



SUCCESS STORY:

COFI SCALES PARENT ENGAGEMENT WORK TO NEW COMMUNITIES AND CONSTITUENCIES – WINS LOCAL AND STATEWIDE CHANGE FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

ABSTRACT

An evaluative paper to explore findings on: How well does the COFI model work with a range of parents and communities to engage parents as leaders in their families, schools, communities and in building a powerful voice for parents on policy and systems change goals on behalf of young children and their families?

Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)

Year Three Report on Illinois Lessons Learned



Community Organizing and Family Issues

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Key findings summary.	Page 3
2. Background on the paper.	Page 4
3. Variables and methods.	Page 5
4. Contexts of the expansion.	Page 5
5. Impact of the expansion project in building statewide power.	Page 7
6. Changing early learning systems: findings and learnings.	Page 11
7. Impact on public action at the community level.	Page 14
8. Impact on individual parents and their families.	Page 19
9. Sustaining expansion momentum. Next steps.	Page 26

APPENDICES

APPENDIX #1 – Process of Leadership Training and Organizing

A. Leadership training and organizing support provided in each expansion community.	Page 28
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B. Recruitment process: How COFI reached out to and recruited parents to participate in leadership training in the expansion/replication communities.	Page 31
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APPENDIX #2 – Background and context on COFI/POWER-PAC’s earlier <i>Early Learning Campaign</i> advocacy work.	Page 34
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APPENDIX #3 – Demographics of expansion communities and parents in each.	Page 35
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Key findings summary.

In seven communities across Illinois, from the spring of 2014 through the fall of 2017, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) recruited, trained and supported 591 low-income parents of color in becoming civic leaders. These communities were new to COFI, which had for nearly 20 years worked primarily with elementary school parents in Chicago neighborhoods: the expansion sought to test COFI's effectiveness in diverse communities and with younger parents of children ages 0-8. After three-and-a-half years we can convincingly say that *"Yes, the COFI model translates well to a broad range of constituencies – urban, suburban, and more isolated smaller cities across the state and teen parents, fathers and families with very young children"*.

The COFI-trained parents in this initiative have reported dramatic impacts on themselves and their families, setting and achieving goals to help improve learning, earning, and health outcomes. They are working in 20 teams to make their neighborhoods safer, their children's preschools and schools better, their families more economically secure, and their communities more engaged in civic life. The parent leaders trained are actively participating in early learning community collaborations and in broad based community development collaboratives, informing agenda setting and policymaking. And COFI-trained parent leaders across the state have now come together across race and cultural differences to impact broad policies that affect low-income children and families, including issues of access to quality early care and education and family economic security.

- Working across the state to gain public policies of benefit to children and families, parent leaders from expansion communities:
 - Won a new statewide Parent Engagement Framework for the Illinois Early Learning Council including the creation of a new Family Advisory Committee to fully include parent voices in child development and early learning decisions at the state cabinet level;
 - Helped to win restoration of child care subsidies to over 200,000 Illinois families;
 - Launched the Early Intervention Redlining campaign to ensure that low-income families of color have equal access to early intervention resources;
 - Championed and won a new law preventing the expulsion of young children from early learning programs;
 - Conducted research and released the report: "Stopping the Debt Spiral" which addresses the crushing impact of debt on Illinois' lowest income families; and
 - Supported Illinois' new "Trust Act" making Illinois a 'sanctuary state'.
- COFI-trained parents also pushed for expansion of the COFI Early Learning Ambassadors program (trained parent outreach workers) and successfully expanded it to seven Illinois communities. The Ambassadors, in turn, reached out to and:

- Knocked on 92,608 doors, spoke with families about the importance of early learning, and identified and referred 7,893 2-4 year olds in need of a quality preschool or Head Start programs;
- Spoke with over 1000 families and helped 326 children ages 0-5 to get developmental screenings; and
- Referred 32,974 children to summer meal program sites;
- And finally, thanks to parent leaders' voices and efforts in the expansion communities,
 - 200 East St. Louis children are bused to and from preschool;
 - 3,000 Aurora children are bused to and from preschool and school;
 - 22 children in Evanston will have Children's Savings Accounts opened;
 - Peer-to-peer outreach programs were created in 7 communities where parents distributed materials about child development and early learning in English and in Spanish (where needed); and
 - Hundreds of parents participated in events to learn about utility bills and rights around utility debt and shut-offs, restorative justice in schools and preschools, neighborhood safety, and Children's Savings Accounts.

At a time of much turmoil in our national lives, COFI-trained parents are building relationships across differences, fostering trust, and assuring that the voices of those farthest from the centers of power are heard and listened to. We welcome discussion and feedback on these learnings.

Background on the paper. COFI was founded in 1995 to increase the public leadership of low-income parents of color so that they could give voice to and take collective action on issues of primary concern to their families. In 2014, after nearly 20 years of successful parent leadership development and organizing in Chicago (primarily with elementary school parents), COFI, its Board and the parent leaders set the goal and began work to expand and replicate the model statewide in Illinois by implementing it: a) with parents of younger children (0-8 years) and b) in collar, suburban and downstate Illinois communities beyond Chicago (called 'out-of-Chicago') to assess its replicability for building an ever-larger constituency of low-income parent leaders of color to advance 'their' policy priorities through a racial equity lens at the statewide and even the national level.

Expansion work has been supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Grand Victoria Foundation, the McCormick Foundation, the Deaconess Foundation and three federal grants to the State of Illinois. The documentation and evaluation of this work was undertaken by staff as well as by third party qualitative data collection by the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University of Chicago – including a particularly in-depth delve into COFI's impact on individual parents and their families by Loyola doctoral student Jennifer Cossyleon. This report is provided to share the expansion experience, results and learnings from the past

three-and-a-half years of work developing effective parent leadership, organizing and engagement across Illinois – predominantly in 7 diverse communities.

Variables and methods. This paper:

- documents progress in bringing parent leaders older and younger, immigrant and African-American, from across the state to work together as a unified group to advance family policy systems change through a racial equity lens;
- documents the impact of the leadership trainings on a) the individual parent leaders and their families (via parent focus group input and goal database analysis) and b) the civic leadership commitment, skill, and impact of the parent leaders (via focus group input and staff reports and focus group);
- discusses administrative, staffing, logistics, and other implications for COFI of moving beyond Chicago to achieve its mission of creating a movement of low-income parent leaders of color;
- describes the numbers and levels of leadership trainings offered, the levels of parent participation, and barriers to participation, with a focus on differences between these younger populations and ‘out-of-Chicago’ communities and earlier COFI parent leaders, as reported by staff (reports and focus groups) and parents (CURL focus groups in four of the communities);
- describes the processes (Appendix #1) for engaging new parents in both city and ‘out-of-Chicago’ communities and the extent to which these processes differed from those of engaging participants to-date, as reported by staff (reports and focus groups) and parents (CURL focus groups in four of the expansion communities); and
- describes the demographics (Appendix #2) of the expansion/replication communities via Census data, as well as the demographics of the parent leaders participating in COFI leadership training via COFI’s leadership team tracking database, summarized in the Team Workbook.

Contexts of the expansion. COFI’s founding purpose is to build a broad based movement of low-income parent leaders of color able to shape public decision-making. With an ever-evolving and nontraditional approach to developing public parent leadership, COFI intentionally starts small and local. At the time of its founding, COFI began testing and implementing its model in public schools, where due to the passage of a law mandating school-based parent-led school councils, parent engagement was allowed and, in many schools, encouraged. COFI found the local school an opportune place to recruit parents for its leadership training program and the policy climate within the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) conducive to parent organizing in local schools and system-wide decision-making. The very first citywide parent-led victory, accordingly, was a CPS commitment from the then-CEO Arne Duncan (later to become

Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education) to support the creation of 150 ‘community schools’, public schools that offered rich after hours including sports, adult education and other children and family programming.

By 2014, COFI had well-documented success in developing leadership from the ranks of low-income African American and Latino parents and grandparents of elementary school-aged children in Chicago. COFI had supported these parents in creating (in 2003) a citywide parent-led member organization of COFI-trained parents, POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council) that had won a long list of systems change victories (for example, recess returned to Chicago schools, a new restorative justice philosophy embedded in the school discipline code, parent peace centers established and a peer-to-peer Ambassador model created). This success had led communities outside Chicago and state officials to ask COFI to pilot its model in communities beyond Chicago. COFI had documented its Theory of Change in the “*COFI Way: Policy & Systems Change*” report. And, so, in 2014, COFI’s board, staff and leaders made the decision to explicitly expand and deepen the reach and impact of its leadership training and organizing model to increase the power of parent leaders of color across Illinois.

The two dimensions for expansion – parents of younger children and communities beyond Chicago – were chosen for different but often interconnected reasons:

- In its policy campaigns, COFI and POWER-PAC increasingly found themselves moving ‘upstream’. For example, the campaign to replace zero tolerance with restorative justice was unique among advocates in its emphasis on elementary school children (the advocacy focus is largely on teens), as parent leaders had experienced, for example, kindergarteners being suspended for minor infractions. More recently – and now confirmed by Yale University – parent leaders observed the profiling of African American boys in preschool settings and are thus taking their *Elementary Justice Campaign* into their *Early Learning Campaign*. In addition, parent leaders increasingly were hearing that not only were low-income children of color not “ready for kindergarten”, but they were starting quite far behind their more privileged peers at preschool entry. Armed with ever-increasing evidence of the importance of early screenings and supports to close the racial gap in children’s development, COFI and POWER-PAC sought opportunities to engage significant numbers of parents of very young children in *Family Focused Organizing*. Parent leaders at COFI believed that by starting with younger families, the leadership training and community building would strengthen parents of these younger children improving outcomes for their kids and engaging them in for the long-haul in policy campaigns to increase public supports for infants and toddlers at-risk. Community partners and federal and foundation funds made it possible to seize this opportunity.
- Over the years, POWER-PAC had increasingly found that, while some important public decisions are made at the municipal level, often its appropriate policy targets are state

level ones. (And very recently COFI and POWER-PAC have helped to create a nationwide collaboration of parent organizing groups, United Parent Leaders Action Network, UPLAN, that seeks to build parent leadership power to change federal policy and worked on national school discipline issues with the national Dignity in Schools Campaign.) Once Chicago Public Schools, for instance, embraced restorative justice policy, POWER-PAC and its partners, worked to encode restorative justice in Illinois statute (SB100). As POWER-PAC moved into early childhood development and economic asset building policy campaigns, most key public decisions are clearly made at the State level. Even as POWER-PAC leaders ‘won’ seats at decision-making tables and the genuine respect of policymakers (see “*The COFI Way*” at www.cofionline.org), they recognized that they needed the voices and muscle of parents across the state to be a truly powerful and impactful force for change. The beyond-Chicago sites selected for initial expansion seized opportunities in funding and local partnerships, but also met criteria for geographic, community, and racial-ethnic diversity as developed by COFI and POWER-PAC. Like the Chicago expansions, these ‘out-of-Chicago’ expansions focused primarily on parents of young children.

