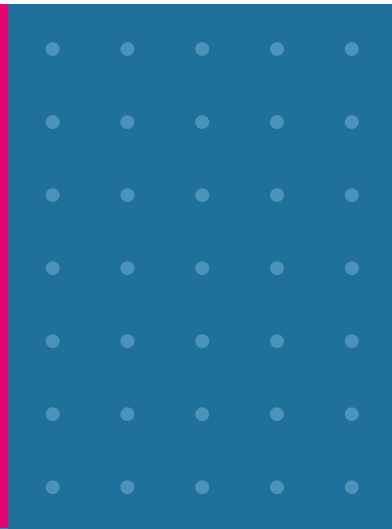




EC-LINC
An initiative
of CSSP

Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems:



PHASE TWO
NAVIGATING THE RIPPLES

EC-LINC is an
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**Center for the
Study of
Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

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“If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”

–U.S. Representative Shirley Chisholm, First Black Woman to serve in Congress



Preface

This report tells the story of how communities across the U.S. came together to advance equity through family engagement in early childhood systems. Over one year, agency staff and parent leaders tested innovative strategies, struggled with structural challenges and engaged in powerful conversations about the role of race in limiting parents' engagement and voice. Together, we created a 5-point *Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood* and began the process of forming a national Parent Leader Network.



Introduction

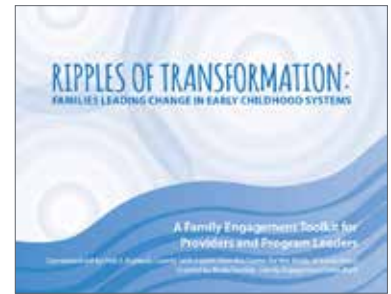
As their child’s first teacher and best advocate, parents¹ play a critical role in their children’s healthy development and learning. Decades of research shows that when parents are engaged in schools, children succeed and schools improve. The same is true for the early years: In May 2016, the U.S. Departments of Education and Human Services declared that “Strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central – not supplemental” to promoting children’s healthy development and preparing them for school.²

Issues of race play a pivotal role as well. Parents want to improve outcomes for their kids, but face barriers when it comes to working with early childhood systems of care, such as early care and education, health and mental health, and family support. Structural racism and bias, which pervade the attitudes, behaviors, policies and practices of these systems and our society as a whole, are barriers that prevent many parents of color from being true partners and leaders in their child’s healthy development and early learning. Yet, when agencies and systems work in partnership with families to change the public policies, institutional practices, cultural representation and other norms that perpetuate racial inequity, family engagement can be a strategy to advance equity and community empowerment.

In 2017, the Center for the Study of Social Policy invited seven communities across the U.S. to join together in a Community of Practice to push the boundaries of traditional parent engagement strategies in early childhood systems, and embrace these new approaches as core strategies to advance equity and community empowerment. These communities came together under the umbrella of EC-LINC, an early childhood learning and innovation network of communities working in partnership with CSSP.

The Community of Practice was inspired by a new family engagement framework and toolkit, [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#). Created in 2016 through a collaboration of EC-LINC communities, parent leaders and other key informants, the *Ripples* posits that family engagement is not a separate strand of programming; rather, it is an integrated, continuing stream of opportunities for parents to be leaders in their families and communities, as well as in transforming policies and systems. In the *Ripples*, agencies and systems partner with families along a parent engagement continuum: as children’s first teachers and best advocates, to program partners and systems change advocates.

In addition, the *Ripples* framework presents authentic family engagement as inseparable from issues of race equity. As participant Carla Keener of First 5 Alameda County (the lead agency on the formation of the Ripples framework) put it: “Equity is intrinsic to family engagement because it means other voices at the table.”



Throughout this report, you will see these three symbols:



Anchor

Linkage to [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#)



Splash

Stories of “ah ha!” moments



Ripple

Stories of impact

¹ We use the term parents to refer to anyone who is a primary caregiver to a child, including biological mothers and fathers, foster and adoptive parents and family members, such as grandparents, uncles and aunts.

² Sourced from [Policy Statement on Family Engagement: From the Early Years to the Early Grades](#)

About the Report

This report is a resource for early childhood stakeholders (parent leaders, service providers and early childhood agency and system leaders) seeking to advance authentic engagement with families as partners and leaders for systems change:

- It describes the experiences of communities as they grapple with the complexity of implementing the strategies aligned with the *Ripples* framework so that the lessons they learned can “ripple out” to other communities, agencies and systems.
- It models a format for a Community of Practice to inspire and inform others who want to try a similar learning and action strategy.
- It highlights co-creation on an ambitious scale through the story of the creation of the *Manifesto for Parent Leadership and Race Equity in Early Childhood Systems*.
- It calls to action parent leaders, service providers and leaders of agencies and systems working to improve outcomes for families with young children.

