# Parent Engagement and Leadership Opportunities:
## The Benefits for Parents, Children, and Educators

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## Introduction

Nearly 30 years of research points to the formative role parents can play in their children's education. Studies cite benefits such as higher test scores and grades, increased graduation and attendance rates, better social skills, and improved behavior (Fan & Chen, 2001). These kinds of findings have led to educational policies and funding that require schools to incorporate parent involvement programs. Parents can be involved in schools in many ways but leadership activities are one way to meaningfully engage parents; they are especially relevant for parents who have traditionally been excluded from school-based activities due to racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequality (Crozier, 2001). Parent leadership can simultaneously offer parents a place to take up topics that *they* consider important and to learn more about schools and academic content.

Self-efficacy, agency, social capital, social networks, and literacy enable people to advocate more effectively (Krishna, 2001) for communities, families, and children, and may also increase families' long-term well-being. Leadership experiences can help parents to expand these capacities.

In this brief we argue for incorporating leadership training and opportunities into parent involvement and family literacy programs, first as a means to support parents in having a meaningful voice in social and educational issues and second to offer educators a better understanding of the benefits of working with and supporting parents as equal partners in school and community endeavors. Ultimately, we argue that family literacy programming is an ideal venue to develop and offer parent leadership opportunities.

## Background

Parent involvement is often necessary to supplement what schools are no longer able to afford due to increased diversity, funding cuts, and fewer resources (Auerbach, 2012b; Griffith & Smith, 2005). As parents are asked to increase participation in schooling, educators need to look for substantive opportunities to engage parents, so that parents may be afforded the choice to move from rowing the boat to steering the boat (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 32). The school or program culture often influences the welcome perceived by parents and local community members, the acceptance of their voices, and the effectiveness of leadership programs (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Parent involvement activities need to reflect the diversity within the school population since race, socio-economic status, and culture shape how parents participate in their children's education and schools (Auerbach, 2012a). Families, schools, and communities working in partnership tend to be more fruitful in supporting

children's school success (Henderson et al., 2007). Yet, schools frequently offer token involvement opportunities that placate or use parents rather than offering them the power to effect change through partnership or control (Auerbach, 2012a).

## Parent Leadership

In the literature, parent involvement, parent engagement, and parent leadership are often used interchangeably; the most commonly used term is parent involvement. However, parent engagement and leadership suggest a mutual partnership between school personnel and parents as they work together to determine and achieve common goals, whereas parent involvement activities are primarily realized on the school's terms (Pushor & Ruitenburg, 2005).

### Parent Involvement

Parent involvement, the "standard model" of how parents participate in schools (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004, January, p. 9-10), typically includes activities such as attending PTO meetings, fundraising, and volunteering in the classroom. These unpaid activities help make schools financially and academically successful (Griffith & Smith, 2005). Communication is usually one directional—school to home (Auerbach, 2012a).

Epstein's (1995) model of parent involvement is typical of this model. Although it includes six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—this model has been criticized for equating parent leadership to parents helping schools reach administrator-set objectives rather than equipping parents to help set, guide, and achieve goals that 'meet school, parent, and community ideas for successful education (Auerbach, 2007; Pushor & Ruitenburg, 2005).

### Parent Engagement

Parent engagement programs position parents to have a voice on topics centering on their children, their schools, and the issues that involve them as adults and community members. Parents are no longer conceived primarily as helpers for schools and children (Miano, 2011); they are acknowledged as partners in the child's learning.

## Parent Leadership

Parent leadership is a form of parent engagement wherein the engaged parent has the opportunity to become a leader (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Few programs or research articles specifically define what leadership means. Expanding on Millar and Kilpatrick (2005) and Sanders (2010), we define leadership as a process in which individuals or groups exercise influence to achieve a goal. The primary components of parent leadership programs, as outlined in the literature, are:

- To engage parents in collaborative and involved decision making in schools or other governance structures;
- To build parent knowledge and understanding of systems, institutional structures, and the accompanying power relationships; and
- To develop advocacy skills.

