



Reimagining Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Advocacy in New Jersey

Introduction

New Jersey has a long history of impactful advocacy for young children. In 2018, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) joined *Think Babies* as a state partner and formed the New Jersey *Think Babies* Coalition to bring specific focus to the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. Since then, the Coalition has leveraged additional projects and funding, including from the Pritzker Children's Initiative and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to make significant strides in envisioning and advancing a Prenatal to Three (P-3) system that works for New Jersey children and families. From the beginning, engaging families of young children has been a priority in New Jersey's P-3 advocacy. This brief focuses on the evolution, impacts, and future of family leadership in advocacy for young children in New Jersey.

The ROAR Parent Leadership Council (PLC), a joint initiative of Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) and Mminated Moms, was formed in January 2021 to actively engage parents from across the state in leadership opportunities to advance an agenda to support the healthy growth and development of children, birth to 3, and their parents. It began out of a recognition that, in the past, solutions were created for communities without their input and that policy work should both engage and be designed by those most affected.



Getting Started

Beginning in 2018, initial engagement efforts followed more common pathways of inviting families to participate at tables that had already been set. This included hosting advocacy trainings to engage family advocates to advance priorities that had been set by the coalition, mobilizing families to participate in rallies at the state's *Strolling Thunder*, and extending invitations to families to participate in coalition workgroups. These efforts were successful in starting to build relationships with family advocates and creating space for dialogue about what needed to happen next.

Taking a Step Back

As ACNJ and the *Think Babies* Coalition gained more experience engaging families in advocacy, they realized based upon feedback from parents and learning more about best practices that they needed to take a step back and reconsider their approach. This meant:

- Gathering input from parents who had participated in earlier efforts. Parents shared the desire to:
 - Have a meaningful voice at decision making tables as full participants;
 - Be engaged in setting priorities at the front end, rather than just advocate for those already identified; and
 - Have deeper opportunities for impactful advocacy.
- Shining a light on current racial equity and parent leadership practices and gaps using an [assessment tool](#) developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy designed to measure racial equity and parent leadership in organizations.
- Leaning on community expertise through thought partnership with grassroots organization Melineated Moms.
- Engaging in courageous conversations internally to examine how engrained beliefs and practices perpetuate inequities.

Building Capacity

New Jersey made progress by building the capacity necessary for authentic family partnership. Including:

- Increasing the capacity of parent leaders through the training series Find Your Roar delivered in partnership with Melineated Moms to engage parents in cohort-based learning to find their voice as advocates.
- Growing the capacity of ACNJ to effectively engage parent leaders through dedicated staffing and the development of transparent processes and procedures for ACNJ's work with families, including compensation for parents.
- Increasing the capacity of *Think Babies* coalition members to welcome and engage parent leaders through intentional learning opportunities with parent leaders sharing their insights about how best to engage parents.

Parent Leadership in Action

New Jersey's efforts to reimagine engagement of parent leaders in advocacy led to the creation of the [Parent Leadership Council](#) (PLC) which is delivering results. Members of the PCL codesigned New Jersey's 2021 and 2022 *Strolling Thunder* Events. Members focused on gathering input from families across the state about how to use COVID Relief funds in 2021 and in 2022 brought together families from across the state to meet directly with their policymakers.

- A Parent Ambassador Program launched to support parent leaders to hold listening sessions with parents in communities across the state to better understand their needs and build relationships for future engagement.
- The PCL is embracing self-determination, leading conversations to decide what the future of the Council should look like.



“ The parents really ran the meetings. Their stories and their struggle finding child care or prenatal care, was very powerful. It made a connection with legislators we never could.

Cecilia Zalkind
President and CEO, ACNJ
Speaking about
Strolling Thunder 2022

Elements of Success for Authentic Family Engagement

As the ACNJ team and the PLC reflect on the past several years, several elements of success for Authentic Family engagement have emerged:

- **Focus on relationships**

- Relationships are at the heart of successful engagement efforts. From an agency standpoint, this means prioritizing dedicated staff capacity for this work and committing to initial and ongoing individual outreach to parent leaders to build trust, collect stories, and manage logistics. Relationships between parent leaders are essential for building camaraderie, resilience, and sharing information and resources to respond to real-time family needs. Relationships between parent leaders and other parents in their communities extend the reach of engagement efforts and allow a fuller understanding of needs and opportunities. Lastly, relationships with partners who have deep connections to communities, such as Melinated Moms, are essential for leveraging the networks and expertise that already exist in communities.