This voyage – at once brilliant, inspiring, heartfelt, messy, confusing and imperfect – represents the first leg of a much longer journey. Rather than an ending, it is a beginning. In some ways we accomplished more in this Community of Practice than we thought possible. In other ways we felt we barely scratched the surface. We hope this report conveys the both the complexity and the clarity of what we learned about equity-driven parent engagement and leadership. We hope it serves as a catalyst for action to begin the process of transformation to early childhood systems that work in partnership with parents and benefit from the wisdom and power of parent voices.



CHAPTER 1

ANCHORING TO THE RIPPLES: An Overview of the Community of Practice

For many agencies in EC-LINC communities, the development of *Ripples of Transformation* in 2016 was turning point. With *Ripples* as a guide, agency leaders and staff needed to make big shifts. A series of workshops for parents – no matter how high quality – is not a family engagement strategy. Authentic family engagement means inviting and supporting families to be leaders at all levels – from making care decisions for their child to providing peer to peer support to partnering with agencies to improve programs and advocate for policy changes. It also requires us to recognize and address the role of race in determining not only outcomes for children, but also who gets a seat at the table, and perhaps more significantly, who is deciding the menu in the first place.

The *Ripples* framework and toolkit gave us the agreement on WHAT authentic family engagement looks like and pointed us to strategies and resources. But actually doing it? That was harder. This Community of Practice was an opportunity for EC-LINC communities to work together on HOW to implement the Ripples.

“Conversations with parents really opened our eyes. ...We got to see concretely what it means when you have authentic engagement. It’s a different level, a deeper level.”

–Carla Keener, Senior Administrator, First 5 Alameda County

THIS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE HAD FIVE INTERRELATED COMPONENTS:

- 1.** Monthly peer-learning sessions via video conference call
- 2.** Mini-grants to enable us to test and learn from new strategies
- 3.** Individualized coaching and technical assistance
- 4.** An in-person convening on Race Equity and Parent Leadership for parents and agency staff
- 5.** The development of a Race Equity and Parent Leadership Manifesto.

As a result of these overlapping strategies, participants in the community of practice were able to:

- Build relationships with and learn from each other
- Deepen relationships with parents and develop their leadership
- Test new strategies emphasizing co-creation with families
- Engage organization and system leaders in boundary-stretching conversations
- Initiate concrete steps toward systemic changes.

In this chapter, we give a snapshot of where participants began their journey in the Community of Practice and the challenges they identified as they worked to advance along the Ripples family engagement continuum.



ANCHOR: Family Engagement to Leadership Continuum

Meet the Communities

Agencies participating in the Communities of Practice shared the common goal of supporting young children to grow up healthy, safe, and ready for school by improving early childhood systems of care. While they had varied experience implementing family engagement, most identified their agency’s family engagement strategies on the first phase of the Ripples Continuum – engaging families with their children. Each community also set a specific goal to work toward in the Community of Practice.

COMMUNITY	LEAD AGENCIES	COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE GOAL
Alameda County, CA	First 5 Alameda County	Collaborate with families to shape family support and engagement funding initiative
Boston, MA	United Way Massachusetts Bay Merrimack Valley/ Boston Family Engagement Network	Create a citywide family engagement framework and goals
Denver, CO	Denver Early Childhood Council	Offer a series of workshops for fathers
Kent County, MI	Great Start Collaborative of Kent County, MI	Expand reach to refugee communities
Los Angeles County	First 5 Los Angeles	Collaborate with parents to plan a Parent/Community Advisory Committee
Palm Beach County	Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County	Expand parent-led initiative at a public housing complex
Ventura County	First 5 Ventura County	Create a fatherhood group

The Community of Practice grew out of the family engagement model and toolkit, [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#). The “Ripples” refer to a continuing flow of opportunities for parents to engage and lead, from First Teacher to Policy Advocate, in three main phases: 1) Engaging with their Children, 2) Shaping Programs and Services, and 3) Influencing Policies and Systems. *To explore these phases in more detail, read pages 5-6 of the Ripples toolkit.*

Participating agencies not only came from different parts of the country, but also had important differences in the level of experience engaging families directly. Kent County, MI, and Boston MA, both had a head start in that they had existing structures to engage parents as partners and leaders. The First 5 agencies in California and Children’s Services Council in Florida are primarily funding agencies, with limited experience working directly with families.

A survey of agency staff participating in the Community of Practice pointed to strengths and challenges.

Strengths:

- More than half (55%) said their agencies either effectively or very effectively valued families for their strengths and a third (33%) identified that their agencies’ strategies to engage families with their children existed in a “clearly defined” way.
- Forty-five percent said their agencies either effectively or very effectively embodied the value of co-creating with families, while 33% said their agencies’ strategies to engage parents in shaping programs and services existed in a “fairly consistent” way.
- More than half (55%) reported collaborating with families in their Community of Practice projects.

