

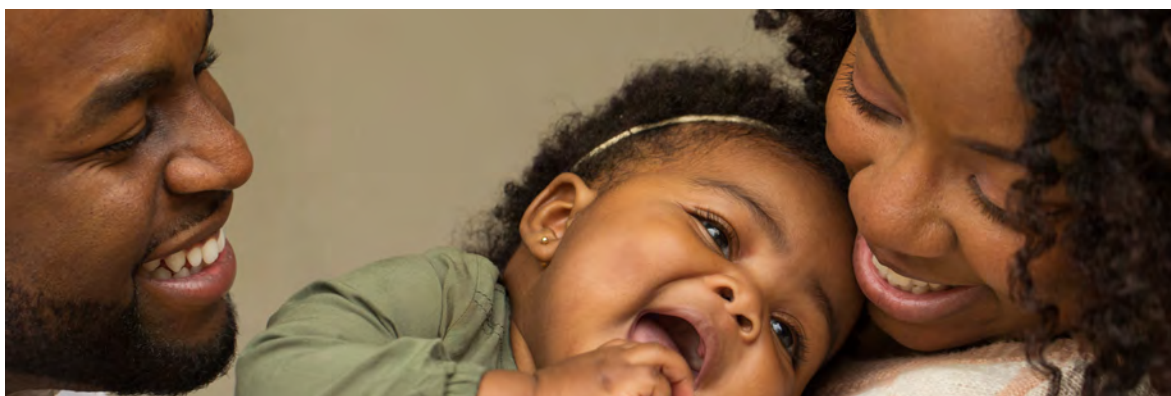


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# Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems:

## Lessons Learned from Three Communities

THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT and  
NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE FOR INFANTS & TODDLERS  
CAPACITY-BUILDING HUB



Parent leadership was the topic of an online technical assistance session sponsored by Help Me Grow North Texas for its organizational partners in November 2020. The session featured presenters from three communities: Multnomah County, Oregon; Liberty City, Florida; and Kent County, Michigan. This summary provides a brief description of each community, the value that parent leadership brings to early childhood systems, and strategies for supporting parent leadership.

The session was hosted by Stephanie Norton of Help Me Grow North Texas and facilitated by Barbara Gebhard, a consultant for the National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers (NCIT) Capacity-Building Hub and the Model Convening Project at ZERO TO THREE, with funding from the Pritzker Children's Initiative.

The term “parent partners and leaders” is used in this document to include all caregivers who act in parenting roles and who contribute to improving the services and systems on which families with young children rely.

## Snapshots of the Three Communities

**Multnomah County** is the most populous county in Oregon, with about 800,000 people and Portland its largest city. There are about 63,000 children age 6 and under. Of all children living in poverty, almost half are children of color.



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—*Nikki Martin-Bynum, Taking on United Childhood Challenges Harmoniously (TOUCCH)*

Presenter Lai-Lani Ovalles is the Senior Program Manager of [Early Learning Multnomah \(ELM\)](#). United Way is the backbone organization. ELM is one of 16 regional early learning hubs working across the state. The hubs engage cross-sector partners to work together to create local systems that are aligned, coordinated, and family-centered. Each hub is funded by the Oregon Early Learning Division.

ELM was in the first group of hubs to organize in the summer of 2014. All of the hubs are required to form a Governance Council, and Multnomah County decided to also create a separate Parent Accountability Council to increase parent participation in decision making.

**Liberty City** is a neighborhood in Miami, Florida, that is approximately six square miles in size. It is home to approximately 20,000 people of whom 80% are Black and live in an economically depressed community. Because Liberty City is on elevated ground, some residents are being displaced due to climate gentrification.

Presenter Nikki Martin-Bynum is a consultant for [Taking on United Childhood Challenges Harmoniously \(TOUCCH\)](#). TOUCCH’s resident-led nonprofit organization focused on reclaiming its power to transform the community from the inside out. This is done in partnership with Liberty City residents, parents, youth, faith-based organizations, schools, businesses, and social impact organizations. TOUCCH seeks to uplift the untapped latent power of community residents to drive the community transformation process.