In addition to targeting younger families, the 7 expansion/replication communities (see Appendix #2 – Demographics) also were all chosen because they are communities that have or are building local-level early learning collaborations (mostly state-funded) that COFI and POWER-PAC believe need to engage the voice of the low-income families of color with young children.

Impact of the expansion project in building statewide power.

Statewide organizing activities. One explicit goal of the expansion/replication project was to build a statewide voice and power for parents of color in state policymaking around issues of importance to families with young children. Toward this end and throughout the project, COFI brought the newly-trained parents leaders from across the 7 replication/expansion communities *together more than 20 times for face-to-face meetings or events*. This included:

- 1) *8 statewide leaders convenings* engaging 138 parents (many attending multiple times) at central Illinois locations (Joliet, Bloomington and Springfield, Illinois) bringing parents together across race, ethnicity, and geography for COFI’s advanced leader training and to meet one another, foster relationship-building statewide, learn from each other’s experiences, find common ground, share solutions, meet with state officials, plan common action, and build a collective action capacity.
- 2) It also includes *7 statewide meetings* of a new Family Engagement Subcommittee of the Illinois Early Learning Council (co-chaired by POWER-PAC leader) created in response to recommendations from POWER-PAC parent leaders for institutionalizing parent voice and input into state level early learning systems and policy. Two parent representatives were chosen by parents in each of the 7 COFI communities and attended these meetings.

- 3) COFI organized statewide working groups of parents on policy issues identified by the parents at statewide gatherings. These included: Family Engagement in Early Childhood Policy, Early Intervention Redlining, Stopping the Debt Spiral and Children’s Savings Accounts. *4 face-to-face statewide training/meetings* of these working groups were held and *4 videoconference meetings* were held. At these meetings, working groups received training, met with public officials and advocates, and planned action steps.
- 4) Lastly, COFI brought parent leaders and their children together annually (4x) for *Family Education Day at the State Capitol* in Springfield. Buses, vans and car loads of parents and children, including over 100 parents and children each May from Aurora, East St. Louis, Elgin, and Evanston, participated in these Springfield days. Said one Aurora parent: “I was simply unaware and this gave me the opportunity to realize that I have the power to talk to my representatives and to ask for betterment of my community, my block, for so many things.”

By project’s end, newly-trained parent leaders from across the state voted to ***grow POWER-PAC into a statewide organization, POWER-PAC Illinois, with branches throughout Illinois***. The branches are currently in formation and the first elected governing council meeting is scheduled for early 2018.

Parent leaders’ impact on statewide (and beyond) systems change over the 3.5 years. Over the 3.5-years of the expansion project, 591 parents and grandparents of young children in the expansion communities were engaged and 219 of those parents actively led statewide campaigns and/or POWER-PAC efforts (58 out-of-Chicago and 161 in Chicago). This engagement ramped up significantly in the last year of the expansion effort with *Year Three/Phase Three: Policy & Systems Change* – the training and organizing process that the expansion sites took on in 2016-2017 to focus on building statewide power and influence for the parents around impacting statewide policy to improve outcomes for low-income young children of color and their families. 48 out-of-Chicago parents and 90 in Chicago parents received this training. Significant advances that moved forward over the 3.5-year period:

- Parent leaders successfully proposed, advanced a plan for, and won passage of a new Parent Engagement Framework for early childhood policymaking and the creation of a Parent Advisory Committee for the State’s Early Learning Council – both approved by the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development and the Illinois Early Learning Council; the ultimate ‘win’ came through the persistence of parent leaders in the face of earlier opposition of early learning advocates skeptical of the idea who, ultimately, acknowledged that POWER-PAC leaders won them over;

- With partners, parents successfully advocated to restore child care eligibility in Illinois first from 50% FPL to 162% FPL, and this past year, to 185% FPL, thus restoring child care assistance to tens of thousands of lower income families;
- In Chicago, POWER-PAC parent leaders (including leaders from the new expansion communities) were *the* core advocacy voice in advancing a unified early learning system (bringing Head Start and Preschool for All under one system) with a simplified and parent-friendly application;
- In Springfield and across the state, parents advanced a broader coalition's (the Illinois Asset Building Group) campaign for a Children's Savings Account by winning the support of the State Treasurer, talking with local elected officials, and building community support for the idea: the campaign moved legislation this spring but with opposition from the Governor, the bill was held up on the last day and will need to be re-introduced next legislative session;
- Parent leaders' experiences and successes as community leaders in early learning provided the basis for policy brief, *Parent Engagement that Builds Leadership and Power*, at http://www.cofionline.org/COFI/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ParentEngagement_brief-web.pdf.
- Parent voices formed the basis of *Strategies for Parent Engagement* brief for school administrators in Illinois (found at COFI and Illinois State Board of Education websites);
- With partners, parents successfully gained a statewide law that prevents the expulsion of young children from State funded preschool programs; rules are in development that would include licensed day care facilities as well;
- In Springfield, in 2017, parents also played a significant role in helping to pass: 1) a new school funding formula; 2) the creation of a new Kindergarten Transition Advisory Committee with a POWER-PAC parent on it; and 3) a balanced state budget with new revenues, which took an override of the Governor's veto;
- Parent leaders provided a critical voice at more than 6 Illinois State Board of Education Listening sessions across Illinois that informed the State's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan and now are being trained to be involved in the implementation of the plan;

- After securing a grant to pilot an early intervention peer outreach effort in the Chicago Englewood community and learning of the dearth of resources available for young families in that area, parents found advocacy and research partners, including the Shriver Center, and launched an “Early Intervention Redlining” campaign to ensure that developmental screening and early intervention resources are accessible in communities that need them most;
- Parents actively partnered in a broader coalition that has gained the Governor’s declaration of Illinois as a ‘sanctuary state’, an announcement that came this past August;
- Parent leaders drafted COFI’s response to proposed Head Start regulations that would have reduced parent empowerment standards; they (the standards) were restored in the final regulations (in coordination with national partners – see next); and
- Finally, parent leaders helped build and launch the new United Parent Leaders Network (UPLAN), a nationwide collaboration of parent organizing and leadership groups, building capacity to change agendas across the states and at the federal level to increase racial equity in life and learning outcomes of children.

Building cross-racial, cross-cultural relationships for systems change. Another important impact of bringing parents from isolated African American and Latino communities together statewide was the building of cross-cultural relationships and learning to work with one another across race and culture. One of the Aurora parents – a Latina – told CURL that the Latina parents learned assertiveness from their African American peers, especially POWER-PAC leaders. African American parents overcame preconceived notions about Latinas and built strong, genuine relationships. As one East St. Louis parent told CURL:

We were <preparing for the trip to Springfield> and they broke us into groups. They took me out of the East St. Louis group to be with the Aurora group. And I remember thinking – ‘I am the only one’. I am thinking to myself, I am going to break away from these people, because they are gonna speak Spanish and they are not gonna recognize me. So I am thinking I’m not gonna go. But when I got there, they were indeed speaking Spanish, but the only thing I hearin’ everybody say is ‘Where is Yolanda?’ I can’t even get away from them! When they didn’t know something, they said, ‘We are gonna say it to Yolanda first’, and then they would tell me, and then they would go back to Spanish. So when we went to see the senators and representatives they were like, ‘Yolanda, you talk. You talk for us.’ Then they made sure that I had a word in, they let me participate.

Because of the statewide relationship-building, parents from new COFI communities learned of specific strategies that POWER-PAC had used successfully to improve the lives of low-income

children and families and took those learnings back to their home communities. For example, several expansion communities developed Early Learning and Summer Meal Peer Ambassador programs (Austin, East St. Louis, Elgin, Englewood and Pilsen/Little Village) upon learning about the model and its tremendous impact in increasing early learning enrollments and participation in supplemental nutrition programs in Chicago. Parent leaders from two ‘out-of-Chicago’ communities in East St. Louis and Aurora hosted Parent Summits on the Racial Wealth Gap and the idea of a state-supported Universal Children’s Savings Accounts program. Evanston parents convinced partners in their city to support a local Children’s Savings Account pilot. And, expansion community parent leaders joined POWER-PAC’s STOP campaign and helped to gather 305 surveys on financial security issues and debt with families in their areas. With those findings, parents at the statewide convenings last year, voted to work on a range of debt-reduction strategies including addressing utility, student loan and medical debt and working to lower local fees and fines. Utility bill clinics were hosted in 5 communities across the state.

Changing early learning local systems: findings and learnings.

Beyond changing statewide systems, another interest of COFI’s in partnering with State early learning initiatives, private foundations, and community collaborations in seven communities is to develop parent leadership and engagement to improve access to and quality of child development, maternal and child health, and early childhood education resources for young low-income children of color in the local communities. The following discussion highlights parents’ impact in this arena over the 3.5-year expansion project:

Gaining full partnership in early learning community collaborations. Each of the seven communities had in place at least one early learning community collaboration at the inception of this project. Unsurprisingly, some of these collaborations were more developed than others, some were more receptive of parent participation than others, and many of them adapted their agendas to available funding mandates, creating in some cases new opportunities and in others new constraints on parent engagement. The parent leaders’ progress in gaining seats and voices at these tables is described later on. COFI organizing staff observed the following about the parents’ victories and setbacks:

- Often, parents felt that they had to ‘prove’ themselves to the professionals in the various collaborations, ‘earn’ their seats at the table by demonstrating the ability to reach families members found ‘hard to reach’, offering their Spanish language proficiency as a resource to the collaboration, carefully presenting research findings of residents’ views of priority concerns, and so forth.
- When professionals had created, shaped, and funded the community collaboration (for example, the Innovation Zones’ funding that is focused exclusively on access and quality), parents – and other community participants – had limited ability to re-prioritize the agenda and thus found the locus of the early learning community collaboration a limited one for some of their actions.

