

**PARENTS AT THE CENTER:
A Guide to Parent Inclusion, Engagement and Leadership**

WORKING DRAFT

**William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund
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OVERVIEW

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund is a family foundation located in Connecticut. The foundation works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut's children by providing grants, technical assistance and a forum for information sharing across the state to:

- support educational change in schools;
- inform public debate through policy research and advocacy; and
- strengthen the involvement of parents and the community in education.

To date the largest investment of the Memorial Fund is its seven-year commitment to the Children First Initiative (CFI)¹. The Memorial Fund and the seven CFI communities worked in partnership to explore promising strategies for children birth to eight. This handbook on *Parents at the Center* is one in a series documenting the important lessons distilled from the CFI experiences. We hope that broadly sharing the handbook will help others continue Connecticut's journey on behalf of young children. We look forward to learning from those on the next leg of the journey, in particular the forty-seven communities now engaged with the Memorial Fund in the Discovery grant making effort.

Why the Children First Handbooks?

¹ Danbury, Hartford, Middletown, Meriden, New London, Norwich and Windham have been partnering with the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in the Children First Initiative.

The experiences of the communities and the foundation over the life of the initiative were rich in content. In partnership we learned to build the plane as we were flying it. From the onset of the Children First Initiative we recognized the importance of inclusion, reflection and the benefit from sharing lessons learned. Cross-site learning opportunities contributed to the successes achieved by each community.

Children First was designed to be an interactive change process. One of the primary goals of CFI was to engage parents and citizens with systems designed to enhance children's development, school readiness and health outcomes. Resources supported the generation of parent leadership, creating and/or sustaining a parent leadership infrastructure, innovative collaborative programs, policy planning and raising overall community awareness on issues that matter most to families and communities.

The Memorial Fund and the seven CFI cities made substantial investments in community-inspired and community-driven strategies to improve education and life outcomes for children birth to eight. The challenges and accomplishments of the CFI communities needed to be recorded and shared. Replication of promising practices requires such documentation. How else can we learn? How else can we move forward?

The Memorial Fund's Board of Trustees and staff are committed to nurturing a

learning community focused on the goal of improving education and life outcomes for young children. The production of the Children First Handbooks speaks to this commitment.

What does “parents at the center” mean?

This guidebook offers resources and examples for communities that want to draw maximum benefit from parents’ strengths to improve the well being of children and families. It focuses on strategies that communities use to amplify parents’ voices, draw on their planning, advocacy and decision-making skills and promote their civic leadership. The guidebook is intended for parents, providers of early childhood services, educators, business people, faith organizations, government officials and others who play a role in creating high quality supports for young children.

The words “parent inclusion”, “parent engagement” and “parent leadership” are used throughout the guide to refer to a whole continuum of ways by which individuals bring their perspective as parents, and their power as citizens and activists (or potential activists) to community processes and institutions. This is different from the way people often use the terms “inclusion” or “engagement” to refer to strategies to educate parents’ about parenting. The former definition assumes that parents have power and can thus offer help to the community. The latter sometimes assumes that parents are powerless, and are more in need of help than capable of offering it.

The guidebook is organized into the following sections:

Why It Matters (Section I) reviews the many benefits of putting parents at the center of a community’s work on behalf of young children. It also highlights ways in which parents currently are engaging with and leading powerful community institutions and processes in Connecticut. These institutions include day care centers, family resource centers and Head Start programs, schools, school readiness councils, libraries, and Departments of Health, Social Services and Recreation. Across these entities, parents are driving activities such as school and city budget planning, school readiness resource allocation, as well as community conversations and deliberations on what our children need to thrive.

Principles, Components and Challenges (Section II) offers a framework to consider current activities and a vision for planning new or enhanced efforts. The principles, opportunities and challenges presented in this section come primarily from CFI lessons learned, many of which have been documented by the Editorial Board² of CFI in *The Children First Initiative: A Community & Parent Engagement Strategy in Connecticut*.