In August 2016, Liberty City leaders received an Early Childhood Comprehensive System (ECCS) grant to

increase the developmental skills of Liberty City 3 year olds. They began with a community and organizational driven plan to map out how to achieve their goals. Over time, they have increased representation of parents and residents and sharpened their focus on the systemic issues that contribute to poor outcomes among young children and their families.

**Kent County, Michigan**, has a population of nearly 700,000 people and includes Grand Rapids, the second largest city after Detroit.

Presenter Annemarie Valdez is the President of [First Steps Kent](#), an independent nonprofit organization that works with parents, service providers, funders, advocates, and other stakeholders to build a comprehensive early childhood system in the county. First Steps Kent also administers and oversees the county’s Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage. Organizations apply for funding generated by the millage to provide early childhood services.

About five years ago, First Steps Kent stepped up its efforts to increase parent participation in all aspects of planning, decision making, and funding allocations.

## Why Parent Leadership Matters

Parent partners and leaders make valuable contributions on multiple levels, according to the three presenters. Valdez observed that once you start involving parents, “you can never go back. They offer a richness and perspective that you absolutely need to do the early childhood work.” Examples include the following:

### **PARENTS BRING AN AUTHENTIC PERSPECTIVE.**

Parents see the “big picture” and the wide range of factors that affect child and family well-being. This offers essential insights to the various providers who seek to serve them. “Parents have so many great things that naturally bubble to the top,” said Martin-Bynum. “Some of those are things that we often lose sight of because we’re so laser-focused on our piece of the program. We forget that people are operating in a larger context of their household and their community.”

### PARENT PARTNERS AND LEADERS GET WORK DONE.

The three presenters described numerous examples of necessary tasks that are done by parent partners and leaders. These include serving on early childhood conference planning committees, where they help design sessions geared to parents and ensure supports (e.g., childcare stipends) that enable parents to attend. They participate in decisions about how public and private funds are spent as members of allocations committees and advisors to foundations. Some have been involved in the hiring process for key positions. Parent partners and leaders also engage wider circles of parents in community-level efforts and mentor emerging leaders.

### PARENT LEADERSHIP CAN BE A PATHWAY TO EMPLOYMENT.

Parent partners and leaders gain experience and skills that can lead to employment in early childhood and other fields. “They really shine,” said Valdez. “In our part of Michigan, we don’t have the workforce we need. So, it is an ideal situation, like a pipeline to employment, for these parent leaders who have found quality employment after a year or two of involvement.”

In Multnomah County, parent leaders were instrumental in the development and passage of universal preschool legislation. “One of the things the parents really pushed for and got in creating our preschool program is a pathway to the workforce,” said Ovalles. “So, if parents are interested in becoming teacher’s aides or classroom teachers, there is a pathway, not just to formal education, but to scholarships and to placement in jobs for all programs.”

### PARENT LEADERSHIP ENHANCES CIVIC LIFE.

In many cases, the contributions of parent partners and leaders are not confined to early childhood. “Our parent leaders have really tasted the fruits of their work and their success; now they want to take on a lot more issues,” said Ovalles. “They want to take on child care and have that available in our community



and accessible to all the parents. They hosted and organized their own parent cafes, formal and informal, to get the vote out. So, there’s definitely a change that’s happening and I think for the better.”

## Strategies for Supporting Parent Leadership

The presenters offered five key strategies: meet people where they are; include parents as decision makers; compensate parents for their time and expenses; provide learning opportunities; and ensure diversity and sustainability.

### MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.

Parent partners and leaders come with a variety of strengths, interests, and circumstances. Valdez described the process they used in Kent County to recruit parents for a funding allocations committee. “Everyone has different abilities and strengths,” she said. “Filling in applications or forms online is not always the way you get the best of our parents. So, we didn’t have a written application. We made it so that they could record and submit a video on their phones, and we received 35 videos from parents who wanted to be on that committee.”

