacts;
- (4) Developing specific goals and tasks related to accomplishing a goal; and
- (5) Encouraging people to get out of “victim” or passive roles and into responsible action.

OUTREACH LESSON LEARNED TO DATE

The PLTI has learned numerous lessons in planning, communicating and teaching with parents which include:

1. Listen to parents, base agendas and curriculum on parent-defined need and language;
2. Remove barriers to participation: offer dinner, transportation and child care;
3. Avoid professional buzzwords such as “developmentally appropriate practice;”
4. Link participation to real change and policies that can be enacted;
5. Acknowledge the fact that we are all parents. Enter conversations based on personal family experiences, rather than a separate vantage point. Parenting and the joy it brings can connect us;
6. Develop environments that value values. Parents care deeply about the decline of the social contract. They want vision and roots for their families. Family values are critical to parent involvement;
7. Do not fear religion. Religion can be a base from which organizing takes place. It can teach leadership skills;
8. Create a pyramid by having parents mentor parents or reach out to new parents in the next class;
9. Allow for the psyche. The family is a Rorschach test. If we want to create a safe and diverse community, we have to allow for the fear, ambivalence and judgment that may surface about family roles and expectations;
10. Include the fathers. There is an African story of a dead man whose bones come alive only when the newborn keeps asking, “Where is my father?” He comes alive through expectation;
11. Let parents design goals for action, skills development and objectives for leadership. You can meaningfully focus on a small section or plan if you understand the whole canvas; and
12. Allow time for stories, generational history and dreams. Where there is memory, there is hope.

Given the declining quality of life for children and families in America and the fragmentation of the social safety net, children's advocates need to recognize the central role parents can play in addressing child and family concerns. Investing time and energy now in developing strong parent leaders will have a profound and lasting impact on the health and vitality of our communities.

CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY – SELECTING PARENT PARTICIPANTS

Creating a community of parents is a rich undertaking. It takes time, care and attention because the heart of the work is relational.

OUTREACH:

How do you Invite Parents to the Training?

- Send a letter to different and diverse organizations;
- Create press releases for local newspapers;
- Utilize church and school leadership;
- Call the local radio stations;
- Use word of mouth; and
- Utilize graduates of the program to select new students.

Generate a community list of organizations and contacts from the following areas.

- Community-based organizations that serve parents;
- Principals of public and private sectors;
- Area legislators;
- Clergy of churches and synagogues;
- Civic associations;
- Selected businesses;
- Parent-teacher associations;
- Child care centers;
- Family day care providers networks;
- Enterprise zones;
- Public Libraries;
- Housing programs; and
- Resource and referral networks.

Broadening the Field of Leaders:

- Seek parents from different social economic backgrounds and geographic regions. Mix family structure as well as work experience. Select parents, grandparents, foster parents and adoptive parent;
- Seek parents that have potential who: 1) show leadership skills within the neighborhood, church or school in which their child resides; 2) may be timid, but seek to be part of the decisions and policies about their children and families; 3) have been socially or economically marginalized, but deeply wish to enter civic debate; and 4) are leading something already and would benefit by broadening or deepening their skills.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS:

1. After receiving an application, applicants are called for interviews. If we do not hear from parents after two weeks, we call them;
2. When scheduling interviews, we remember how easily the plans of parents can shift because of child care arrangements falling through, work hours or illness; and
3. Every interaction with parents is as relaxed, real and respectful as we can make it.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

The interview is approximately 20 minutes in length. Allow at least half an hour for each person so that you can greet them and say goodbye properly. When interviewing parents, keep in mind that we have in common the experience of being parents. This helps establish immediate rapport.

1. How did you learn of this program? There must be a story to your coming here.
2. What are your concerns for children; for your own children as well as the children in the community?
3. As you look over this curriculum, what interests you? What do you think is missing in content or skills development?
4. If you go through the training, what will your goals be? What do you envision yourself doing with what you have learned?
5. What is your experience with people from different backgrounds?
6. Have you ever been in parent training before?
7. What questions do you have about the structure or content of this program?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE COMMUNITY:

Creating a Mix:

The selection process can help determine the potential for a community of parents. The class should create a mix of family situations, based on the marital status of the participants, the ages of the participants' children, whether or not the parents are working or at home and whether or not their children are in public or private school or at home. It works best to create a diverse and strong community of parents.

WHAT TO AVOID:

There are three situations that we try to avoid when creating a community of parents:

1. Avoid putting too many parents together that know each other well from the same school or neighborhood. Parents will then tend to make the relationships within the whole class rather than relying on the people that they know.
2. Avoid “professional” parents. The training should not take the place of professional development for a person who does outreach to parents as paid work. If this is the case for someone, try and determine what the training has to offer them personally.
3. Do not encourage “single issue” parents. These are often parents, usually well-meaning, who always organize around the same issue and cannot look broadly at an issue.

The community of parents is the family for the 20-week curriculum on self, society and civics. The deeper the group in its range and insight, the stronger the critical thinking and goal setting of each participant will be for children.

ESTABLISHING LOCAL DESIGN TEAMS FOR THE PLTI CLASS

The PLTI program is a public-private partnership that links with local communities to increase the number of parents trained in civics and democracy.

Each town seeking to replicate the PLTI model sets up a Design Team to implement the program. The Design Team has the special function of informing the public, introducing the leadership training opportunities to parents, selecting parents to attend the program and ensuring that the courses run smoothly for the community.

Design Teams can be established through the leadership of an elected official, an agency, an initiative or a constituency group. For example, in Connecticut, Design Teams have been spearheaded by city health departments, community agencies, foundations and business leaders. Participants must reflect the demographic profile of the parents in the community.

Local Design Teams find locations for classes arrange for family supports such as dinner and child-care and raise local funds to match the state resources. The Connecticut Commission on Children offers Design Teams technical assistance in setting up a Parent Leadership Training Institute within a community.

The state PLTI coordinator offers: 1) teacher training for PLTI Facilitators who go through the full three-day training curriculum; 2) a tested curriculum of 20 weeks with focus on empowerment and civics skills for parents; 3) technical assistance for communities and systems interested in developing the capacity of parents for children; and 4) resources to help seed the program within a town or region.

For more Information:

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