Assessing Your Local Efforts (Section III) lists some of the questions a group of parents or community might ask about its current work and opportunities for strengthening those efforts. These questions can be used to help groups inventory current assets, establish a baseline or track changes over time.

² The CFI Editorial Board members: Danbury CFI, Hartford CFI, Meriden CFI, Middletown CFI, New London CFI, Norwich CFI, Windham CFI, and the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund.

Additional Resources (Section IV) lists resources in Connecticut and nationally to support parents.

Section I: Why Do Parent Inclusion, Engagement and Leadership Matter?

The Memorial Fund values parent inclusion, engagement and leadership as strategies to improve the well being of children and their success in school. The Memorial Fund builds partnerships with communities that share these values as they work toward improvements in early care and education.

The term “**parent**” , as used in this guide, refers to children’s most immediate caretakers – mothers, fathers and, often, grandparents and other relatives or adults who accept responsibility for their nurturance, safety and well-being. The guide focuses mainly on increasing the involvement, engagement and leadership of people who are operating primarily from their parenting role. That is, while many of the people who work on behalf of children (child care providers, health care providers, system actors) are parents, this guide is aimed at parents who are not already in these kinds of positions.

Children and communities can benefit from their parents’ engagement in their early care and education in at least five ways:

- Children whose parents play a more active role in their schooling tend to perform better academically than children whose parents are less active.
- Schools that engage with parents early (before their children enter formal schooling) can set a stage for equitable and knowledgeable relationships that promote active parent involvement.
- Parents who become leaders in civic processes and institutions often sharpen their own skills and gain confidence in the process, which strengthens their leadership at home;
- Because parents are focused on the immediate good of their own children as well as the long-term good of the community as a whole, parent leaders are powerful voices for timely action and tangible results;
- Expanding the base of informed and active parents as citizens can lead to more equitable distribution of community resources and effective advocacy.

Moving from involvement to engagement involves understanding and expanding the roles parents’ play with their children and in communities. In our schools, parents traditionally sponsor and run activities that augment basic classroom experiences. They develop and raise funds for education programs, schools, athletic teams and multi-cultural events. They enrich children’s days as volunteers and aides in day care settings and elementary schools, on playgrounds and in neighborhood recreation, faith-based and after-school programs.

on, CONNECTICUT PARENTS have been asked in multiple ways including the following:
Parents are also frequently asked to participate in focus groups and surveys to inform planning and budgets.
ity strengths and needs,

nd family agendas, Increasingly, there are other forms of engagement where parents serve as fundamental agents for change. In Connecticut, for example, parents promote change by serving on advisory committees and boards, organizing and advocating, distributing data on the status of children, and by educating legislators and funders about local needs and preferences. Parents also serve as elected or appointed officials and as decision makers at resource and policy tables.
ut services, outcomes and funding,

The hope is that this change will support the development of meaningful roles for parents within and across communities. Thus, it is reasonable to think of parent inclusion, engagement and leadership as an ever-widening continuum. The continuum includes activities designed to reach out and inform parents and those aimed at moving the power of decision making and resource allocation further into parent hands.

Most communities already have activities along at least part of this continuum. For example, nearly every community in Connecticut now involves parents on advisory boards and assesses parent need for early care and education. Most early care and education providers try to engage parents in activities that the program defines for them. Fewer create roles of equality with parents; fewer still allow parents to set the agenda for change. Communities also struggle to reach all parents across divides of geography, race, class and language. It is the Memorial Fund's belief that parents in the role of equal powerful partners are more likely to positively influence how children are cared for and supported in the community.

In organized groups around the state, parents write, edit, produce and distribute newspapers that inform other parents about decisions, policies, programs and funding opportunities of critical importance to them. They organize and collaborate with other community leaders and institutions. Parent both negotiate and advocate for the well being of children. They join as members (sometimes leaders) of School Readiness Councils and School Boards. They educate and weigh-in with their legislative delegations. Parents also counsel various agencies and departments that allocate resources and create policies for early care and education systems.