- Sometimes seemingly obvious ‘blind spots’ in collaborations created real barriers to parent participation and thus send the message that ‘we don’t need you’. Two in particular: the times of meetings (in one expansion community parents successfully fought for a time change – parents wanted the meetings to be held while their children were in the preschool program, but that did not work for program staff. This agreement was then reversed and ultimately alternating with ‘parent friendly’ and ‘provider friendly’ meeting times) and the lack of provision of child care and translation at meetings.
- Often, the extent to which the community collaboration welcomed and truly respected parent leadership was highly dependent on who was staffing the collaboration, although COFI offered training for these staff, it often was not enough to overcome pre-existing perspectives and approach. Over time, the most effective way of changing these perspectives was for the parents to build direct relationships with these professionals.
- Parent leaders in each expansion community found that they wanted their own ‘space’ from which to build support and leadership and, then, bring their collective perspective to the community collaborations. Accordingly, in each community, parents formed their own cross-team group which set the agenda for change from the perspective of parents. They then sent representatives to the early learning collaboration with that agenda.
- Despite these barriers and with COFI staff playing a bridge role by providing training and consulting with the collaboration teams, there was a huge change in attitudes toward the parents as the collaboratives learned that parents bring a unique addition to their tables.

Parent leaders’ impact on expansion communities’ responsiveness to families with young children. We adapted a framework to document parent leaders’ impact on community systems supports for low-income families with young children based on the Center for Schools and Communities’ framework (<https://www.center-school.org/fssr/documents/ContibofFam.pdf>).

COFI-trained parent leaders contributed these skills, assets, roles, and sweat to help early learning collaborations improve systems and better serve low-income families of color:

1) They connected with families that other service providers couldn’t.

- COFI-trained parents instituted Ambassadors programs in 6 of the 7 targeted communities, generating hundreds of new developmental screenings and thousands of early learning enrollments;
- They created a parent-to-parent pilot project to support parents in getting services for their 0-3 aged-children with diverse needs in Englewood that other communities are adapting and may be a model for a new state initiative to reach more children with early intervention services;
- They partnered with school districts in Aurora and Elgin to reach out to and engage Spanish-speaking immigrant families (evermore fearful of door-knocks and calls from officials of any public institution); and

- In several communities, they reached out to engage families in supplemental summer meal programs.
- 2) They brought the voices and perspectives of families to inform program, policy, and practice, and, in so doing, often reframed broader issues such as family economic security as ones of clear concern to improving child developmental and early learning outcomes.
- Parent leaders' own experiences (in their families and friendship networks) and feedback from families as gained by Ambassadors and outreach efforts identified enrollment and attendance barriers from their perspectives – safety, transportation, a program that asked about immigration status, a center that was indifferent to parents, programs not aligned with non-traditional working hours, duplicative and confusing application processes across programs, etc.;
 - Parent leaders brought the collective experiences of POWER-PAC – research about enrollment barriers and proposed policy solutions – to the local early learning collaboration tables (*Why Johnny Isn't in Preschool; How We Got Johnny, Jada, and José into Preschool* at www.cofionline.org), 'winning' developmental screening and early learning Ambassador outreach, simplified and common application systems across program sites, Spanish language information and application materials, a single point of contact phone number, buses and safety measures, etc.; and
 - They brought the voices and experiences of parents to bear on community agenda setting and broader systems change victories in which new parent leaders teamed with veteran ones via POWER-PAC to create. See immediately below and next section.
- 3) They connected early learning and family support programs and collaborations to the communities served.
- Parent leaders' own knowledge of community resources and stakeholders informed outreach strategies (WIC stations, community festivals, churches, public housing developments, laundromats, etc.);
 - Over 100 community surveys were conducted during the *Community Outreach & Action* phase of the COFI model in each community to identify priorities beyond early learning program issues that are particular problems for families with young children; specifically they identified neighborhood violence, access to child and maternal health resources, and economic security, including utility bills, medical and student loan costs, and fees and fines that mire their families in debt;
 - The findings from these surveys were subsequently presented at parent-led Town Hall community forums in all 7 expansion communities which were attended by over 300 people statewide to engage more residents and community stakeholders in understanding the importance of strong early learning systems and introducing other ideas to improve life outcomes of children and families of color;

- In several communities, parent leaders' Spanish language proficiency was recognized as *a* key asset to better community connections and family outreach;
 - Parent leaders' evolving relationships with broader community development collaborations (Cradle to Career in Evanston; East Side Aligned; Team Englewood; Austin Coming Together) and local elected officials in several collaborations helped both to raise the visibility of the early learning collaborations and to sharpen the focus of broader collaborations on issues of benefit to low-income families with young children.
- 4) They proposed new 'green light' vs 'red tape' solutions to longstanding problems, using simple and creative methods fully grounded in parents' authentic experiences to find solutions to seeming intractable program, policy, and practice problems. Examples: Ambassadors, Parent Peer Advocates, Walking Preschool Buses, buses for children in sprawled communities, new placement of crossing guards, stop signs, bus stops and parking spaces, providing information to make utilities more affordable, 'one stop' phone number to access early learning resources, streamlined and common (across programs) applications.
- 5) They strengthened advocacy for early learning programs, systems, and budgets by organizing grassroots participation in such efforts. Within the participating communities, Ambassadors, community surveys, and Town Halls all served to raise levels of awareness about the importance of strong early learning systems and of residents' participation in efforts to champion these systems. See next.

Impact and learnings of the leadership training and organizing support on public action at the community level.

One more contextual comment. In each of the expansion/replication communities, an Early Learning Community Collaboration – made up of early learning and developmental screening providers, schools or school districts, some public officials responsible for early learning policy and budget, and nonprofit child advocates – had been created to improve enrollments, attendance, and quality of programs. COFI/POWER-PAC worked to ensure 'real' parent engagement in these community collaborations. This work is briefly summarized here but is the focus of an entire paper to be issued shortly.

Aurora. Aurora's parent leadership group, Padres Lideres Activos, is today a strong and growing group of parent leaders. Padres has fought successfully to make the early learning collaboration in their community, SPARK, more responsive to and respectful of parents, gaining changes in meeting times, gaining the provision of child care at the meetings to enable their participation, and successfully advocating for a Parent Council within that collaboration. (When COFI opened an office in Aurora in August 2016, SPARK agreed to hold its parent meetings at

that site with child care.) Parent leaders are keenly aware that early learning programs and resources in the Latino-dominated eastern section of the community are inferior to those of the western section of the community, which is predominately White, and are working to achieve racial equity in developmental, early learning, and educational outcomes. Identifying transportation as a major barrier to children's learning success, the parent leaders last spring 'won' school bussing for the first time in their school district to bus 3,000 preschool and elementary school aged children

Aurora parent leaders articulated a change agenda beyond early learning systems improvements as well. Their *Community Outreach & Action* focused on better understanding low-income families' economic woes and, learning about Children's Savings Accounts from other COFI parent leaders. Aurora parents held both a Parent Summit and later a community forum with 100 in attendance, introducing this policy idea and their broader vision to the community; and they joined others across the state to advance this policy in Springfield last spring. East Aurora School District 131 was so impressed with the parents' outreach work that it asked COFI to provide leadership training in several schools and it asked Padres to partner with them in ongoing efforts to better reach families who speak Spanish and to build parent leadership. Padres Lideres Activos is steadily building multi-issues capacity, with parents currently building a campaign to improve the access of immigrant families to health care and meeting with the new Aurora mayor's staff.

Austin. In Austin, recruited parents of young children tended also to have older children: although their concerns for their children thus spanned the preschool-school age range, these new parent leaders quickly joined with long-time POWER-PAC/Austin parents to create Austin Parents United and a) conducted outreach with dozens of parents to identify the biggest needs in their community for families with young children and b) then, worked with the Austin Coming Together Early Childhood Collaboration to create and implement an Early Learning Peer Ambassador program last summer and a new parent council. Their community survey results were not surprising but will drive future actions: the top concern is safety for children in the area – to reduce gun violence and increase parent safety patrols. Secondly, affordable housing for young moms with babies/infants/toddlers was discussed. Parents are working with partner, New Moms, to explore actions on this issue. They also hosted two Utility Bill Clinics with the Citizens Utility Board to help residents save on their utility bills.

East St. Louis. Newly-trained East St. Louis parent leaders are making progress on three major identified early learning access problems: confusing and conflicting application processes from program to program, the need for a more welcoming climate for parents and families at the early learning center, and transportation issues around the early learning center – including safety, parking, and ultimately, the need for bus service for preschool. Working as a parent leadership team, Parents United for Change, within broader early learning collaborations in the community, East St. Louis parents have negotiated a Peer Ambassadors program that has successfully increased developmental screenings in the community and, with COFI, created a Food

Ambassador program this past summer that reached families about summer meal options for children. They built relationships with the Mayor and school district officials and won some changes: a new preschool busing for 200 children, new crossing guards and bus stops, a parent safety patrol, a dialogue about the welcoming climate, and improvements in parking for the preschool center.

Parents United for Change leaders also have advocated for their community at the state level: they testified at two public hearings on the implementation of ESSA (the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act); they are an active part of the State's Parent Support Task Force on Developmental Screenings (co-chaired by POWER-PAC); they presented at a forum for more equitable state funding of local public school districts; they hosted a Parent Summit on Universal Children's Savings accounts; and, they fought for and won the reinstatement of one state program that was cut a year and a half ago (the All Our Kids network program funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services).

Parents United is steadily building multi-issues capacity and began a campaign to reduce fines imposed by the public housing authority that, as they accumulate, mire already-low-income families further into debt. Parent United for Change parent leaders are a member group of the emerging nationwide network of organized parent leaders, United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN).

Elgin. As in nearby Aurora, newly-trained Elgin parents have keenly felt and observed racial discrimination in their community, played out in inferior programs and resources for Latino and African American families. In order to best take action on this, Elgin parents have had to work to open doors to their full participation in their community's early learning collaborative, the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning, overcoming professionals' initial reluctance to see them or listen to their authentic voices as partners in improving systems. They are making progress: they 'won' meeting times with child care so they can participate; they won funding support to implement an Early Learning Ambassadors program in partnership with the Innovation Zone; they won a single phone number that families can call (in English and Spanish) to learn about early learning resources; and school district officials asked them to partner in reaching out to Spanish speaking families and asked COFI to expand leadership training in the community.