“Meeting people where they are” can also apply to service providers. Liberty City started its work in parent leadership with a parallel process, with one coalition for organizations and institutions and another for parents. “We were doing so much work and support to ensure that parents felt comfortable in the space, but then realized we needed to make sure that the agencies were prepared to have them in this space,” said Martin-Bynum. “So, it was more work to ensure organizational readiness, like breaking down acronyms and sharing power.”

“We’re working to make sure that parent voices are at all levels of planning and that parents are in every planning session, part of each committee, part of my board of directors.”

— Annemarie Valdez, *First Steps Kent*

### INCLUDE PARENTS AS DECISION MAKERS.

All three presenters emphasized the importance of providing purposeful roles and responsibilities to parent partners. Examples include the following:

- As one of Oregon’s early learning hubs, ELM was required to form a governance council that included representatives from the major organizations and institutions, as well as parents. Most of the other early learning hubs had one or two parents on their councils. ELM decided to create an additional Parent Accountability Council (PAC) and to create the PAC first.

“The PAC really is the heartbeat of our organization,” said Ovalles. “They created our guiding principles, which focus on racial equity and decreasing the disparities that exist for children of color in early learning.” The PAC is comprised of 12 parent leaders who meet monthly. They take issues that the PAC is talking about, along with parent feedback from the community, to the Governance Council, creating an ongoing feedback loop of communication. The PAC’s

guiding principles and a brief video are available at the ELM [website](#).

- In Liberty City, parent partners have input on what data are collected from families and why. “Several parents serve on the data subcommittee,” said Martin-Bynum. “They’re getting ongoing data updates and they’re also crafting the questions, including things we may have missed on our own.”

In addition, parents have a say in what programs get funded in their community. “Lots of times when we look at why a program was successful or not successful, we don’t take into account if anybody asked local residents if they even wanted it,” said Martin-Brynum, “or if the applicant had the capacity to serve the community in the way they need, culturally congruent, hours of operation, etc. So, we don’t enter any agreement or letter of support without input from parents.”

- First Steps Kent supports the work of parent partners and leaders across Kent County’s early childhood system. “What we had five years ago was low participation until we built the relationships and trust with our parent community,” said Valdez. “We’re working to make sure that parent voices are at all levels of planning and that parents are in every planning session, part of each committee, part of my board of directors.”

For example, four of the nine members of the Ready by Five Allocation Committee must be parents. The parent members are mainly people whose families have experienced some of the services funded by the millage. There are also five or six parents who serve on a home visiting committee that meets every month. And in 2018, parents were included in every aspect of the countywide Ready by Five conference, including parent members on the planning committee, sessions designed specifically for parents, and stipends for child care.

### COMPENSATE PARENTS FOR THEIR TIME AND EXPENSES.

Compensation is important for several reasons, according to the three presenters, and needs to be built into budgets as a necessary expense. It shows





respect for parents as equal partners, especially when the other people in the room are there as part of their paid jobs. It also increases the pool of parent partners when they know they will be paid for their time and out-of-pocket expenses.

The presenters noted that compensation tends to deepen people's commitment to the work. "Folks are getting a sense of their own agency," said Martin-Bynum. "We've had some instances where they continued to convene and work on things outside of their paid hours just because it was something that was meaningful and important to them."

Various methods and levels of compensation have been employed across the three communities. In some cases, parents are paid based on an hourly rate for a specified number of hours. Another common method is providing a set amount of money per meeting to cover the parent's time and/or expenses. These stipends are often provided in the form of gift cards. "Paying parents is a situation where we can't just paint with the same brush," said Valdez. "Not everyone can handle getting paid by check. We try to be as flexible as we can because we want to have that authentic voice."