These activities fall under the umbrella of parent inclusion, engagement and leadership. It has been useful for many parents and parent leaders, programs and systems to shift their way of thinking about what parents should and can do.

Section II: Principles, Components and Challenges

The vision of a fully engaged community has several parts. It includes a sufficiently large and diverse group of involved parents to ensure that their voices are heard. It assumes parents will play a variety of leadership roles and access to information and influence. It assumes that parents will continue to take part in more traditional activities (such as attending parent-teacher

conferences, volunteering at pre-school and school events, supporting budget requests) as well as feel able to influence policy by advocating for their children and communities.

To achieve this vision of an engaged community, we would need to change some of the ways that parents and child-serving organizations and systems currently interact. For example, parents would need to be fully represented on boards and bodies that control the institutions and systems that affect young children and their families. Such involvement also presumes that parents have access to policy briefings, funding and budget analyses and training on civic leadership.

A small group of **Danbury** parents came together as a result of two community forums on recreational issues. As Danbury Children First Initiative's (DCFI) Playground Improvement Coalition they partnered with the Parks and Recreation Department. The group took an inventory of school and public playgrounds. With few exceptions, they found them in deplorable condition and dangerously unsafe.

As time went on, parents became more involved with the nitty-gritty of the project. Meetings were held with the Mayor as well as the Parks Director. With the aid of the parents, it was decided that four city playgrounds would be revamped—with the downtown playground also being built to serve handicapped children. Helping the mayor pass a bond referendum, the

parents were ecstatic when \$200,000 became available for playground improvement. Parents were part of the decision-making process as bids were reviewed and the contractor was chosen.

Volunteers and parents were able to change an established system for the better and feel the sense of ownership and pride. The Playground Improvement Coalition urged the PTO's to insist on City funding for new school playgrounds. All 13 elementary schools received equal funding for additional equipment. This was the first time the City funded playgrounds.

Parent leaders and their institutional partners have suggested some basics to keep in mind as you expand the base of parent engagement and leadership:

- **Provide Training:** Just as many parents will benefit from training to reinforce and build specific leadership skills. Many providers, agencies, schools, teachers and staff also can benefit from training to build their capacity to work effectively with parents;
- **Break down Barriers:** System people who sit at collaborative tables and work jointly with parents are usually employees who are paid and have time built into their day to do this work. People who are at these tables in the role of parents are generally volunteers. While they may be deeply committed and offer a substantial amount of time to the work, they often are taking off time from work or trading-off time with their own children for time to help a

broader group of children. It is important to set meeting times, establish expectations, divvy up responsibilities, and manage volunteer burn-out with these differences in mind.

- **Bridge Divides:** Many of the communities in Connecticut are very diverse with respect to class, race, ethnicity, language and family structure. Most people are not very experienced at building authentic, trusting relationships across these traditional divides. Some communities invest in facilitation, training or technical assistance for help in building group process and relationship building skills. Absent this support, it can take a long time before diverse groups tackle difficult or “hot” issues. For example, people may not want to discuss problems with reading readiness, fearing such a discussion will raise uncomfortable questions about readiness of non-English speaking children to succeed in schools. At the same time, it can be very important to examine the data (e.g., to know how many children are scoring poorly due in part to the language or circumstances in which testing or screening is done). Even with the additional information, people may not be in agreement about why data show differences in income, health indicators, school performance, etc.
- **Analyze Power:** Examining issues through the lens of race, class and language can help parents assess a whole range of topics that might influence supports or policy changes, such as whether or not children are being labeled inappropriately, criteria

by which children are judged to be school ready, how services are distributed across neighborhoods or early education and care settings, whether or not formulas for funding allocation across schools seem appropriate, etc.