How they did it, COFI staff relate, was via a combination of storytelling of their and other parents' experiences with the system, demonstrations of their leadership and early learning systems knowledge, conducting a community survey and presenting results at their Town Hall forum, and the pushing ideas like Ambassadors that are relatively simple solutions to seemingly intractable enrollment problems. One newly-trained Elgin parent leader presented about the leadership training process and the Ambassadors program at the Statewide Birth to Three conference in central Illinois. They named their community-wide parent team, Padres con Poder/Parents with Power. With parents in Aurora, and in partnership with the Kane County Health Department, they are also now tackling the issue of health care access and affordability for immigrant and undocumented families and last year hosted a forum on immigrant rights.

Englewood. The teen moms trained by COFI from ChildServ and Family Focus home-visiting programs along with the Head Start parents from Children’s Home & Aid and Metropolitan Family Services came together in a team called Empowering Englewood that worked on a writing project and published a book of poetry and narrative during year one. In year two, these teams – along with other COFI-trained parents – joined the Southside Parents United Roundtable (SPUR) to do community outreach focused on issues of preschool pushout and expulsion. They hosted a well-attended community Town Hall forum on preschool pushout and presented their outreach findings, which later informed a legislative proposal – now law – that bans preschool expulsions statewide.

The Town Hall also led to a proposal from the parents to work on the need for more support for young moms with children with developmental delays or experiencing trauma. Parent leaders won \$20,000 in Innovation Zone funding last year to create the Peer Advocates program with 7 parent leaders – trained on developmental disabilities, early intervention, the screening process, and parents’ rights and responsibilities in gaining access to these resources – reaching out to families door-to-door. Ultimately, parents won a monthly developmental screening site in their community. In a community overcome with gun violence, neighborhood safety is the other dominant concern of Englewood parent leaders. Parents built relationships with the local aldermen and other community groups to create positive alternatives to street violence. And SPUR, like Austin parents, hosted a Utility Bill Clinic with Citizens Utility Board to help residents save on their utility bills.

Evanston. In 2013, a youth serving agency, Youth Opportunities Umbrella, asked COFI to bring its leadership training program to parents of children in Chute Middle School in Evanston. These parents went on to create a parent team, Parents on a Mission (POM), which has become a force in challenging racial disparities on the Evanston school system. With COFI expansion funding, the POM parents were hired by COFI to be peer trainers along with COFI staff to train three new groups of parents of young children from the preschool center and a network of child care agencies. Those young parents then formed PEACE, Parents of Evanston Allied for Childhood Education. PEACE and POM parents are now pushing for and winning change in three areas: 1) the parents won the creation of a new Parent Advisory Committee to inform the local Cradle to Career Collective Impact effort in Evanston; 2) they won support from the Evanston Community Foundation to pilot a new Children’s Savings Account pilot beginning in 2018– informed by POWER-PAC work in this area over the past several years; and 3) they met with school board members and helped to inform some racial equity efforts including ending tracking in math at the middle school.

Pilsen-Little Village. COFI has trained two teams of parents of very young children, one in each of these twin sister communities. The Pilsen team of new parent leaders set up an English/Spanish conversation initiative that meets weekly and has helped them in their English learning. The Little Village team is largely focused on safety and anti-violence, gathering 500 signatures on a petition for a new stop sign that won support of the City Council this fall and

aims to improve safe passage to and from the local preschools/schools. Both groups worked with the Innovation Zone (the federal Race to the Top grant) to do a peer outreach effort to identify early learning needs and resources in the community; the parents were sorely frustrated to find a serious lack of services in the community for families with young children. They continued to reinforce their concerns at the Innovation Zone table in order to seek action in generating new resources for their community. With the end of the Innovation Zone project, one significant enduring parent leader contribution to local systems improvements was the adaptation of the Ambassadors model within the dominant provider organization, Catholic Charities.

The two teams came together two years ago to participate in *Community Outreach & Action* training: outreach interviews identified neighborhood safety, lack of early learning resources, language barriers, and deportation fears as priority problems. Each team hosted a community forum focused on early learning, restorative justice and violence prevention – introducing the concept of restorative justice and POWER-PAC’s Peace Center model at each forum. Over 100 parents attended these forums. As in the other communities, neighborhood safety remains a dominant concern of parents, compounded now by deportation fears. This past year, the Pilsen and Little Village parents teamed with COFI leaders from nearby Latino communities of Brighton and Gage Parks (and suburban Cicero) to create a POWER-PAC ‘branch’ to build power to advance policies and practices that protect immigrant children and families.

Similarities and differences in civic leadership across the expansion sites. CURL’s researchers summarized parents’ reflections on their public leadership in the four communities in which CURL conducted focus groups as:

- The ‘new’ parent leaders clearly grasped the ‘COFI model’ of systems change: they repeatedly spoke to the **importance of relationships in change-making**, within the COFI ‘family’, with advocates, with elected and appointed officials. Parents also understood that they brought power to these relationships, so they were ones based on mutuality rather than dependence. They observed that these relationships created a climate of two-way accountability to move mutually held goals forward.
- The parent leaders reiterated how important **the positive expressions of support and solidarity** were that they felt within and across COFI parent leadership teams as critical in maintaining and furthering their civic leadership and action. Group support enabled them to practice newly learned skills and overcome frustrations such as the challenge of getting turnout to their Town Hall meetings and community forums.
- The newly trained parent leaders echoed the voices of parent leaders trained in years past in observing – and celebrating – their **gains in political sophistication** and how much they had learned about **advocacy strategies and tactics to achieve their goals**.

CURL researchers also observed some differences among the groups.

- Parents in predominantly Spanish speaking groups tended to focus more on personal goals they needed to achieve in order to become more effective civic leaders, beginning with English language mastery, while African American participants focused more in the discussions on their public leadership challenges and accomplishments.
- Parents in Latina communities spoke more than African American participants in the focus groups to issues of racial/ethnic disparities – clear differences in ‘their’ areas of the community with respect to school and program quality and quantity – and to the impact of deportation fears on building community. Perhaps racial inequity is so embedded in the African American experience that it just didn’t come up in the focus groups, or perhaps, because the two African American communities (East St. Louis and Englewood) participating were entirely African American, comparisons with majority communities were not immediately in their thoughts.
- And one major difference between ‘out-of-Chicago’ and Chicago parent leaders’ observations. Although the ‘out-of-Chicago’ participants faced challenges in their schools and communities, they spoke of having ready access to leaders within targeted bureaucracies. (One Elgin parent exclaimed, “We had the Mayor at our summer picnic!”) The Chicago parents, on the other hand, spoke of the ‘overwhelming bureaucratic monstrosity’ of Chicago Public Schools and other city departments and the unending ability of officials to pass blame for problems to others, without repercussions.

Impact of leadership trainings on individual participating parents and families.

Note: COFI has largely focused on the impact of its leadership training process on visible changes in community, school, and public policies advanced by parent leaders, but the powerful statements of parents that the training was life-changing for them seem important to capture, as well. Over the 3.5 years of the expansion, the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University conducted focus groups twice with new parent leaders in four of the seven expansion/ replication sites to better document what differences the leadership training made in participants’ lives. Those four sites are Aurora, East St. Louis, Englewood, and Pilsen/Little Village, collectively providing urban-suburban/collar county-downstate, and predominantly African American/predominantly Latino experiences. (For more on the demographics of the communities, please see the Appendix.) In addition, Loyola doctoral candidate and CURL research associate Jennifer Cossyleon interviewed 22 COFI leaders from these and other neighborhoods in-depth and observed trainings and their immediate impacts. Here is the collective summary of both of these evaluation efforts:

Summary of parents’ self-reported program impact. Overwhelmingly, all the parent groups interviewed at all focus groups sites expressed a general excitement and positive energy about

the leadership training. Repeatedly, parents spoke about their enthusiasm for the curriculum and eagerness to learn more. The parents expressed a genuine relationship with COFI staff leading their training. Ms. Cossyleon summarized that the trainings built ‘critical consciousness’ as articulated by Paulo Freire, the ability to understand the systemic roots of oppression, as well as the skills and support to transcend oppression in both private and public life.

Throughout the focus groups, five themes continually emerged from parent feedback. The first theme was about the parents’ growing confidence, fueled by new knowledge and skills. The second theme encompassed support and accountability developed through the parent leadership training. The third theme was learning new leadership skills that they are applying in their personal lives, as well as in public life. The fourth theme was about two-generation impacts and the fifth was about cross-racial and cross-cultural insights.

Impact #1: increases in confidence. The most common remark about the parent leadership training was that of increased confidence, vital to goal achievement as well as effective public leadership, with differences in community context. In the bilingual communities of Pilsen/Little Village and Aurora, confidence was associated with issues of *citizenship and civic duty*, with English language mastery one critically important confidence-builder: being able to communicate, socialize, and understand the cultural patterns of this country allows them to feel independent in their lives, and self-assured when pressing for change or confronting issues in their community and their schools. “*My goal is to become a citizen and my first step to accomplish that is to learn English better. This year I want to apply for my citizenship.*” Another parent: “*...when we come to a country that is not ours, it is very difficult. Being confident within ourselves helps us greatly.*” Besides or beyond attaining U.S. citizenship, parents from Pilsen/Little Village and Aurora wanted to gain confidence to better contribute to their community.

I want to be a facilitator. I want to learn how to elevate my voice as a Hispanic and support my community. Many times we have issues but don’t know how to get involved in groups and execute goals. I want to learn to be an effective leader of groups that incorporates community and a variety of cultures even within the Hispanic community. I want to get more involved.

In East St. Louis, parents told stories about how the training allowed them to gain confidence *to advocate*, asserting their right to (literally and figuratively) enter spaces they did not feel they belonged. One mother:

Sometimes, we as people be like well, I want to go up to—let’s just say the school, I’ll just use that for example—I want to go up to the school. But then we think I don’t know how they’ll take me in. Or what should I say, or how I should say it. But coming to COFI I’ve learned... that your voice matters and it’s more powerful than we actually think. I’m saying, for mothers, for ladies, you know, we just more powerful than we really know. And we can make changes, and we can make a difference. We can.

Confidence for the parents was also gained via information and skill building in the training, particularly about demystifying bureaucratic processes and noticing that they could operate and function in these spaces. Parents said they “wanted to be advocate[s] for children, especially in their schools,” and they were gaining the confidence to do precisely this from COFI. Parents were particularly buoyed about meeting with elected officials on their annual trip to Springfield:

“Just like that trip to Springfield...It was a personal learning experience because I got a chance to talk to people that—“

“—Actually make our laws.”