Challenges:

- Agencies felt least effective embodying the values of being transparent with and accountable to families: 89% said their agency was not effective or somewhat effective in this area.
- Acknowledging and acting to eliminate barriers based on race was the second most challenging area: 78% said their agency was not effective or somewhat effective in this area.
- More than two-thirds (67%) cited structural limitations (such as funding sources, HR rules, etc.) as a significant or very significant barrier to authentically engaging families.
- The next most significant barriers were lack of defined agency goals and strategies (55%) and lack of resources such as funds, time and expertise (44%).





SPLASH: “It couldn't have happened at a better time”

For First 5 Alameda County (F5AC) in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Community of Practice was timely. The year before, F5AC adopted a strategic plan that, for the first time, explicitly lifted up family engagement and equity as core commitments. Using the *Ripples* as a guide, Senior Administrator Carla Keener was charged with rolling out three new agency strategies with family engagement as an integral component. “For us...it couldn’t have happened at a better time,” said Keener. The Community of Practice “gave us the opportunity to have a cross-strategy, cross-disciplinary group come together, and we are still in conversation. ...It probably wouldn’t have happened as quickly or intentionally if we hadn’t had that external push.”

It wasn’t all smooth sailing, though. The agency’s original goal for the Community of Practice was to bring together parent leaders “to help us begin to fill out the framing for our family engagement [strategy] and support the development of the funding opportunity,” said Keener. In talking to parents, however, she realized that “we went in assuming a lot that turned out not to be true.” First, she found that many parents “just don’t know who we are and what we do.” Or if they did, it was through the agency’s contractors, and the stories “didn’t always sync up. It was sobering.”

“To think that we could skip over some fairly foundational pieces and [achieve] an authentic engagement process with parents in a short time was ambitious and naive. We found internally that we still had work to do to come to a consensus...around parent engagement, leadership and equity.”



RIPPLE: “We're having the conversation”

Despite the bumpy journey, the experience of the Community of Practice allowed the team at First 5 Alameda County to transition from struggling with *whether* they should or could engage families in authentic ways, to “struggling with how to do it, and that’s the conversation to be having,” said Keener.

As a result, Keener says, F5AC now has a draft document outlining current or proposed family engagement activities in every agency strategy, and plans to map it to the *Ripples* framework. The working group had a retreat to map out steps to develop the agency’s framework for “not only the funding opportunity, but how we want to see parent engagement implemented through the agency,” says Keener. “We’re not going to have all the answers; we are not going to be perfect in our execution, but to be having the conversation, and to be prepared to do something concrete and substantial in the fall, feels like a good spot.”

CHAPTER 2

TAKING A DEEPER DIVE: Peer Learning Strategy

ANCHOR: Co-Creation

WHAT IS CO-CREATION? To co-create is to involve all stakeholders in creating solutions and priorities for an organization. Co-creation starts with an organization asking stakeholders, "what matters to you?" It is not bringing families in at the end of a process and asking, "what matter to you about our priorities?" In co-creation, everyone has the same information and everyone is trusted and respected for the experience they bring to the process.

Peer Learning Sessions

A monthly series of 1-hour peer learning sessions acted as the "backbone" of the Community of Practice.

The sessions included content for agencies to bring back to their site-level strategies and opportunities to share successes and challenges with each other. The meetings were held through video conference call, which enabled people to see as well as hear each other, and made the experience more of a dialogue than a typical webinar presentation. Beyond the first sessions, we did not set agendas in advance; instead we designed each session based on the evolving needs and interests of the group.

Each session incorporated an opportunity for participants to share updates on their goals and projects, which proved invaluable and reassuring. Delores Haynes from Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County reflected: "Each community is unique. However, I was encouraged to know our struggles to engage and partner with families are not at all unique." Peer Learning Sessions "showed in real life how [parent engagement strategies] worked and people were so open and honest in sharing not only accomplishments but also challenges," added Carla Keener of First 5 Alameda County.

"There is a lot of opportunity to learn from each other, and be able to be honest about it. Sometimes we only talk about how great things were. Let's talk about what we failed at. We are going to learn more about what other people did so we don't repeat it."

–Courtney Meyers-Keaton, Parent Liason, Great Start Collaborative of Kent County, MI

The six peer learning sessions of the Community of Practice all connected back to a central concept: **co-creation**. To explore strategies and resources related to partnering and co-creating with parents, read pages 11-14 of [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#).



Community of Practice Peer Learning Sessions

Session 1: Sharing Power With Families

Children’s Services Council Palm Beach County (CSCPBC) and Housing Partnership Inc. shared the story of supporting parents in a low-income housing development to identify issues and design solutions to improve conditions for families. The strategies parents chose initially seemed to diverge from traditional early childhood strategies, yet resulted in significant gains for young children and their families.

Session 2: Family Engagement for What?