- **Resource the Work:** Building and sustaining parent leadership is hard work and takes substantial investments of time and money. It also does not happen overnight. It can take years for people to switch from thinking that parents mostly need help to thinking that parents are an able constituency who can lead change. It takes considerable human and economic resources to organize a broad constituency of parents who are trained and supported. Further, it takes time for parents to trust each other and for parents and systems to interact effectively. The work must be intentional and supported with funds – it doesn’t often happen on its own.

Components

Children First sites have adopted three different, though often related, strategies to accomplish these ends, including:

1. Changing values and climates within institutions, systems or communities to acknowledge and welcome parent voice.

Some successful community strategies have focused on changing the way people think about parents and their own roles in support of a parent-defined agenda. The goals are generally to deliver supports in ways that families can accept; to improve services to

children and families, to build on strengths rather than deficits and/or to build mutual and trusting relationships between people using services and people providing them.

Other successful strategies have involved recognizing ways in which parents are leaders in their homes and elsewhere and using them as resources; re-engineering systems to be customer focused; acting on advice or input parents provide; making data more readily available to parents for decision-making and advocacy; and organizing work according to parent-defined goals and priorities.

Following a survey of over 500 parents in **Danbury**, ParentNet was formed by Danbury Children First and other key players in the field of parent education. ParentNet is a response to parents' interest in accessible and affordable parenting skills training. The ParentNet Board is a broad partnership of Danbury's family and child-serving agencies and two parent leaders. Based on parent preferences and needs, workshops run for two hours weekly for four weeks; childcare, refreshments, and transportation assistance are provided; and the \$10 fee for the course can be waived if necessary. Unlike many parenting classes, ParentNet is open to all parents on an ongoing basis. The classes are available in the three primary languages spoken in Danbury: English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Graduates also may attend a monthly two-hour support group, where childcare is provided.

2. Expanding leadership opportunities to ensure multiple, meaningful roles

for parents within institutions, systems and community processes.

Successful community-driven strategies in this area focused on ways for parents to influence the inner workings of community systems, including those that distribute school readiness funds, determine community priorities, and set budget processes. Their goals range from ensuring that choices reflect taxpayers' and consumers' preferences and priorities to increasing the pool of experienced leadership as an investment in the future of the community.

Specific strategies include: having groups of parents review proposals and plans and allocate resources for child care, school, recreation, health and other publicly funded supports or services; actively filling existing requirements for parent inclusion, engagement and leadership; creating collaborations or coalitions between parent groups and systems; shifting resource allocation and decision-making activities to parent-led collaborations and processes.

3. Helping individual parents and parent organizations be effective agents for change.

Successful strategies in this area have focused on building the capacities of individual parents, parent representatives and organized groups of parents to take effective civic action. The goals have included: supporting people who are already working on a particular issue or are taking on expanded leadership roles; building a larger pool of such people; and organizing an unorganized constituency or group within the community.

Norwich was one of the first towns to use PLTI training after its initial piloting in Hartford. During the first year of implementation, the Norwich Department of Social Services and Youth and Family Services, United Community & Family Services, and other agencies offered their training skills as in-kind services to help initiate PLTI. The commitment of staff resources has been ongoing as well as the commitment to provide opportunities for Spanish-speaking parents. Norwich decided not to continue with PLTI and instead developed a parent leadership curriculum called *Voices for Families* as part of a larger continuum of leadership training opportunities for parents.

Building on a strong base of parent leaders, **Meriden** CFI initiated a Parent Engagement and Leadership project to expand leadership opportunities. A project design team was formed (half parents and half CFI members) and charged with overseeing the development and roll-out of a parent leadership menu of activities. The design team would be responsible for managing all facets of the project including participant recruitment, selection, marketing, and

support.

The design team’s goal was to encourage a larger, diverse group of parents to become leaders in the community. Parents were offered an array of leadership programs and opportunities. The programs would help parents better understand how their schools and government work. The longer-term goal was for parents to become more comfortable and involved with decisions that affect their children. The programs were also designed to give new parents the leadership skills necessary to take on and master their new role.