“—Yeah...Just to talk to them I was like, you put your pants on just as well as I do. You are no different than me. You just got a higher paying job. But who are you to cut off these particular things that affect me and my family? So just to actually have a chance to talk to those people—you know I’m so used to seeing them on T.V.! To actually talk to them it was like, man! I do [have] a voice and I did think that I was being heard.”

Impact #2: increases in peer support. Parents reflected that building relationships among the group of participants was critically important to them, enabling them to open up, share life stories – even ones they thought shameful – and personal goals, and, thus, gain acceptance and support. With time and the support of one other, parents gained even more confidence. One Aurora parent said:

“I heard other people talking with confidence and that gave me a lot of encouragement. I heard other people’s experiences as well and that motivated me to share what I had kept within me for so many years.”

The bond formed between parents during the course of the trainings was generally the first thing parents commented on when they spoke about their experience. As one Aurora parent commented, *“When there are conflicts going on at home, I come here and talk about my problems. My daughter says, ‘Go. You come back as a better person when you come back from them.’ I know she can see the changes I’ve made.”* Through the leadership training process, participants find the space to share both the good and the bad in their lives, but importantly, discover that others in the group feel similarly. It appears that the group builds collaborative capacity where parents utilize their knowledge and skills to assist one another in finding answers:

“We come here to learn about tools to help each other when we are overwhelmed with our children. It helps to know we aren’t the only one making mistakes or having a hard time.”

The collaborative experience was not limited to assisting with problems. In East St. Louis, parents sometimes embraced one another’s personal goals as their own to help encourage group members: wrestling together with how they would achieve their personal goals cemented those goals and heightened accountability for their achievement.

“...When you do it on your own, it comes from within you. So if we decide ...what steps we’re gonna take and no one told you—“

“You’re held accountable to it.”

“Yes! It comes exactly from yourself, so you know you got to do it because you said it.”

“You said it in front of the group.”

In all of the focus groups, parents commented on obstacles that make it difficult for them to sustain their participation in the parent leadership trainings. These challenges include scheduling and timing of meetings, balancing work and familial commitments, childcare, and transportation. However, Englewood parents, inspired by how well their COFI staff member encouraged participants to attend meetings and events and “went after them” when they fell off the radar, learned to do the same for one another. Further, several parents told Ms. Cossyleon that the training process and the support they experienced in training provided significant respite from daily stresses, giving parents a change to breathe, reflect, and re-wind.

Impact #3: increases in leadership skills. COFI’s leadership model intentionally seeks to build leadership skills among groups of people who have not previously participated in public life. The process begins with helping parents see themselves as leaders.

Leadership identity formation. Many parents entered the leadership training program wondering how they could be both a parent and a leader at the same time. COFI’s program challenges this false dichotomy. Parents’ new conceptions of leadership, as results of participating in *Family Focused Organizing*, enabled them to see themselves as leaders. Before starting the COFI trainings, some of the parents felt that leaders had a particular look, had their lives together, and were immediately taken seriously by the community and school officials. They noted that the respectful environment fostered by COFI staff and their peers in the group allowed them to feel confident in embracing a leadership identity even though they may not fit this preconceived notion. The training also taught parents to demand respect from community leaders, their families, and their peers. Parents in both Englewood and Aurora commented on the stigma associated with their neighborhoods and socio-economic class standing and how that interfered with their willingness to engage in community issues. One parent reflected on feelings she had while attending a school meeting saying:

“Many times for the school where I’m at, it was already given a negative stigma. And many times the women over here would not open up to you. You can try but it takes a lot so...what I had to tell them is, please do not judge me by the outside look. It’s been hard over here...you have to let them know...”

Ms. Cossyleon, returning to the thought of Paulo Freire, observed through the interviews that COFI-trained parent leaders had become ‘politically liberated’ through the leadership training process, able to see and understand their legitimate place at decision-making tables.

Goal setting and other leadership skills in personal life. Parents who participate in COFI training attest that the training’s civic leadership content is readily applicable to improving the quality of their private lives. The most-often reported example was **how to set attainable goals.**

One parent in Aurora, for example, said her favorite part of the training was learning how to accomplish goals and particularly overcoming “*the obstacles that we could face when trying to accomplish our goals.*” An East St. Louis parent, reflecting on the importance of goal setting and how it is not taught in schools, took it upon herself to introduce the concepts to her children and her mother using COFI’s model and goal setting worksheets.

The “**Web of Support**” seemed particularly helpful to personal goal setting: one parent discussed being in a situation where she needed assistance. She described how in that moment, she conjured an image of the web of support, reorganizing people’s placement in her life. One stakeholder recounted how a parent applied the “**Web of Support**” concept to evaluate a romantic relationship, realizing her partner of 15 years was not supportive of her and her goals.

Other parents spoke about the usefulness of learning the community organizing **skill of active listening, called “One-on-Ones”**, and how it has helped them to diffuse tense situations and communicate more effectively at home. In all of these examples, parents demonstrated the applicability of the lessons and how deeply they integrated those lessons, allowing them to make life changes and approach situations differently than they would have before.

Furthermore, the parents noted these changes have benefitted their lives. For many of them, the idea of placing their needs before the needs of their family was a revolutionary concept they had not considered before. Many, many of them commented on how tough it was at first to grasp the idea of separating their needs from those of their families.

The ongoing COFI-POWER-PAC action campaigns gave many parents tools to help manage in their homes. Parents reported in both interviews and focus groups that they learned from the leadership training process **how to advocate for their children in their schools** and **how to locate resources their families need**. Parents reported that they are newly **applying restorative justice practices** to the resolution of family conflicts and to child behavior management. And many parents also reported that the economic asset campaign STOP taught them useful lessons in **personal money management**.

Lastly, many parents reported that the discipline of developing a public action strategy – **analyzing a problem, identifying alternative solutions, assessing the most actionable solutions, etc.** – has helped them solve problems and become more orderly in their private lives.

Leadership skills and knowledge in the civic sphere. Of course, *Family Focused Organizing* is ultimately about parent leadership for community and systems change. The training curriculum advances from leadership for personal change to family to school/community to broader systems change. In the first year of the model, much of the training focuses on building leadership identities, setting and achieving personal and family goals, and building supportive action teams. In the second year, even while new parents continue to participate in new rounds of the first set

of trainings, returning parent leaders focused squarely on community outreach and community change leadership. In each community, newly trained parent leaders quickly demonstrated leadership and organizing skills. COFI's *Year Two/Phase Two: Community Outreach & Action* training explicitly hones these skills, with leaders working in teams to knock on doors and engage hundreds more parents in each community in conversations about their concerns and culminating in a Town Hall to identify actions that will address those concerns. And, during *Year Three: Policy & Systems Change* parents are taught how policy change happens, how to work together across race and culture and skills of media, public speaking, etc.

A couple of examples of civic leadership skills in action: East St. Louis parents demonstrated in their focus group the capacity to articulate complicated early childhood program and policy issues in compelling yet simple terms that those without a background in early childhood learning would understand. They also reported applying lessons they were learning about team formation to strengthen community collaborations and about restorative justice to address the community's high rates of violence. Similarly, parents from Aurora discussed how they decided group discussion topics based on everyone's interest. They posted group rules on the wall before each meeting, including respecting everyone and listening attentively when someone speaks.

Parents specifically spoke of the benefits of systems change trainings to prepare them to meet with elected and appointed officials in Springfield and locally. Participants said that, before this training, they had not understood the legislative process, nor had they felt they had the right to understand it. Had it not been for COFI workshops preparing for the Springfield trip, parents said they never would have engaged in advocating in the Capitol. COFI trainings helped instill in parents the confidence and the right to speak for themselves. An Aurora parent summarized:

<The training process> "makes us more connected and more of a community. We can really be involved. We learn not only how to fight and fight and fight, but we learn how to know ourselves better. When we know ourselves we can fight more successfully."

Impact #4: two-generation ripples. Many parent leaders described the benefits of the leadership training in improving their parenting skills and their families' functioning: implementing the strategies learned from restorative justice trainings in resolving family conflicts, encouraging goal setting and achievement among all family members, learning about system resources that would help their own children, etc. Beyond these in-home improvements, moreover, some parent leaders report that their children are becoming activists through their example. One leader's story:

"One day when I came in the school to pick up my 9-year-old daughter, another parent walked up to me, and said to me 'I thank you for what you are instilling in your daughter.' And I was like huh? She said, well my baby was scared to tell me about something that was going on <it was a suspension threat> and your daughter told her 'you know what, you should tell your mommy because my mommy goes out and fights for

things like this and your parents have rights'. And I was like, wow. I never knew that what I do is trickling down on my baby."

Impact #5: racial/cultural bridge building. COFI intentionally seeks to build leadership capacity and action across communities of low-income parents of color. Jennifer Cossyleon observes that COFI's leadership model is explicitly designed to support the social transformation of low-income women of color, connects their personal struggles with public ones, and, in so doing, speaks to the common 'lived expressions of intersecting oppressions' among diverse racial and ethnic groups¹. For its first 20 years, COFI's cross-community bridging focused on building the citywide POWER-PAC, bringing largely-segregated African American and Latino communities together. The expansion to even more isolated communities of predominantly one race or one ethnicity statewide heightened the imperative of bringing parents together to find common ground and commit to collective action. Cossyleon observed²:

Motherleaders leaders from across racial-ethnic communities and neighborhoods collaborated at committee meetings (which were held in English and Spanish) and organizing activities. Sharon, a black motherleader, as well as many others in my study, highlighted how COFI helped them "to speak to different people" and to "not be afraid to go to talk to different people that's got different cultures." Both African American, Latina, and white motherleaders went to immigration summits and rallies together, attended events focused on de-criminalizing youth, and rode buses to Springfield, in mixed-community groups to visit each other's representatives and senators.

Importantly, parents who participated in COFI's organizing trainings learned about institutions that have oppressed them—the education system, legal system, police, and media—and identified laws and practices that hindered progress for them and their families. "Who gains when we are divided?" asked Nora at a COFI training. "The prison system! The one percent! Trump and his friends!" leaders chimed in enthusiastically.

Parent leaders from expansion communities found these convenings to be extremely powerful and growthful experiences, particularly as they found common perspectives and began to understand the common roots of seemingly different sources of oppression. One leader:

"Wow, we are in shock, we never knew that we would have the same vision or the same purpose and we all are thirsty for changes. It doesn't matter what kind of race you are; we experience, we want changes and we want to see them, and we're gonna work together."