To break the all-too-common cycle of agencies setting vague goals for engaging families – most common: “to increase family engagement” – we challenged participants to design family engagement activities to achieve concrete outcomes. What will be the result of engaging families? An initiative co-designed by parents? An agency policy to create a family-friendly environment? A formal leadership body, such as a Parent Advisory Board?

Session 3: Family Engagement Strategies

We applied [IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum](#)³ – inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower—to family engagement, and asked participants to reflect on what level of engagement their agency was ready for. We also named some best practices for empowering parents, including: asking people individually for their participation and practicing active listening (one-on-ones); enabling parents to create group agreements; and being aware of power and privilege dynamics.

SPLASH: Leveraging Credibility

Aditi Subramaniam, coordinator of the Boston Family Engagement Network (BFEN), started in her new role just days before the first CoP Peer Learning Session. She quickly realized that it would be an advantage: “Having CoP as part of my role allowed me to elevate things that I have always wanted to say, but in a way that says we are not the only ones saying this!”

RIPPLE: A Deeper Commitment

Aditi Subramaniam of BFEN was able to leverage what she was learning about best practices to push for a parent-led planning process for citywide meeting of Parent Partners, as well as dedicated funding in the budget for family engagement. “We’ve been able to elevate this in really concrete ways, by literally putting our money where our mouth is.”

³ Cited with permission from the IAP2 Federation: <http://www.iap2.org>, click on the [Resources](#) link.



Session 4: Co-creation, Transparency, and Accountability

How do you ensure authentic engagement with parents? Make sure they are at the table during all phases. **Before:** Ask parents how they want to be involved. *Even better: parents co-design the process.* **During:** Share in a clear and understandable way how the final decision will be made. *Even better: parents make or significantly influence the decision.* **After:** Report back to parents who participated what the agency did with their feedback. *Even better: parents help implement the decision and participate in the evaluation process.*

Session 5: Race Equity, Parent Power, and Family Engagement

In this session, participants reflected on their experience at the previous month's Race Equity and Parent Leadership face-to-face convening. Parent leaders expressed a desire to know their rights in systems and be empowered to advocate and organize. We brainstormed what steps we can take to integrate this expanded definition of family support and engagement into our agencies and systems.

Session 6: Working Together on the Race Equity Manifesto

Expanding beyond the core participant group to include everyone who attending the January race equity convening, we mapped out a process to refine the rough concept of the Parent Leadership and Race Equity Manifesto initiated during the convening.

SPLASH: Money Matters

After one of the Peer Learning Sessions, Paula Brown, Director of Great Start Collaborative of Kent County, realized that participants in the Parent Coalition, a group of parents who meet monthly to learn about and inform the work of the Collaborative, should also be learning about the Collaborative's budget process and have the opportunity to shape budget priorities.

RIPPLE: Expanding Influence

Brown's seed of an idea grew into a pilot of a new strategy to train interested members of the Great Start Collaborative Parent Coalition on the budget process so that parents can have a greater say on family engagement priorities and activities. "This will help us determine what our budget is for parent-led strategies for the next fiscal year, and involve parents in the process of deciding," said Parent Liaison Courtney Meyers-Keaton.

CHAPTER 3

TESTING THE WATERS: Mini-grant Projects

ANCHOR: Lessons for Agency Leaders

We wanted this Community of Practice to emphasize “practice” – opportunities for small-scale, quick experiments to test new strategies. Through a six-month mini-grant of \$5,000 each, participating agencies had the opportunity to test new strategies with maximum flexibility, minimal investment, and a quick turnaround. In some cases, agencies learned what works and developed innovative strategies through “failing forward.”⁴

The terms of the grant emphasized learning over outcomes and required only a brief letter to apply. Grantee agencies were expected to directly involve parents in the project, participate in the monthly Peer Learning Sessions and take advantage of one-on-one coaching and technical assistance offered by Melia Franklin, CSSP’s project consultant.

Projects varied according to the agencies’ learning goals, priorities and opportunities. For example, First 5 Alameda County and First 5 Los Angeles Counties, both major funders in early childhood, explored how to engage parents as advisors to inform their funding and programmatic strategies. In contrast, Great Start Collaborative of Kent County, MI, and the Boston Family Engagement Network, which both had parent engagement strategies in place, chose to test new strategies that took them out of their comfort zones.

“We needed to ‘get out of the way’, and give space for parents to take the lead”

–Aditi Subramaniam, Coordinator, Boston Family Engagement Network

In most mini-grant projects, agencies sought to engage with parents to learn more about what they experienced interacting with systems and what they needed and wanted to be successful. To explore strategies and resources related to families shaping programs and services, read pages 11-14 of [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#).