These opportunities offer parents a way to participate in, guide, and negotiate curricular or programmatic decisions. Leadership can include activities that vary in level of commitment, for example, inviting another parent to a school event, or more robust activities such as developing a petition or serving on the school governance committee.

## Family Literacy

Family literacy programs are intergenerational programs that focus on building academic readiness and success within the family context. These programs typically enroll families who are economically vulnerable, often immigrants or families of color, who may need to build English language or literacy skills. Many parents in these programs have had poor school experiences or are unfamiliar with the U.S. school system, leading

them to be uncomfortable interacting with educators due to feelings of marginalization, exclusion, or linguistic constraints. Consequently, parents may choose not to participate in the pre-K-12 setting since they do not feel recognized as valuable members of the school community or worry about schools marginalizing their children (Stelmach, 2011).

Until the demise of Even Start funding in 2010, family literacy was primarily equated with a four-component, standalone program. Since then, family literacy programming has continued to expand to after-school programs, community programs, library programs, and family fun nights, among other venues, but the emphasis has shifted away from adult literacy to primarily focus on skills that support children's academic success and persistence (Wasik & Van Horn, 2012). However, family literacy programming continues to offer a unique opportunity to tie adult and child learning with other key features that help families navigate school and employment.

## Combining Parent Leadership and Family Literacy Programming

Programs that solely focus on leadership skills and development can launch parents into advocacy roles; however, parent engagement programs that include literacy content knowledge *and* leadership can assist parents and their children to be successful in-school and out-of-school settings. Family literacy is ideally suited to provide leadership activities for adults because these programs can weave parent engagement into an environment that highlights literacy, child development, school, community, and family. Such programs can focus on developing (a) adult leadership and literacy skills; (b) child literacy and language skills; (c) parenting and child advocacy skills; and (d) knowledge about school systems and curricula. Learning in these areas can be transferred to schools, the community, or other settings. Offering parents opportunities to practice leadership skills as a component of family literacy programming is a way to develop or strengthen these skills and increase advocacy capacity in a supportive,

risk-free environment.

Family literacy programs that offer a parent leadership component afford parents and practitioners a unique opportunity to build supportive relationships, meld their knowledge, and share leadership roles. Integration of different expertise can honor parents' contributions and help assist them to enact leadership skills and negotiate the multiple, overlapping aspects of their daily lives—school, home, work, neighborhood, family—that may hold different expectations and require different forms of participation (Moje, 2000).

## Factors and Benefits of Leadership Programming

Leadership is more than an individual's skill or ability; rather, it integrates building knowledge, skills, relationships, collaborations, and responsibility (Millar & Kilpatrick, 2005). Prior research (Krishna, 2001) suggests that leadership opportunities can promote social capital and social networks, agency (the ability to act), literacy capabilities, and self-efficacy, all of which are vital for family literacy participants.

> *Leadership training encourages participants to engage in governance or advocacy activities.*

### Literacy

Literacy is a sociocultural practice, wherein the act of reading and writing involves dynamics of power and meaning (Heath, 1983). This sociocultural definition highlights the idea that educational systems often, unwittingly, privilege or exclude various groups. For example, non-mainstream parents are often marginalized or assigned helper volunteer activities in the school. While the relationship of literacy and leadership is underexplored in the adult education literature, leadership programming can afford participants the opportunity to develop literacy and leadership skills. Simultaneously programming can address issues in their daily lives and help them to foster

the skills needed to analyze social structures that keep them on the margins of mainstream society (e.g., poverty, race, immigration policies). In a study on parental engagement in mathematics, parents stated that developing academic skills ultimately influenced their ability to support children's school work and teach other parents (Civil, Bernier, & Quintos, 2003). Leadership activities also provide authentic opportunities to practice and expand literacy skills. For example, while parents are developing leadership projects they may simultaneously build their own literacy skills, use literacy skills in new ways (e.g., write a petition), or become more comfortable negotiating literacy events (Heath, 1983). Literacy and learning activities can enhance community capacity, social capital, and support personal outcomes, including increased self-confidence and efficacy as learners (Black, Balatti, & Falk, 2006; Millar & Kilpatrick, 2005).