### PROVIDE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES.

All three communities invest in training for parent partners and leaders. Some of the training is specific to committees on which they serve, e.g., home visiting. Resources on leadership and organizing in general include the following:

- [Community Organizing and Family Issues \(COFI\)](#) uses parents' strengths and commitment to their children and to their neighborhoods to help make positive change in their own lives, their families, and their communities.
- [Popular Education](#) is an effective strategy for sharing information, building skills, and developing leadership. In a health promotion context, Popular Education helps people analyze the root causes of ill health and create healthier and more just communities.
- [Parent Leader Network of the Center for the Study of Social Policy \(CSSP\)](#) brings together parents from across the country to collaborate, build leadership skills, advance racial equity, and advocate for change in early childhood systems.
- [The Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#), another CSSP initiative, was created in 2018 to help early childhood systems learn to work with parents in ways that promote equitable outcomes and maximize opportunities for all children.
- [Talking is Teaching](#) is a universal developmental health community campaign. With the support of the Clinton Foundation, parents in Liberty City created the parent edition and now train other parents on how to create and lead developmental health campaigns.
- [Cultural Humility Training](#) was developed by the California Prevention Training Center for people working to address health disparities in their communities. The training covers the concept and principles of cultural humility, including life-long learning and critical self-reflection, recognizing and challenging power imbalances, and institutional accountability.

### **ENSURE DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY.**

No one parent can speak for all families. Nor is it fair to lean on a few parents to address all the early childhood issues in a community. “Sometimes we look to that magic parent, who may be one person in a room of thirty,” said Martin-Bynum. “That puts far too much responsibility on one person. Not to mention that each person is going to have a different set of experiences and you want to bring in diverse experiences.”

In Liberty City, an informal pipeline of parent partners and leaders has emerged. “I would say that right now there are about four or five who are holding the term parent leader and the rest of the group is holding the term parent partner,” said Martin-Bynum. “And they decide when it changes. They will nominate each other as the parent leader for different things, like participating in calls and discussions. And then there are the folks who say, no, I just want to be a parent partner.”

In Multnomah County, the 12 PAC members represent six culturally specific communities within the county that

are most affected by poverty: Native American, African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latino, and a large immigrant and refugee population, primarily Vietnamese and Somali. The PAC partners, with organizations that serve those communities, in turn recruit parents they know to serve on the PAC. When vacancies occur, the organizations are there to fill them.

### **Conclusion**

All three presenters view parent partners and leaders as critical to the success of early childhood systems and initiatives. Engaging and supporting them requires time, resources, and mutual trust. “Follow their lead, even when it doesn’t seem like it’s necessarily connected to early childhood,” Martin-Bynum advised. “In every instance, it has directly connected back to early childhood in a tangible way, which on the front end we were unable to see. And by doing that, we’re building trust and partnership.”

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## **ABOUT THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT**

Four national early childhood models—Family Connects, HealthySteps, Help Me Grow, and Nurse-Family Partnership—are exploring ways to have a greater impact on young children and their families in communities where their programs overlap. The project is a multi-year initiative, with leadership and facilitation from [ZERO TO THREE](#) and funding from the [Pritzker Children’s Initiative](#). While the four models were the starting point for the project, their local experiences reveal a broad range of community partners who play important roles in early childhood collaboration. For links to additional stories and briefs from the Model Convening Project, see the [Hand in Hand Directory](#).

## **NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE FOR INFANTS & TODDLERS (NCIT) CAPACITY-BUILDING HUB**

The NCIT Capacity-Building Hub, managed by the BUILD Initiative, provides consultation and support to Pritzker Children’s Initiative’s 20 state and 10 community coalition grantees working on their prenatal-to-age-three agendas. The Hub offers consultation and support to assist Pritzker Children’s Initiative-funded state and community leaders and their coalitions to make the provision of opportunities and services more equitable. The Hub will progressively grow its national efforts to increase the knowledge of all state and community leaders by sharing promising strategies and resources other states are successfully using to improve maternal health, birth outcomes, and infant-toddler well-being.

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