¹ Jennifer Cossyleon, 'Coming Out of My Shell: Contesting Fear, Vulnerability, and Despair through Family Focused Organizing', *Socius: Social Research for a Dynamic World*, forthcoming, pp.1-2 of manuscript dated August 22, 2017

² Cossyleon, pp. 11-12.

Another leader, an African American father, reflecting on current immigration policy: *“It is just wrong. It is out and out just wrong. It is not just Hispanic people they are doing, or Asian people. They are doing anybody who came to this country to start their life over again. Of course, being a minority for so long and raised up in the Civil Rights <movement>, I think about all the things that hold us back. The thing is not that they are taking jobs. It is once again, just like way back when, they are putting one against another. Don’t let them put us against each other. Let’s hang together.”*

Sustaining expansion momentum. Lessons learned.

Three-and-a-half years is a short window in which to demonstrate that the meaningful engagement of a group of people who have been ignored or denigrated by the institutions designed to serve them is both possible and beneficial to those institutions’ outcomes. Yet as this report describes, that engagement is happening and growing in each expansion community.

COFI’s model is complex, multi-leveled, and long-term. It takes a minimum of three years to learn and implement the COFI model in a new community: the work of training and supporting emerging parent leaders is resource-demanding, but critical to its success. COFI continually strives to make the implementation of this model ever more efficient without short-changing the necessarily incremental leadership process and the imperative of building its evidence base. Over the expansion period, COFI expanded administrative staff to better support data management in the expansion sites and the logistics of statewide gatherings; it located offices right in Aurora and East St. Louis to support parent leaders close to home; and it expanded staff and parent peer training to increase collective leadership training capacity across the sites.

Still, COFI has yet to gain a firm, long-range infrastructure to support parent engagement and leadership: philanthropic support remains that of time-limited ‘initiatives’; public support remains a budget ‘add on’ – often the first program cut during budget crises. In schools and preschools, budgets for teacher in-service training and professional development far exceed budgets for parent engagement. In budgets for public education and marketing of early learning programs, ad agencies are handsomely compensated while struggles ensue about compensating Ambassadors – who have proven themselves more effective than mass marketing in generating enrollments – at very modest wage levels. We observe keenly at many decision-making tables that every person in the room – *except* the parent leader – is compensated for participating. In brief, we expect low-income parents of color to *volunteer* to participate in safety patrols, host Family Nights, teach other parents about restorative justice and child development, while we figure out how to compensate every other actor – law enforcement, school security, school and preschool faculty and staff – in the process. Then we wonder why these parents – struggling to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table – are not engaged. And ultimately we look to organizations like COFI to solve the ‘problem’ of parent disengagement as quickly and effectively as they can, largely through the generosity of private philanthropy.

The W.K. Kellogg's Family Engagement Initiative has been path-breaking in its building of action and knowledge about how to restore disfranchised low-income parents of color to their proper places as empowered 'first teachers' of their children. Now, if we could only bake that experience into the cake of Head Start, child care, ESSA, and maternal and child health policy and budget.

APPENDIX #1 – Leadership and Organizing Process

A. Leadership training and organizing support provided in each expansion community.

Overview of COFI training process. COFI's *Family Focused Organizing* model has three distinct phases each of which usually take about a year. COFI also offers special, specific trainings for parent leaders who want to learn to be trainers and for parents who want specific content on a particular policy issue such as early learning or restorative justice.

The basic model through which parents from expansion/replication sites participated is:

Phase 1: Self, Family & Team Leadership Training and Team Building. In COFI's 1st phase of leadership training, staff and peer trainers starts with several months of recruitment and relationship-building and then the offer of a 7-session (usually over 7 weeks) course that begins with a community visioning orientation and then workshops that move into what kinds of leaders and leadership skills are needed to achieve these visions. The visioning experience helps participants identify common concerns and goals, helping them to build a team and creating excitement about what they might accomplish together. The training then turns to individual and family goal-setting, breaking goals into achievable objectives, asking for and providing mutual support, and balancing personal, family, and public responsibilities. The training seeks to increase a parent's self-efficacy, helps them to see themselves as leaders in their own lives and family lives and to set and accomplish goals. At the conclusion of the training, the group decides if they want to form a Parent Action Team and continue to work together to support one another and to work on a group goal to improve their school and/or community. (Note, COFI has never had a group that did not want to work together on a goal.)

Once the parents commit to forming a Parent Action Team, COFI provides team training and on-the-ground support (at least 10 weeks) that enables the teams to identify, tackle, and win at least one immediately achievable school/community improvement goal. Goals typically include such things as school safety, after-school programming, school-parent communications, and organizing walking clubs, savings circles, etc.

Phase 2: Community Outreach & Action. In the 2nd phase of COFI training (second year), staff and peer trainers provide five workshops to help Parent Action Team members learn skills of engaging others in their community. They learn the art of the one-on-one interview and community surveying. Teams make a commitment to reach out to at least 100 other parents, residents, and community stakeholders for the explicit three-fold purpose of: 1) building relationships to increase the community's "social capital", 2) identifying priority issues facing families in the community, and 3) engaging more people in tackling issues that will improve the community's response to families. Parent-to-parent outreach is primarily done door-to-door in pairs to build confidence and for safety reasons. When the outreach process is completed, COFI

supports the parent leaders as they compile the information to expand their action teams and sharpen their community action agendas and then host a community Town Hall meeting to share their findings and recommendations and identify community partners for achieving that change.

Increasingly at this stage, and with COFI organizing assistance, the individual parent action teams come together across communities to build a community-wide parent voice to address community issues. Austin teams formed Austin Parents United; in Englewood, teams came together to build the Southside Parent United Roundtable, in Pilsen-Little Village, Padres Lideres Unidos. These community-wide networks of parents became the host for the Town Hall meetings that created a community dialogue about the issues and visions for change that emerged from the training and outreach. In many of the communities, the Town Hall meetings focused on improving access to high quality early learning programs and on safety issues and restorative justice in their schools and preschools.

Phase 3: Policy & Systems Change. COFI's policy and systems change work builds off of the incremental steps of Phase 1 and Phase 2, as parents build strong and trust-filled relationships across communities and with professional allies both inside and outside of larger systems. It is aimed at creating a tight cross-cultural community of parents that work together to create policy and systems change. In Phase 3, parents create the organizational structure needed to sustain their ongoing development of new leaders and campaign organizing work. In COFI expansion project, the new expansion communities voted to join POWER-PAC and create POWER-PAC Illinois as a statewide member led parent organization.

The *Policy & Systems Change* curriculum includes:

- What is Policy and Systems Change and How Government Works
- How Parents Can Impact Change
- What It Means to Be a Family Focused Leader
- Working Cross-Culturally
- Choosing Issues that Broadly Impact Children and Families
- Research Through Relationships and Outreach to Identify Solutions
- Telling Your Story
- Building Allies, Champions and Strategic Partnerships
- Working with Public Officials and Negotiation
- Building the Leadership in Others
- Speaking with the Media and Fundraising Skills
- Why and How to Build the Organizational or Network Structure

Adaptations of the leadership program to the expansion population. Given the focus of the expansion sites on strengthening child development and early learning systems, COFI made two adaptations of its generic model. First, in *Self, Family & Team*, the community visioning

exercise explicitly asked parents what would make their communities better places for families with children ages 0-8. Through this lens, parents still identified their priorities, and, indeed, their priorities were typically *not* the same as those of early learning providers and policymakers, but, instead, ones that other parents echoed and that animated them. In short, parents often identified neighborhood safety and children’s safe passage to and from programs and schools as a top access concern, while professionals would identify program quality issues and parents uninformed about the importance of early learning as the key problems. The second adaptation was in the *Community Outreach & Action* training. Again, parent leaders were encouraged to use a survey format that asked other parents about their perceptions of the community’s response to families with children ages 0-8, presenting those survey findings in a Town Hall community meeting with ideas for engaging parents in remedying the identified problems.

Leadership trainings conducted with expansion populations and sites over the past 3.5

years. Over the past three-and-a-half years, COFI has trained 591 unduplicated parents at expansion and replication sites. 219 of those parents stayed active and became a part of statewide advocacy work. The vast majority of these parents have young children. Trainings were held at the following sites:

- In Aurora, the East Aurora School District 131 Early Learning Center, Family Focus-Aurora, the Visiting Nurses Association Home-Visiting program, Bardwell Elementary School and at the COFI Aurora office.
- In Austin, DePriest and Howe Preschool programs.
- In East St. Louis, Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House Prevention Initiative program, the Children Home + Aid, All Our Kids Early Learning Network, Vivian Adams Preschool Center, Southern Illinois Healthcare Foundation Healthy Start program and the Change-makers group held at the COFI East St. Louis office.
- In Elgin, the ChildServ Home-Visiting program, Century Oaks School, the U-46 More at Four Program, and the MIECHV Parent Engagement group.
- In Englewood, Children’s Home + Aid Head Start, Metropolitan Family Services Head Start, Family Focus-Englewood and ChildServ Home-Visiting programs.
- In Evanston, the Joseph Hill Early Learning Center – District 65 and Family Focus-Evanston (in partnership with the Child Care Network of Evanston and other providers).
- In Pilsen/Little Village, the Our Lady of Tepeyac/Tolton Center Head Start and Adult Education Program and the St. Pius Church Head Start.

Learnings about providing leadership training for the expansion populations. COFI found some heretofore not experienced challenges in providing leadership training to parents of younger children and in new “out-of-Chicago” communities:

- Providing leadership trainings for parents recruited from across program sites created logistics challenges in finding centralized and transportation-accessible training sites in geographically large and less densely populated “out-of-Chicago” communities. In

contrast, COFI's heretofore standard training space, the local public elementary school in urban areas, has the advantages of facilities and ready proximity (easy walking distance) to participating parents.

- Unlike public schools or afterschool centers, home-visiting and preschool programs typically have a 'parent program', and, often, have multiple ones. Beyond the problem of not understanding that the COFI training was not a one-off deal but a long-term process (see recruitment learnings below), parents referred to COFI's training sometimes found themselves with conflicting program participation commitments (English classes, parenting classes, and leadership meetings that were all happening at the same time).
- Lastly, although the *Self, Family & Team* training brought significant, sometimes life-changing, benefits for very young, teen parents (see next section), it was especially difficult to retain them in the program as they often experienced major life changes of their own (moving out of their parents' house, moving to a new neighborhood or community), ones that also generated time constraints (enrolling in school, finding a job).

B. Recruitment Process: How COFI reached out to and recruited parents to participate in leadership training in the expansion/replication communities.