⁴<https://hbr.org/2011/04/failing-by-design>

Challenges

One common challenge was how long it took to get parent engagement initiatives off the ground. For example, in order build relationships with parents and make sure they had enough information about the context to participate in meaningful ways, F5AC had to delay the launch of an RFP for six months. “It slows you down when you have authentic parent engagement,” said Carla Keener of First 5 Alameda County. “Relationship-building takes time,” added Aditi Subramaniam, coordinator of the Boston Family Engagement Network (BFEN). In order to plan in a way “that’s organic and coming from the parents...I had to slow myself down.”

Another challenge for some agencies was getting buy-in from agency leadership, especially since most of the Community of Practice participants were staff at the program level. Leaders at one agency put a project to launch a parent engagement initiative on hold, leaving staff uncertain about next steps. When the project eventually got the green light, the scope was significantly reduced.

“The dimension of having parents co-create and co-lead implies a certain power sharing, which clashes with the hierarchical structure of a big agency,” explains one participant in the Community of Practice. “It’s fine for us to plan to have parents at the center of everything, but unless leadership has that same vision, we are only going to get so far.”

SPLASH: Parents Taking the Lead

Grantees were encouraged to revise their project goals as they went, and most did so. For example, in Boston, the initial goal was to involve parents in creating a family engagement framework for the city. Aditi Subramaniam, coordinator of BFEN, soon realized that recruiting parents to attend existing meetings that are set up by and for providers was not going to provide the deeper relationships and sense of ownership that true co-creation requires. Instead, the project shifted to a parent-led process to plan two citywide meetings of parent partners. The first meeting involved two parent leaders in the planning and 20 attended. From that meeting, eight parent leaders stepped forward to plan the next meeting. “We needed to ‘get out of the way’, and give space for parents to take the lead,” she said.

RIPPLE: Elevating and Sustaining the Work

Based on the success of these two citywide meetings parent partners created a plan to meet quarterly in different neighborhood centers to strengthen relationships, as well as learn from and support each other. It also inspired Subramaniam to apply for funding for potential citywide and neighborhood-specific opportunities to elevate and sustain this work. “We want to pave the way for parents of young children throughout Boston to expand their roles as leaders in multiple levels and spaces,” she said.



SPLASH: “We Just Rolled With It”

The Great Start Collaborative in Kent County in Michigan used its mini-grant to “tap into a population that we have zero access to historically,” said Parent Liaison Courtney Myers-Keaton. With one-on-one technical assistance from CSSP’s consultant, Melia Franklin, staff developed a strategy to partner with refugee organizations to learn more about what African refugees in the community needed from early childhood systems through a series of community conversations.

Scheduling with the refugee organizations was difficult, and when it finally came together, they had very little information and very little time to organize. The result, said Myers-Keaton, was chaos. “We had 60 people in the room and we had planned for 20. It was supposed to start at 4:00, the church service didn’t even end until 5:30. There must’ve been 20 children and we only had one child care provider. We just rolled with it.”

It wasn’t only logistics that proved challenging. It soon became clear that these newly arrived refugee families didn’t have the cultural context to understand “early childhood.” “Clearly, we didn’t speak the same language, but we REALLY didn’t speak the same language,” said coordinator Leslie Hawkins. “We learned that if we want to try to connect with people who have been in the country for a year or less, we have to completely reframe how we are talking to them about their children and figure out where is the point that connects with them about their young children.”



RIPPLE: Responding to the Needs

Great Start Collaborative now has a clear picture of what it will take to learn about the needs of refugee families with young children and is using this information to plan next year’s budget and work plan. Beyond the logistics of translation and interpretation in multiple languages, Myers-Keaton and Hawkins recognize that building relationships and cultural understanding will take time. “After our second community conversation, I could see why organizations feel it is too difficult to engage with the refugee population,” reflects Myers-Keaton. “At the same time, I could see that the need was so great.”

CHAPTER 4

RIDING THE WAVES: Coaching and Technical Assistance

ANCHOR: Advocate

A familiar principle in family engagement is to “meet parents where they are” – by building relationships and tailoring programs to the needs and interests of families. We applied this principle in the Community of Practice by providing systems professionals with coaching and technical assistance. Each agency had the opportunity to participate in four 1-hour sessions with project consultant Melia Franklin, who founded and directed the Oakland-based Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network. Through these one-on-one conversations, participants became change agents from within, advocating for new approaches and gaining strategies to address dynamics at their own agencies.

“One-on-ones helped us distill information and see how to apply it to our work.”

– Delores Haynes, Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County



Coaching and Technical Assistance simultaneously supported participants where they were and pushed them to start thinking about engaging parents on deeper levels. To explore strategies and resources related to families influencing policies and systems, read pages 16-18 of [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#).

SPLASH: “It was the glue!”