CFI communities have built parent leadership and the capacity of parent organizations. Activities include: (a) supporting parent organizing; (b) providing staff, funds and in-kind resources; (c) implementing parent and civic leadership and civic trainings; (d) providing access to key information on child and family issues; and, (e) supporting parents to assume civic roles. Specific supports have included scholarships, multi-lingual resources, child-care, transportation and employer support. CFI communities’ experiences suggest several tips for doing this work. See Table 1 below.

| TABLE 1: TIPS from Children First Initiative (CFI) | |
|---|--|
| MAKE PARENT INCLUSION AND LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES FOR THE COMMUNITY | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Allocate resources and staff the work ➤ Engage key leaders (e.g., Mayor, Superintendent, United Way, major funders, businesses, media) in meeting with and understanding the value of parent leaders ➤ Hold systems accountable for meeting requirements for parent input or oversight ➤ Build parent leadership requirement into receipt of public funds ➤ Hold meetings at times that are good for parents and not just providers | |

PUT EFFORT INTO ORGANIZING PARENTS

- Use door to door, person to person organizing strategies to meet parents and allow them to identify the issues of most concern to them
- Develop or strengthen parent-led organizations both as a strategy for organizing and an outgrowth of organizing efforts
- Organize continually to expand the base of organized parents and to replace parent leaders who will inevitably move on at some point (as their children age and/or they take on new commitments)
- Research and become educated about organizing models (e.g., from the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Center for Third World Organizing) and strategies (e.g., popular education; grassroots organizing; non-violence) that have been used in effective social change and social movements in the United States but are not typically considered in the children’s arena.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS TO TAKE ROLES THAT ARE APPROPRIATE TO THEIR OWN NEEDS, INTERESTS , AND AVAILABILITY AT VARIOUS STAGES IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LIVES

- Have a range of roles from one-time involvement with special events to long-term leadership on Boards, task forces, committees and the like
- Include behind-the-scenes roles (gathering information to assess the fit between parents’ child care needs and available options) and visible public ones (testifying at meetings with legislators) without requiring that every parent do both
- Include term limits and other ways for parents to step away from leadership roles as needed

DO WORK WITHIN THE GROUP TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF RACE, CLASS, CULTURE, ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE AND POWER THAT CREATE BARRIERS TO FULLY INCLUSIVE PROCESSES AND PRODUCTS

- Allow parents to set the agenda and plan group meetings
- Translate materials and have adequate processes to engage non-English speakers
- Hold meetings in homes, churches, community centers and other places where parents from different ethnic, racial and cultural groups control the setting and/or know they are welcome
- Become educated about structural racism and how it plays out in public and private institutions that affect children’s well being. Support a group’s development of a shared vocabulary and analysis to facilitate this conversation. Provide training, facilitation and access to other models.
- Encourage parents to use their collective power to advocate for change – and use this as a rationale for doing the hard work of inclusion

PREPARE FOR SHIFTS IN POWER IF PARENT INCLUSION AND LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES ARE SUCCESSFUL

Assume goals, assumptions and strategies will change in unanticipated ways once parents begin to act on training and experiences offered to them.

In **Windham** 's School Readiness program, all applications for funds are reviewed by an independent panel consisting of two Windham parents, two early childhood professionals and a representative from the town

government. The goal of this panel is to approve applications to the School Readiness Council that increase the quality of care young children receive in Windham. The panel's work has included highlighting the need for higher

wages in some programs and for consistent pay scales across the system of early care and education. The panel recently recommended that the Council adopt the policy of requiring all to complete the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation. The panel aims to improve the credentials and curriculum of early care providers as well as improve the quality of programs.

Section III: Assessing Your Local Efforts

Community efforts to strengthen parent inclusion, engagement and leadership are always based on **some understanding of where the community is now compared** to where it would like to be in the future. The communities most likely to make progress on their goals are those that use data and reflection to assess their work over time. In many areas of interest information is routinely gathered and publicized. However, in the area of parent engagement and leadership, there is no formal system for collecting information.