## Social Capital and Social Networks

Social capital is both a cause and outcome of leadership. Social capital refers to the resources we gain from our social ties and social status. A person's social network (who one knows) is crucial to gaining recognition and accessing resources (social capital) people need to thrive, including information about school procedures, teachers, testing, and other aspects of education. Social capital is also tied to social class and race (Lareau, 2002). For example, a low-income parent may have less access to school personnel than a middle- or upper-class parent who is more familiar with school expectations and more comfortable relating to professionals. Organizations, such as programs offering leadership opportunities, can serve as a broker to help participants expand social networks thereby increasing knowledge and access to resources (Small, 2009, p. 19).

## Agency

Social scientists refer to agency as one's capacity to act, achieve desires, and enact an identity. This capacity is delimited by who we are, where we live, our social and economic resources, societal

expectations, and more. Leadership opportunities can enhance personal and collective agency. For example in one family literacy program, some adult students who were involved in a leadership council subsequently played governance roles in other community organizations, made informed choices that benefitted their families, and spoke up on matters of integrity (i.e., unfair work practices) (Toso, Prins, Drayton, Gnanadass, & Gungor, 2009).

## Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the *self-perception* of one's ability to carry out, and affect the outcome of an event (Bandura, 1982). This perception is critical to accomplishing a goal. Skill acquisition, such as learning how to run a meeting, and positive experiences, such as observing someone else's success or performing better than anticipated, can increase self-efficacy and one's persistence and willingness to mange new or intimidating activities (Bandura, 1982). Similarly, education and experiences that develop leadership skills might encourage learners, particularly marginalized adults, to engage in advocacy or other leadership activities beyond the confines of the classroom (Chrispeels, 2012). Heightened self-efficacy can enable adults to take action, lead community events, interact with school personnel, advocate for their child, or seek out new opportunities (Chrispeels, 2012; Toso et al., 2009).

### Examples of Successful Leadership Programs

The following four leadership program categories highlight a few unique, successful leadership programs that provide research-based evidence to support stated outcomes.

### Parents as Leaders in Educational Governance

The *La Familia Initiative* (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2005) engaged Latino parents in school-based activism. The project aimed to help middle-school parents better understand schooling issues and how to support their children academically. The

project emphasized developing parent voice, social networks, collective organization skills, and advocacy. This initiative sought to develop leadership and activism in a shared space that highlighted supportive relationships based on the parents' lives. Parents became active members in school improvement meetings and developed a strong sense of shared community and self-efficacy. School staff reported "a general academic improvement" (p. 40) for the children.

Parent leadership has been a core component of *Head Start* since its inception. The idea of substantive parent leadership has been strengthened through the development of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (Office of Head Start, 2011), wherein parent leadership goals are melded into the program's work plans and long-term goals. Each Head Start program has local control; implementation of the framework and leadership development opportunities varies across sites. For example, programs might offer professional development for parents, create a program environment that fosters leadership, or provide mentoring from community members.

## Parents as Leaders in Children's Literacy Development, School, and Communities

A notable parent leadership program was *Parents Supporting Educational Excellence* (Parents SEE) in Connecticut (see Connecticut Commission on Children, 2012). A primary purpose of the program was to support parents to become "advocates for change and partners in school improvement, rather than parents as helpers at home" (Henderson, 2010, p. 4). Parents SEE offered a five-hour retreat and 12 three-hour sessions that explored the components of effective schools, federal and local legislation, and communicating and engaging with decision makers. Parents reported higher levels of confidence in understanding the school system, expressing their opinions about school reform, engaging with their children at home, and participating in school governance activities.