Coaching and technical assistance not only supported individual participants to increase their capacity as change agents advancing parent engagement, it also helped them connect to the larger group and get the most out of the Community of Practice. “It was the glue that helped pull all the pieces together,” observed LaNita Sanders of Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County (CSCPBC). For the first monthly peer learning calls, Sanders recalled: “It was hard not knowing intimately what the other communities were doing...What I found most valuable was having Melia...gather and compile all of that information, and then disaggregate it and pull out those gems to help each one of us, no matter where we were in the process or what we were dealing with.”



RIPPLE: Influencing Long-term Strategies

Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County was heading into a new strategic planning period. To Delores Haynes, systems officer at CSC, “strategic TA was exactly what we needed.... It’s like having an arsenal as we have conversations [with agency leadership] about how we incorporate the voice of the community and parents.” Haynes was able to leverage what she learned to persuade agency leadership to bring in the Community of Practice consultant to support the development of new goals and strategies around parent engagement for the next five years.



SPLASH: “It helped us ask strategic questions”

First 5 Los Angeles program officer Leticia Sanchez had an “Ah Ha!” moment during a Coaching and TA session. She realized that while in her department, which includes the agency’s Welcome Baby and other [home visiting programs](#), “we have been supporting initiatives that tell a very good story around family engagement,” this was not the case with other departments and the agency’s strategic plan lacked explicit language around family engagement. It got her and her team “thinking about how it looks ... if we were to do family engagement through multiple investments across our entire organization?” Her team is now exploring these in more depth in a family engagement learning community for philanthropy, convened by [LA Partnership for Early Childhood Investment](#). In addition, Sanchez and her team recently presented a [family engagement strategy update](#) to the Commission’s Program and Strategy Committee, referencing [Ripples of Transformation](#) family engagement framework.

RIPPLE: Empowering Conversations

Sanchez’ increased level of awareness around authentic family engagement empowered her to speak up when she saw others engaging in outdated strategies. At a meeting to plan an advisory committee to develop a fathers’ engagement framework for the county, she spoke up when she noticed that the while the group was made up of men, some of whom were fathers, they were all professionals. “I felt like it needed to be made up of men [from the community] who were parenting as well. The response I got was, ‘Well, that would mean we would need to change the focus of our advisory group ... [to] parent leadership’. ...I wanted to ensure ... that early in the planning process fathers have that voice at the table.”



CHAPTER 5

CONVERGING CURRENTS:

Race Equity and Parent Leadership Convening

ANCHOR: Lessons for Agency Leaders

About four months into the Community of Practice, agency staff and parent leaders converged to work on the most fundamental, sensitive and seemingly intractable issue in parent engagement: race. The converging currents of parent leaders and agency professionals transformed the Community of Practice from one dominated by agency voices to one in which parent and agency leaders had begun to build relationships and now worked side by side.

The Community of Practice sought to address the relationship between race equity and parent engagement and leadership head-on and face-to-face.

In January 2018, nine EC-LINC communities – about 40 staff and parent leaders – gathered in Oakland, California, for two days of dialogue and action. The agenda was created with input from staff and parents and focused around creating a Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems.

Skillfully facilitated by Chrysta Wilson of [Wilson and Associates](#) in Los Angeles and CSSP senior associate Juanita Gallion, parent leaders kicked off the convening in a “[Fishbowl](#)” exercise. Three fathers, two mothers and a grandmother shared stories illustrating what race equity meant to them as parents. As a result, the convening set the stage for a fresh dynamic between parents as experts on their lived experience and agency staff as learners. This reset dynamic carried through the afternoon as participants rotated through a [World Cafe](#), where groups contributed, reviewed and added to the vision, beliefs, strategies and goals that were to make up the Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Manifesto.

“I had never been to a conference where parents were included on that level ... it was really powerful.... I learned a lot from watching the facilitation and seeing parents really be active in a conversation about what they need for themselves and for their community”

– Carla Therriault, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

The *Ripples* and the [Policy Brief](#) that followed identified ways in which family engagement and issues of race equity intertwined. For strategies and resources on strengthening your agency’s cultural responsiveness and commitment to equity, read page 17 of [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#).

Bringing the Manifesto to Life

When we closed the circle on the afternoon of the second day of the convening, the walls were covered with the collective aspirations and will of the group. Participants' emotions ran the gamut – inspired, joyful, empowered, determined, overwhelmed, humbled and, yes, skeptical about what happens next. Leaving the convening, many participants – especially parent leaders – were eager to take action. But first, we needed to transform the notes into a Manifesto.

Over the next few months, we expanded our next Community of Practice Peer Learning Session to everyone who attended the convening and had a series of discussions about the Manifesto content. Working with notes from the convening, we created a three-page summary that participants approved by voting on each section. From the summary, we created a Draft Manifesto, which was vetted and approved by a vote of participants.