Few communities around the country have assumed responsibility for parent inclusion, engagement and leadership as a social good. Fewer still have **information on current conditions or recent trends in this area**, or have developed a shared sense of what form of change might be most desirable for their community. Thus, measuring and

tracking progress on these areas involves thinking creatively about what information would be helpful and how such information might be gathered.

We hope that the questions in Table 2 on the following page will assist you in that thought process. Section IV lists additional resources and websites for building and assessing parent inclusion, engagement and leadership.

Parents as Leaders (PALS) was a five-week parent leadership program held in **Middletown**. The idea to offer PALS began through the collaboration of several parents, two parent advocates, a parent resource coordinator, a family resource center director, and the Middletown CFI Coordinator. The organizers wanted to bring the Parent Leadership Training Program (PLTI) to Middletown but needed proof that it would be a worthwhile investment.

Through PALS, the training ground was tested using local speakers to introduce the concept of parent leadership. All of the speakers spoke for free. Partner agencies provided childcare, food, and additional supports. Participants were recruited through flyers, cable television ads, and feature articles in local newspapers. Attendance was high and reached parents who ordinarily do not come out to such events. Because of its success, PLTI was funded and launched in Middletown.

Table 2: QUESTIONS TO BEGIN ASSESSING YOUR WORK

| DOMAINS | SUB-QUESTIONS |
|--|---|
| Who are the parents in our community? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How are we defining the term “parent”? ➤ Why does parent leadership matter to us? To our community? ➤ What do we hope to accomplish through parent leadership? ➤ What is the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among our parents? |
| What outcomes are we targeting through parent inclusion, engagement and leadership strategies? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Are we focused on: improving the supply of early care and education; improving the quality of early care and education; strengthening connections between early care and elementary education; and/or improving students’ social, emotional and academic performance? ➤ What are parent interests and goals in the target outcome areas? ➤ How are they different among parents in various circumstances? |
| What have been the trends in parent inclusion, engagement and leadership in our community? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What inclusion, engagement and leadership activities and experiences do parents have? ➤ What opportunities, groups and institutions support them? ➤ How effective are they? ➤ Are they more effective with some groups of parents than with others? ➤ What parent-led groups exist? Do they have a constituency? ➤ What groups and Boards do parents lead on? What decision-making positions do they currently hold? |
| Which parent participation and leadership strategies have led to the desired change or result? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Which strategies have led to the desired change most efficiently and with the broadest community buy-in? ➤ Which have spawned the most new leaders or best follow-up work? ➤ What do these strategies have in common? ➤ What do the common features suggest about the essential ingredients of parent participation and leadership for our community? |
| What changes are being considered or made to strengthen parent inclusion, engagement and leadership? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What could we measure to tell if they are being effective? ➤ What could we measure about the process of making these changes? ➤ What could we measure about the results? |

Section IV: Additional resources

Connecticut-based resources

- Connecticut Commission on Children, Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) www.state.ct.us/coc
- Connecticut Voices for Children www.ctkidslink.org
- ASPIRA Parents for Educational Excellence Program (APEX) www.aspira.org
- Connecticut Parents as Teachers (PAT) www.patnc.org
- Connecticut School-Family-Community Partnerships www.state.ct.us/sde/early/sfcs/sfc/
- Special Education Resource Center (SERC) www.serc.rh.edu

Resources available nationally or from communities outside Connecticut

- Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships www.csoc.jhu
- The Children's Partnership www.childrenspartnership.org
- Family Support America www.fsa.org
- Head Start Bureau www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb
- Parents Anonymous www.parentsanonymous-natl.org
- Parents as Teachers National Center www.patnc.org
- National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and National Congress of Parents and Teachers www.pta.org
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education www.ncpie.org
- National Parent Information Network <http://npin.org>
- Parent Training and Information Centers www.npnd.org/ptis.htm
- Partnership for Family Involvement in Education www.ed.gov/pfie
- Parents Leadership Institute www.parentleaders.org