Gathering information (COFI staff and POWER-PAC leaders) via their earlier early learning advocacy work and professional networks about opportunities and challenges in going into these communities. The expansion/replication communities were in part made possible by two (and, later, a third) federal grants to the State of Illinois to strengthen its early child development services. COFI staff and its parent leadership organization POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew Policy Action Council) were well involved in state level policymaking tables with their research and input having informed the statement of the problem in the federal proposal in two instances. State officials sought their advice on both parent engagement and site selection. The first federal grant (the State Advisory Council grant – and Hard-to-Reach pilot program) extended COFI-POWER-PAC's highly successful policy campaign and ground work to reach out to families eligible for but unenrolled in child development and early learning programs. The second (MIECHV – Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home-Visiting) expanded Illinois' home-visiting programs to identify and support infants at development risk. The third, later on, Race-to-the-Top Early Learning Challenge grant which created Innovation Zones to strengthen community-based early learning systems. Working with government officials and child advocacy groups such as Illinois Action for Children and Voices for Illinois Children, COFI-POWER-PAC advocated for the Innovation Zone model sites in three neighborhoods in Chicago (Austin, Englewood, and Pilsen-Little Village) and in three (Aurora, East St. Louis and Elgin) out of the four 'out-of-Chicago' sites previously described.

Recruit, train, and support staff organizers for each community who were from or familiar or comfortable working in that community. Even with federal grant subcontracts and with generous grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Grand Victoria Foundation, resources did not permit hiring a full-time staff organizer in each of the new cities. Thus, COFI staffed the expansion sites with a mix of hiring part-time staff from the new communities and deploying Chicago-based staff and parent peer trainers to the out-of-Chicago expansion sites. In East St. Louis a new organizer was hired part-time until COFI could secure additional funds to expand her work to full-time. She was supported by a senior COFI staffer who was on-site about once a month during the first year and peer trainers who came from Chicago to support the first rounds of training. In Elgin and Aurora, two part-time organizers were hired supported by Chicago senior staff and peer trainers. In Evanston, as noted above, middle school Parent Peer Trainers were employed, along with organizers from Chicago to support the project. In creating the new local organizer positions, COFI sought individuals with organizing skills, good relationships with local agencies and officials and excellent rapport with and respect for parents.

Reach out to local partners. COFI's *Family Focused Organizing* model seeks to identify local community partners – be they community groups, schools, Head Start or WIC centers, social agencies, churches, schools or preschools – who will embrace the model and support and encourage parent engagement and leadership long-term. As described, one important reason these expansion/replication communities were selected was that COFI had built relationships with local partners in each community. Local level partners are critical to the success of this project, key stakeholders in building and sustaining community parent engagement projects and coalitions to increase access to and quality of early learning programs and systems. All except Evanston developed Innovation Zone partnerships which worked with COFI. In addition, other key partners, by community, are:

- In Aurora, IL: SPARK (Strong Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten) Early Childhood Network, E. Aurora School Districts 129 and 131, the Kane County Health Department and VNA (Visiting Nurses Association).
- In Austin: Austin Coming Together's Austin Early Childhood Collaboration.
- In East St. Louis IL: the AOK (All Our Kids) Early Learning Network of St. Clair County, a collaboration comprised of public and private agencies, Children's Home + Aid, the Deaconess Foundation, East Side Aligned's collective action effort, and the Early Learning Partnership.
- In Elgin, IL: the Kane County Department of Health - MIECHV, Elgin District U-46 and EPEL (Elgin Partnership for Early Learning).
- In Englewood: the Southside Early Learning Network, including representatives from groups like the Children's Home + Aid and Family Focus-Englewood.
- In Evanston: the Cradle to Career Collaboration, the Childcare Network of Evanston, Family Focus-Evanston, the Joseph E. Hill Early Learning Center (District 65), and Youth Opportunities Umbrella.

- In Pilsen-Little Village: members of the Innovation Zone including Catholic Charities, Erie Neighborhood House, Enlace and the Tolton Center.

Parent recruitment strategies and learnings. As briefly outlined in the descriptions of each participating community (Appendix #3 below), the recruitment focus to engage parents in the leadership training process shifted from COFI's traditional locus of the local elementary school to early learning program centers, home-visiting program sites, and other social agencies (including the public housing authority in East St. Louis) serving young children. In some sites, local elementary schools remained an excellent locus since they often provide preschool programs and since many parents of elementary school aged children also have younger children.

In contrast to the local school recruitment locus, organizing staff at the expansion sites incurred several significant recruitment challenges that necessitated changes in strategy. Among them:

- Especially in new and relatively unknown communities, local partners began with a lack of clarity about the intensity and long-term nature of the COFI model. Although COFI offered training to them on the model, many partners still assumed the program would be a series of sessions with an ending point. Many examples of scheduling conflicts or partners who wanted to move on to a different project after parents were recruited and trained led to greater attrition than COFI has previously experienced.
- Although neighborhood schools as partners experience a great deal of ups and downs in their budgets year-to-year, they generally are funded well enough to serve as adequate partners (providing free and secure space for the workshops, communicating about the project with families, etc.). Home-visiting, adult learning, day care/early learning centers and other such programs lacked stable funding, as both the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois struggled with budget cuts. As results, community partners who were particularly supportive one year might not have the budget or the space in the coming year to continue as partners. This happened with the Tolton Center in Pilsen-Little Village and to a certain extent with Family Focus in Aurora, Englewood and Evanston.

As we have learned in Chicago, the best recruiters for new partners and new parent participants for this program are COFI-trained parent leaders themselves. The challenges around recruiting and engaging partners became less of an issue the deeper and longer the program existed in the new communities because the parent leaders themselves are developing new partnerships and bringing new parents into their groups and to COFI training.

APPENDIX #2 – Background and context on COFI/POWER-PAC’s earlier Early Learning Campaign advocacy work.

In all seven expansion communities, early learning programs, practices, and policies were an explicit lens for parent leadership, products of POWER-PAC’s Early Learning Campaign’s several years of growing policy influence in this field, the focus of funding opportunities, and the priorities of parent leaders as gleaned from the community visioning processes. As parents identified challenges in their communities in meeting the developmental needs of young children, COFI brought the findings of POWER-PAC’s earlier research, their recommendations for reform, and their implementation ideas to the newly trained groups.

For an overview of this work-to-date, please see the set of policy briefs “Why Johnny Isn’t in Preschool and How We Got Johnny, Jada, and Jose into Preschool” at www.cofionline.org/publications. Here is a quick summary of some of the major POWER-PAC ideas and interventions that have been picked up by expansion/replication sites:

- **Ambassadors.** Recognizing that parents whose children are eligible for but unenrolled in early learning programs are typically not reached or persuaded by public education and marketing campaigns, COFI/POWER-PAC developed a model for training (and when possible compensating) parent leaders to reach out to other parents to inform them about the importance of early learning and support them through the resource identification and enrollment process. Ambassadors have increased enrollments in Head Start, early screening and developmental and supplemental nutrition (summer meal) programs.
- **Streamlined and simplified enrollment processes.** POWER-PAC found every early learning program (Head Start, preschool, childcare) and every center to have its own, lengthy, and unique application process, intimidating and confusing to many parents. A significant Chicago victory is that, for the past two years, the city has been implementing a new online, uniform enrollment site for the city’s preschool and Head Start slots. POWER-PAC parents are partnered closely with the City to assure that the roll-out of this system is parent-friendly.
- **Walking Preschool Buses/Safe Passage Patrols.** Transportation to and from early learning programs was identified as one of the biggest barriers to enrollment and attendance in Chicago neighborhoods. POWER-PAC developed the idea of training and compensating parent leaders to escort young children to and from preschool. A related idea is Parent Safe Passage Patrols, assuring the safe passage of young children escorted by older children or their parents, to and from preschool.

Appendix #3 - Demographics of expansion communities & parents in each.

In partnership with early learning collaboration partners in each community, COFI selected 3 Chicago neighborhoods in which to expand its work to reach parents of young children and 4 ‘out-of-Chicago’ communities in which to expand its geographic reach. Both expansions – age and geography – sought to test the extent to which the COFI model ‘works’ with diverse populations and in consort with early learning community collaborations in each area toward the goal of engaging diverse parent leaders as leaders in their families, schools, communities and together, across the state, to champion systems change.

Demographics of COFI’s first 20 years of focus: low-income Chicago parents and grandparents of school-aged children

COFI’s ‘home’ community, Chicago, is the nation’s third largest city, and one of its most segregated cities. Today, Chicago has 2,720,546 residents almost equally divided among white non-Hispanics (31.7%), Latinos (28.9%), and African Americans (32.9%), with Asians (5.5%) and others (2.7%) the remainder. Median household income is \$47,831 and 22.7% of Chicagoans live in poverty. COFI has intentionally chosen to work in over a dozen low-income primarily West and South-Side African American and Latina communities. Of the 4,000 Chicago parents who have participated in COFI training to date, about half are African American and half Latina; all are low-income with over half living far below the poverty line. Prior to these years of expansion, COFI leaders were typically parents of school aged children, recruited through elementary schools and child-serving nonprofits; about 25% are grandparents. Over 99% of COFI parent training participants are women.

Age expansion community: Austin (in Chicago)

Austin is a primarily African American (85.1%) community of 97,741 on Chicago’s far West side. Latinos comprise 8.3% of the population and diverse others the remainder. The median household income – \$31,460 – is less than 2/3 that of the city of Chicago as a whole, and over a third – 35.6% - live below the poverty line. The community’s teen birth rate is over 1/3 higher than the city as a whole. Austin has been destabilized by the razing of Chicago’s high rise public housing developments beginning around 2000, with thousands of public housing tenants relocating here.

COFI has developed parent leadership in Austin from its inception in 1995. Hundreds of Austin parents, recruited primarily at 8 public elementary schools and several Head Start/child care sites, have participated in COFI leadership training and have made their mark in gaining after school programs, safety patrols and addressing health issues in their neighborhoods, serving on Local School Councils and nonprofit boards, fighting proposed school closures and principal selections, and building POWER-PAC. Austin parent leaders have actively helped create and execute POWER-PAC’s *Elementary Justice* (replacing zero tolerance with restorative justice), *Recess for All!* (restoring recess to Chicago public schools), *Early Learning* (increasing access to quality programs), and *Stepping Out of Poverty (STOP)* (anti-poverty) campaigns.