SPLASH: A Life-changing Experience

Most participants agreed that the Oakland convening had the most significant impact of all of the strategies in the Community of Practice. For one parent, LaQona, it was nothing short of “life-changing,” according to LaNita Sanders of Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, who attended the convening with LaQona. “If you never get out of your neighborhood, you have no idea what’s out there, what’s available,” added Sanders. For LaQona, “it opened up the opportunities ...She has really been very motivated and enthused about the whole idea of being a parent leader and taking on responsibility for your whole community, not just your [own] children.” For example, LaQona, along with other parent ambassadors at the Stonybrook housing complex, met and developed a plan for parents to take turns walking groups of children to the school bus stop to make sure they showed up on time, followed the rules, and boarded the bus safely. The school bus itself was the result of months of activism by parents concerned about their children crossing a 4-lane boulevard to get to school.

RIPPLE: Busting Assumptions Back Home

After the convening, LaQona was one of five Palm Beach County parents the Children’s Services Council sponsored to attend the [Racial Equity Institute](#) training, which had recently expanded to accommodate community residents and parents. Delores Haynes of Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, who also attended the training, recalled a powerful story LaQona shared during an exercise about poverty and making assumptions. A year before, she had been homeless, yet she went and got her hair and nails done. According to Haynes, LaQuona challenged the group to understand her circumstances, saying, “I slept in my car with my children. ...You may think that that is a misplaced priority, but that was the only thing that day that I had any control over and it gave me something to feel good about.”

We chose the word ‘manifesto’ to describe our document because we wanted to signal the boldness of the moment and the importance of the issues. A Manifesto is a call to action. By definition, it is short and easy to understand, based on common visions and beliefs of a group. Another definition of the verb manifest can mean to express, embody and realize something in daily actions and long-term goals.

CHAPTER 6

RISING TIDES:

Charting a Course Forward

ANCHOR: Increasing Families Voices

While creating the Manifesto itself felt like a collective accomplishment, we were left with more questions than answers: Who are the audiences for the Manifesto? What are we asking them to do? What are the roles of parents and agencies, respectively? Who is going to lead this work? Who is going to fund this work? How will we sustain the momentum?

Not surprisingly, it was the parents who began leading the way toward answers. During the convening, parent leaders named “building a national Parent Leader Network” as a potential action step, post-convening. It was listed on a sheet of butcher paper with several others, but when we came back together after the convening, this idea had the most energy and passion behind it. In late March of 2018, a small group of parent leaders who had attended the convening from the EC-LINC communities of Boston, MA, Hartford, CT, and Kent County, MI, began meeting virtually to plan a future Parent Leader Network for EC-LINC communities.

By June, parent leaders had chosen a mission and vision for the group:

“The EC-LINC Parent Leader Network provides a space for parents in EC-LINC communities to:

- *Collaborate with and support each other*
- *Represent the parent perspective in EC-LINC*
- *Advocate for parent voice and leadership in systems that impact families.”*

Woven throughout this vision is the Parent Leader Network’s role in building momentum, support and commitment around the *Race Equity and Parent Leadership Manifesto*. “Even before coming to Oakland...at Parent Cafes we were having we talked a lot about equity – it was equity, equity, equity!” said parent leader, Caroline Austin of Hartford, who is a member of the planning committee. “I’m excited. My wheels are turning!”

Families are experts on their own experiences. Systems need parents at the table to ensure programs are equitable, accessible and effective. [See pages 18-19 of Ripples.](#)

A Big Shift for CSSP

Supporting the formation of a Parent Leader Network within EC-LINC is a big shift for CSSP. “Parent leadership and race equity has been consistently identified as a need by EC-LINC communities, but we hadn’t really taken it on. This is an opportunity for deep work in communities around parent engagement as well as together in our network,” said CSSP senior associate Stephanie Doyle. “It’s also an opportunity for CSSP to co-create an agenda with parents, something the EC-LINC has never done before.”

In response to the parents’ leadership and ongoing commitment to organizing parents in EC-LINC, CSSP has secured funding to launch the Parent Leader Network over the next three years. In addition to ongoing support for organizing the Parent Leader Network, the funding will provide for an annual meeting of parent leaders from EC-LINC communities; a website and other communications to promote the Manifesto; local and national learning, advocacy and skill-building for parents; and parent-led projects in EC-LINC communities.

To planning committee member Lisa Melara, a parent leader from Boston, the success of the Parent Leader Network depends on one thing “How engaged are the parents?” From personal experience, she added: “If it’s agencies corraling parents, focused on ‘let’s teach them leadership skills’... it won’t go anywhere... we have to offer things that parents want to do.”

It also challenges EC-LINC to “walk the talk” of partnering with parents. “Leaving the convening in January, I felt a huge sense of responsibility,” reflects Doyle. “EC-LINC has a great opportunity to learn from and with the parent leaders but to do that we will have to step out of our comfort zone at times. It is exhilarating!”