## Parents as Leaders in Parents and Children's Literacy Development, School, and Community

A Pennsylvania family literacy program established a *Parent Advisory Council* (see Toso et al., 2009) to build leadership skills and voice. The council engaged parents in developing and making decisions about program structure, curriculum, class activities, student incentive structures, and community building activities. Parents also requested and developed parenting and literacy activities and informed the structure and design of the adult and early childhood education classes. Lastly, parents enhanced their literacy skills as they worked with teachers to write agendas, rework meeting notes, and create books and activities for their children. Staff and parents reported higher levels of class attendance, parent-school communication, and participation in and leadership of community events. Parents also cited increased self-esteem and self-efficacy.

The *Math and Parent Partnerships (MAPPS)* program (see Civil et al., 2003) was designed to assist parents in understanding changes in the district's math curriculum, develop parents' math skills to support children's schoolwork, and support leadership skills by coaching parents to become teachers of future math workshops. Parents initially said they participated to support their children's learning but continued in the program for their own learning purposes. They reported increased confidence, more instances of initiating conversation with school administrators about curriculum changes, and increased interest in pursuing more formal schooling. Teachers corroborated these parents reported outcomes. Lastly, children stated that they were proud of their parents' new role in the family and the community.

## Developing a Family Literacy Leadership Program

Leadership programs transcend traditional parent involvement by giving parents opportunities to focus on topics that affect their children's academic success. Research is limited on the key

components and skills needed to support or develop parent leaders among marginalized families. However, our review finds that as a result of leadership training many participants appear to increase literacy and language knowledge and become involved in governance or advocacy activities.

Following are some tips gleaned from the literature for developing a leadership program:

- Design a leadership program that meets regularly for an extended time period to allow participants to plan and carry out a project;
- Ask parents to identify topics that are relevant to their daily lives and build these topics into the program;
- Develop programming that builds parents' knowledge and expertise;
- Include programming that builds language and literacy skills to facilitate parents' self-confidence and ability to be recognized in mainstream society;
- Include opportunities for parents and children to reflect on their goals and hopes for themselves, their families, and their communities;
- Include governance opportunities that offer parents a substantive say in programming, activities, or other relevant aspects of the program so that parents can develop and practice leadership skills;
- Provide training for parents similar to any professional development activities;
- Provide opportunities for parents to interact with other school and community stakeholders and decision makers to develop confidence, become more comfortable interacting and voicing concerns and solutions with school and community leaders, and to broaden social networks;
- Provide support as parents transition to new leadership opportunities after they have completed the program;
- Provide opportunities for families, school staff, and community members to celebrate parent accomplishments.

## Conclusion

Some schools and programs seeking to involve parents in their children's school life include concepts of leadership. However, programs conceive of parent leadership differently as evidenced by the program examples described in this brief. Each of these programs provides parents with opportunities to build skills that are needed for effective leadership. Weaker forms of leadership consider parents as leaders primarily in terms supporting their child's schoolwork; stronger forms of leadership provide learning opportunities that focus on developing knowledge about education policy, schools, communities, social institutions, and leadership skills. Leadership activities can build parent-educator relationships and give educators new insights to parent knowledge and experiences that support classroom learning and a child's social and academic life.

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**Parent Leadership Resources**

Parent Leadership Toolkit
http://parentsanonymous.org/assets/NPLM_TK_All.pdf

Parent Leadership Training Institute Brochure
https://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/plti/PLTI_brochure.pdf

Parent Leadership Training Institute Overview
https://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/plti_overview.htm

Building Local Leadership for Change (Annenburg Institute)
http://annenberginstitute.org/publication/building-local-leadership-change-national-scan-parent-leadership-training-programs

*Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family/School Partnerships* (Anne Henderson, Editor).
Parent Organizing as a Strategy for Sustainable Policy Change
http://www.resourcelibrary.gcyf.org/node/3782

Parent Engagement And Leadership (Pushor & Ruitenberg)
http://www.mcdowellfoundation.ca/

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