Over the past 3.5 years, COFI staff and POWER-PAC leaders worked closely with the broader community development collaboration, Austin Coming Together and its Austin Early Childhood Collaboration, to recruit parents of very young children for this effort. Via two public preschool programs and a network of home care providers, COFI trained and engaged 23 new parents with young children in Austin and teamed them with a total of 94 west-side COFI-trained parents. About one-third are themselves young; the remainder are typically parents who also have older children and/or grandparents raising grandchildren. All are African American. Most participants are mothers but there are also fathers participating.

Age expansion community: Englewood (in Chicago)

Englewood is an almost entirely African American (98.8%) community of 35,186 on Chicago's South Side. Like Austin, it has been destabilized by the destruction of so much public housing and the relocation of public housing tenants. Its median household income – \$20,925 – is less than half that of the entire city; its poverty rate is a whopping 43.3%; and its unemployment rate is triple the national average. Its teen birth rate is nearly double the City's.

With local partners Family Focus and others, COFI has provided leadership training to hundreds of Englewood parents over the past seventeen years. These parent leaders have, in turn, with Austin and other Chicago parent leaders, helped build POWER-PAC and the campaigns described directly above. In 2012, the Englewood parent teams came together to create the Southside Parent United Roundtable (SPUR) which has become a force in both early learning and broader community development coalitions.

Over the past three-and-half years, recruiting through already-built partnerships with 3 Southside Early Learning Network provider agencies – Children's Home & Aid, Family Focus and Metropolitan Family Services – who offer preschool and home visiting programs, COFI provided leadership training to 37 new parents of young children, including two teams of teen moms as young as 14 years old and engaged them with a total of 96 south-side parents. The new parents were invited into and many joined Southside Parents United Roundtable (SPUR). As in Austin, all participants are African American and, beyond the teen moms, many are parents of older children or grandparents raising grandchildren.

Age expansion community: Pilsen/Little Village (Chicago)

Pilsen/Little Village is a two-community Mexican American enclave located on the near southwest side of Chicago with a large population of recent immigrants from Mexico. Pilsen is a gentrifying neighborhood of 35,769, of whom 73.4% are Latino. Little Village is a community of 77,324 of whom 82.1% are Latino. Pilsen's median household income at \$35,733 is ¼ lower than the City's; its poverty rate of 29.6% is 1/3 higher; and its unemployment rate is lower, with many people working and still living in poverty. Its teen birth rate is 15% higher than the citywide rate. Little Village's median income is \$37,251; its poverty rate is lower (22%) than Pilsen's but its unemployment rate is higher (6.8% vs 4.1%). Its teen birth rate is 1/3 higher than the citywide rate.

COFI's intensive work in Pilsen/Little Village only began with this expansion project in 2014, though COFI partnered with community group, Pilsen Alliance, more than 10 years ago to train Whittier Elementary parents – who later made national news with hunger strike to save their community center and library. Also, over the years, many COFI-trained parents in gentrifying communities have relocated to Little Village and other parts of Chicago's southwest side.

Over the past three years, via its expansion work, COFI recruited and trained 54 new parents of young children in Pilsen/Little Village in its leadership development and organizing process. The first year of the project, COFI partnered with two Head Start centers that helped the project to connect to parents. One also had an adult learning program which was a good partner as they truly valued parent engagement and encouraged it. Sadly, before the second year, the adult education programming succumbed to City and State budget cuts, and so retention of parent leaders depended on the efforts of COFI staff and POWER-PAC leaders in the community. Young parents (under age 30) were the majority of participants the first year, but by the second year, the youngest parents were less active and the average age within the group was in their early thirties. All participating parents are Latino. By year two, coming together across local teams, Pilsen/Little Village parent leaders organized themselves as Padres Lideros Unidos. This past year, Pilsen/Little Village parents extended their reach, building parent leadership across near Southwest Side Latino communities including Brighton and Gage Parks.

Geographic and age expansion community: Aurora

Aurora, a city 50 miles west of Chicago in one of the “collar counties”, is Illinois' second largest city and one of the fastest growing cities in the state with 200,661 residents. It is home to a significant job base in manufacturing, warehousing, corporate parks, healthcare, higher education, and technology. It is also extremely – and increasingly – diverse, with people of color (41.3% Latino, 10.7% African American, 6.7% Asian, and 3.8% other) outnumbering white people (39.9%). The median household income is \$63,569, yet 19.1% of Aurorans live below the poverty line. Students in the East Aurora school district, where the project has concentrated, are 78% living in poverty and 87% Latino, 8% African American, 3% white and 2% other races.

Aurora is a new community for COFI's work, with a very limited engagement in 2013, supported via the aforementioned federal and private grants, and selected for this expansion in 2014 because it is both one of the fastest growing communities in Illinois and one with growing ethnic inequality. In Aurora, COFI has targeted families in the East Aurora School district and the community's home-visiting program, the Visiting Nurses Association, reaching largely of low and lower income Latinos – many of whom work or have family members who work in low-wage manufacturing, farm work and service industry jobs. Training has been done at 4 sites to-date, at Family Focus-Aurora and at the Visiting Nurses Association (two members of the local early learning collaborative, SPARK) and at two school district sites – the early learning center and Bardwell Elementary. 157 Aurora parents have participated in COFI training over the past 3.5 years. Most are Latina mothers with young children –and a few fathers, from the low-income east side of the community. Again, younger parents participated more during the first

year but current participation is largely parents in their early thirties. The group of Aurora parent leaders has named itself *Padres Lideres Activos*.

Geographic and age expansion community: East St. Louis

East St. Louis is a devastated African American small city across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Of its 26,790 residents, 98% are African American. Median household income is \$19,856 and 59.9% of its residents live below the poverty level. Fewer than half of working age adults – male or female – is in the labor force. East St. Louis virtually lacks a jobs base beyond very small local proprietorships and faces overwhelming challenges in providing basic municipal and human services.

COFI's work in East St. Louis began in 2012, also with a very limited engagement, when COFI was asked to support the All Our Kids Early Learning network in providing parent leadership training. COFI selected East St. Louis for this expansion/replication work because of its compelling needs, the request of previously COFI-trained parents and the invitation and offers of resources of early learning officials. Recruiting from a variety of venues (public housing, home-visiting, preschools, contacts of the staff organizer who is familiar with the community), 77 East St. Louis parents participated in COFI trainings over the 3.5 years. They are, unsurprisingly, entirely African American and low-income. Ages have ranged from 16 years old to grandparents, with about half of currently active parents in the early thirties age group and the remainder, older. All are women. The group of COFI trained parent leaders has named itself *Parents United for Change*.

Geographic and age expansion community: Elgin

Elgin is also in the collar counties and was for years a city unto itself 40 miles northwest of Chicago; more recently it has a growing number of commuters (to Chicago) living particularly in its outskirts. Like so many communities in and around Chicago, Latinos are the fastest growing segment of its population. Today, Elgin has 112,111 residents, of whom 43.6% are Latino, 42.6% are white, 7.4% are African American, and 10.4% are Asian, American Indian, or multiracial. Elgin has a robust jobs base with manufacturing, warehousing, health, retail, and a major casino. Its median household income is \$59,832 yet 20.5% of residents live below the poverty line and many of those families live in the neighborhoods that this project focuses on.

Like Aurora and East St. Louis, COFI began a limited engagement in Elgin in 2012 in partnership with the MIECHV (Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home-Visiting) program in the community to reach and engage low-income parents and soon expanded the partnership to include training Elgin U-46 School District staff and leaders. COFI selected Elgin as an expansion/replication community for this project due to the request of COFI-trained parents in the community, the ongoing partnership with the MIECHV and School District, because of an emerging early learning community collaboration, the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL) presented a partnership opportunity and because of the challenge of confronting the community's growing ethnic inequality. Reaching out to parents via MIECHV providers and in

with the School District, COFI provided leadership training to 38 Elgin parents during the 3.5 years. The home-visiting program at the YWCA proved especially productive. Of the currently active parent leaders, calling themselves Padres Con Poder, Latinas predominate but the group also includes immigrants from Eastern Europe and African American parents and grandparents.

Geographic and age expansion community: Evanston

Evanston is a relatively affluent city that is both a northern suburb of Chicago and a metropolis unto itself, the location of Northwestern University and several major technology and communications corporations. Once considered one of three Chicago area neighborhoods welcoming racially diverse populations (the Hyde Park Chicago neighborhood and the suburb of Oak Park being the other two), Evanston has been becoming ever more affluent. Of its 75,527 residents, 61.2% are white, 18.1% African American, 9% Latino, 8.6% Asian, and 4% other. Median household income is \$69,347. Yet, Evanston has pockets of very low-income residents, and 13.9% of Evanstonians live in poverty.

COFI began organizing and parent leadership development in Evanston in 2013 in partnership with the Y.O.U. (Youth Opportunities Umbrella) youth-serving agency through their community schools initiative at two middle schools – one in Evanston and the other in neighboring Skokie. Y.O.U. wanted to be sure to engage low-income parents of color in these schools to inform youth, family and community programming. At the urging of Y.O.U. and others in Evanston's Cradle-to-Career collective impact initiative, coupled with the challenge of improving the lives of diverse low-income families of color in an economically diverse community, COFI selected Evanston as an expansion/replication community. With three parent peer trainers from the original middle school parent group, COFI trained 24 new Evanston parents of young children recruiting from a number of early learning and home-visiting programs in the community and the school district's early learning center. The parents trained are 80% African American, 10% are Latina and 10% other. While over half of those trained are relatively young parents, again, those who remain highly engaged are largely in their early thirties. Evanston parent leaders named their group Parents of Evanston Allied for Childhood Education (PEACE).

Other communities. Beyond these targeted communities, COFI also has other partnerships where it provides parent leadership training in communities beyond its traditional base of low-income African American and Latino communities in Chicago. With Y.O.U. (as mentioned above, COFI trained parents at a middle school in Skokie where families spoke six different languages (Urdu, Spanish, Arabic, Aramaic, Tagalog and English – with translators provided by the school district); trained preschool parents in a largely Latino suburb of West Chicago in partnership with a collective impact initiative; in River Rouge MI in partnership with the Guidance Center (a mixed African American and Latino community); in other Michigan communities in partnership with the Great Start Collaboratives; with Head Start sites in Bronzeville, Back of the Yards and the Near Westside communities in Chicago; and with non-custodial fathers in partnership with Fathers, Families and Healthy and the Power of Fathers Collaborative. These diverse additional experiences are integrated into this report as appropriate.