How do we get there? Fulfilling these commitments require us to transform the way we do business, not only in programs serving families, but across the entire agency. Agencies must become more:

- **Family-centered:** valuing parents as experts and their child’s best advocates, developing their leadership and inviting them as partners on all levels.
- **Equity-driven:** understanding families’ experiences in systems and actively working to break down barriers and promote opportunities.
- **Collaborative:** partnering with parents at all levels, from identifying the issue to implementing the solution, and working with parent-led organizations that know the community and have unique expertise developing parents’ leadership and engaging them in organizing and advocacy.
- **Transparent:** making sure parents have access to all of the information they need to participate in decision-making processes at the program, agency and system level.

CHAPTER 7

RIPPLING OUT: A Call to Action

We started this voyage anchored to the *Ripples of Transformation* family engagement framework and toolkit and, in the process of learning and collaborating together, created a new compass to chart the course forward: The [Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood](#). This Manifesto and its 5 Commitments for Change is a joint call to action from system and parent leaders to create the transformations needed to ensure all parents are supported and empowered to give their children a strong start in life. In co-creating this Manifesto with parent leaders and committing to carrying it forward, EC-LINC communities and CSSP have increased our accountability as agencies and systems leaders. The Manifesto challenges us to transform the deeply embedded patterns of systemic and institutional racism and implicit bias that contribute to poor outcomes for children of color and their families.

Why focus on race? We learned from parent leaders at the Oakland convening described in Chapter 5 of this report that race equity and authentic parent engagement and leadership are inextricably linked. When parents have a voice and systems are responsive, families have more access to opportunities and supports that align with their needs. In other words, increased voice and engagement can narrow opportunity gaps. However, if parent engagement strategies are not accompanied by concurrent strategies to address issues of race and equity, parents of color will continue to face barriers to becoming true partners and leaders in early childhood systems and gaps will persist.



The Five Commitments

1. Challenge Racism
2. Embrace Parent Leadership
3. Prioritize Resources
4. Create Career Pathways.
5. Maximize Equitable Outcomes

How do we begin? This Community of Practice demonstrated that taking small, intentional steps toward improvement and learning from the results, is more effective than trying to change everything at once. The foundation for change requires agencies to realign on multiple levels: commitment, capacity, practice and the level of influence parents have in agency decision-making.

Small Steps Toward Big Shifts

AGENCY SHIFT	SMALL STEP EXAMPLE
<p>Commitment Agency’s commitment to authentically engaging parents and addressing equity issues is represented by agency leadership, in agency communications, policies, and allocation of resources (budgets.)</p>	<p>State a clear goal for improvement in strategic or annual plan (e.g. increase participation of fathers by launching father-specific programming) or commit to raising necessary resources within a specific time period.</p>
<p>Capacity Agency staffing, training, resources effectively support diverse parents to advance their leadership, including paid roles for parent leaders as peer educators or parent partners.</p>	<p>Identify and fill one significant gap in staff skills (such as training for facilitation), or resources (such as high-quality interpretation and translation).</p>
<p>Practice Parents feel engaged, welcomed, and valued and are invited to advance their leadership in a variety of ways, including through formal leadership training, policy advocacy and paraprofessional roles leading to staff positions.</p>	<p>Choose a promising strategy and use Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle to test an idea quickly on a small scale before implementation agency-wide.</p>
<p>Influence Parents have opportunities to influence decisions at all levels, from care decisions for their child, to program delivery to agency decision-making.</p>	<p>Invite a group of parents to help plan a new initiative, strategy or event and report back to them how their participation influenced the results. Deliver a “quick win” by implementing a change in response to parents’ feedback and ideas.</p>



This [self-assessment](#) is a starting point for dialogue and planning to identify and make changes needed to engage parents as partners and leaders to advance a more equitable, accountable, and responsive early childhood system of care.



The Next Wave

Achieving such dramatic change is not easy. Authentic parent engagement requires agencies and systems to release control and share power, which opens the door to many unknowns. It requires:

- **Belief** that the wisdom, experience, and leadership of parents are essential components of early childhood systems' strategies to improve the lives of children and their families
- **Fundamental changes** on multiple levels – in programs, policies, operations, governance, and perhaps most important, mindset and behavior
- **Buy-in** at all levels of an agency's staff and leadership
- **Time** to build trusting relationships, to test and refine strategies, to include parents in decision-making processes, support them in new roles and consistently communicate with them.
- **Flexibility** to be responsive to the needs and ideas of parents
- **Support** from policy makers and funders to make these changes
- **Comfort with discomfort** – criticism, missteps, even failure – as we struggle to change attitudes, beliefs and policies that have cemented themselves over many decades.



Working alongside parent leaders and in partnership with agencies and systems throughout the United States, CSSP is committed to supporting communities to explore and implement these fundamental changes in the years to come.



About EC-LINC

The Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC) is developed by and for communities and convened by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. EC-LINC’s mission is to support families and improve results for young children in communities across the country, with a focus on accelerating the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems.

About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

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