- **Be transparent**

- Authentic reciprocal engagement requires transparency. Whether it's about compensation structures for parent stipends, realistic assessments of the opportunity for policy change, or how project decisions will be made, transparency between agency staff, coalition members, and parent leaders is essential.

- **Follow through**

- Building long term trust and belief among parent leaders that their efforts are respected requires that agencies follow through on what they say they will do.

- **Capacity and resources**

- Developing effective structures, building relationships, and compensating parent leaders for their expertise requires substantial staff capacity, funding, and time.

“*Strolling Thunder* was such a positive, engaging, and inspiring experience. I felt involved in creating change and motivated by the meetings with legislators (and the subsequent social media posts and e-mails summarizing bills that are moving forward in the process). It was truly a “connecting” experience – which is not easily done virtually and speaks to all the work YOU and ACNJ put into making it a success. The toolkits, guidance, and support you guys provided – before, during, and after the meetings – facilitated participation and made it easy to contribute. This year’s approach really engaged parents and deepened their participation in the PLC!”

Laura Palescandolo,
PLC member

Results

The PLC has emerged as a powerful voice in advocacy for New Jersey's babies and families. Their work has resulted in increased understanding among partners of how parents in New Jersey with young children access services, not just in the policy areas initially identified by the *Think Babies* coalition, but taking a more holistic view of the barriers and challenges that families face when raising their babies. An example of this are the results of the Expanding Equitable Access to Head Start and Early Head Start project which surfaced information about gaps and needs in family access to services in the Newark region.

Parent leaders in New Jersey are engaging in impactful advocacy. In 2022, members of the PLC met with their policymakers, testified and provided written testimony at state legislative hearings, spoke on national webinars, participated actively in all of the *Think Babies* coalition workgroups, and were featured in the media.

Parent leaders in New Jersey have been active partners in advocacy to advance important policies and investments such as:

- Creation of the Thriving by Three Act competitive grant program for infant and toddler child care programs; and
- Reauthorization of the MIECHV federal home visiting program.

Next Steps

This work is far from complete. Building on the capacity that has been developed, the PLC and partners at ACNJ and the *Think Babies* Coalition will continue to focus on leveraging the wisdom of families to make policy that is truly responsive to community needs. They will also work to support the continued growth of parent leaders currently engaged and broadening the network. Building sustainable operational structures and financing for the Parent Leadership Council will be critical to the success of these efforts.



Making Progress for Families with Young Children in New Jersey

Spring 2018

- New Jersey joined *Think Babies*
- First New Jersey *Strolling Thunder* rally

Spring 2019

- New Jersey awarded Pritzker Children's Initiative planning grant
- Second New Jersey *Strolling Thunder* rally

Fall 2020

- New Jersey undertakes CSSP self-assessment to measure racial equity and parent leadership in the work of the coalition
- Conducts series of Find Your Roar trainings delivered to parents in partnership with Melinated Moms

Spring 2021

- New Jersey joined the Increasing Equitable Access to Head Start and Early Head Start project with a focus on the Newark area
- Fourth New Jersey *Strolling* event is planned in collaboration with parent leaders to gather input regarding use of federal Covid relief dollars.

Winter 2022

- Parent co-leads identified to lead the Parent Leadership Council

Summer 2022

- Governor Murphy signs Thriving by Three Act

Spring 2018–Winter 2019

- Conducted 6 advocacy training events for parents and providers

Spring 2020

- New Jersey awarded Pritzker Children's Initiative implementation grant
- Third New Jersey *Strolling Thunder* virtual rally

Winter 2021

- ROAR Parent Leadership (PLC) is established

Summer 2021

- ACNJ hired a Parent Engagement Coordinator to provide dedicated staffing

Spring 2022

- Centering the Voices of those with Lived Experience to Disrupt Systemic Racism in Policy and Advocacy Aimed at Supporting Children and Families Project launches building on Head Start project from 2021. Focus on creating a parent ambassador program supporting PLC members to hold focus groups with other families in their communities
- Fifth New Jersey *Strolling Thunder* event is planned in collaboration with parent leaders with focus on direct meetings between parents and policymakers.

Winter 2022

- Congress reauthorizes the MIECHV federally home visiting program