

Activating Parent Voice and Agency: A Brief on Family Leadership

October 2023



Overview

The National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) has been a leader in multigenerational education programming for over 30 years, serving more than 150 communities in all 50 states with a mission to eradicate poverty through education solutions for families. Through decades of family literacy and engagement efforts, the need to intentionally support families in activating their existing leadership capacity became apparent. We recognize that as their child's first teacher and primary advocate, parenting adults need and deserve opportunities to expand their leadership skills and network with other families, school-based professionals, and local leaders to create positive change in their schools and communities. For families furthest from opportunity due to economic, racial, and other systemic barriers, the need for this support is even more urgent to help break generational cycles. Therefore, NCFL designed its family leadership programming to center historically marginalized parenting adults in learning experiences that help them constructively engage system leaders in partnerships that produce more equitable outcomes for families.

It is our belief that leadership at all levels matters in order to create equitable and thriving communities. NCFL strives to create spaces that prioritize relationships, shared power, and parent voice as a means of overcoming barriers and dismantling inequities within communities. Family leadership creates the conditions for families to deepen their impact on the issues that matter most to them by becoming active leaders in solving local challenges. Evidence shows that when parenting adults in communities are activated alongside systems leaders to solve problems together, community outcomes improve. These partnerships result in increased civic engagement among parenting adults, greater parent self-efficacy and influence, and more meaningful communication and partnership among families and community stakeholders.

Defining Family Leadership

NCFL defines family leadership as **strategies and services that improve and enhance the leadership skills of parenting adults and that are designed to support families in becoming advocates for themselves, their families, and their communities. This work is accomplished alongside the education and community systems that serve them.**

NCFL's family leadership programming pairs families with practitioners and community stakeholders. This pairing allows for dual capacity building through joint programming and shared learning, thus ensuring that problem solving occurs with families rather than happening to them. The sharing of learning and perspectives can be highlighted by one Activate! National parent participant: "I've learned that a lot of people care about the people and kids in this world besides the parents. I learned that a lot [more] organizations are fighting for better education and mental health awareness than people think."

NCFL believes all families have existing leadership capabilities and that family leadership programming is meant to amplify that capacity. This is an important distinction especially as it relates to families who have been historically marginalized due to their race, ethnicity, language, or economic status. Far too often, practitioners view families with a deficit perspective that assumes they require leadership remediation to effectively participate in educational systems (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). NCFL instead recognizes the inherent leadership skills, funds of knowledge, and lived experiences that parenting adults offer and provides families with tools and coaching to apply these skills within existing paradigms.

To facilitate this work, NCFL relies on a set of foundational equity design principles that ensure the organization joins communities and

partnerships ready to listen to the experiences, hopes, and dreams of families and practitioners closest to the challenges and barriers in communities. NCFL’s commitment is to work alongside families and communities toward redesigning solutions that create transformative outcomes. These principles help NCFL to counteract the implicit biases inherent in many systems by (1) fostering community leadership and building capacity, (2) addressing issues of education inequities, (3) working towards systems change, (4) sharing power and decision making, (5) prioritizing relationships, and (6) practicing inclusivity (McKercher, 2021; Hill, Molitor & Ortiz, 2016).

NCFL’s Approach to Family Leadership

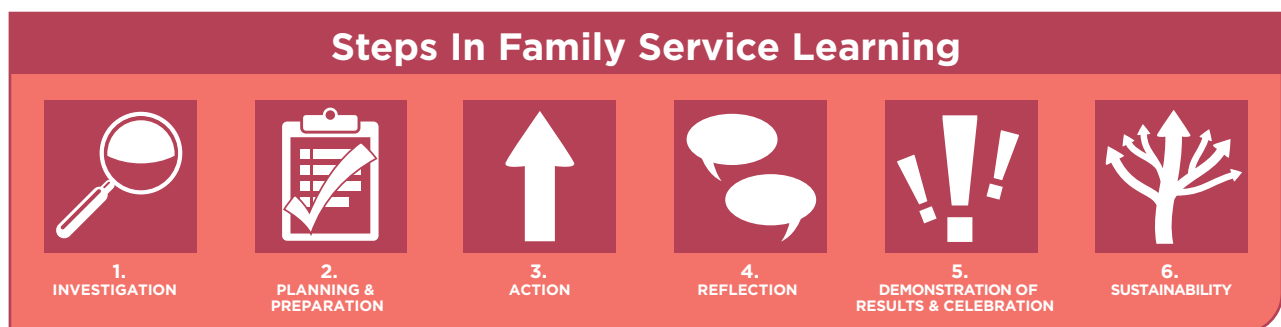
NCFL’s family leadership efforts serve as a bridge to build more intentional parent-school-community partnerships that result in positive outcomes for children and families. Our family leadership models are underpinned by a research-based family service learning framework intended to strengthen communities by fostering leadership and advocacy skills. This six-step approach is meant to not only provide parent leaders with a guide for solving an existing community problem, but also to serve as a template for addressing future problems (Roehlkepartain, 2009). Through the family service learning process, parent leaders investigate, plan and prepare, take action, reflect, demonstrate results, and consider sustainability. Studies indicate that service-learning projects have significant positive effects on a variety of measured outcomes, including academic performance, critical thinking skills, commitment to activism, and self-rated leadership ability (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Our family leadership offerings work to (1) increase the self-efficacy of parenting adults to support their child’s education and positively impact family and community challenges, (2) bring practitioners and parenting adults together to create spaces for shared power, (3) build dual capacity of practitioners and parenting adults so that each is equipped to work together in new and different ways, (4) create and expand spaces of advocacy and leadership for parents and families, (5) root the work in asset-based framing and co-design principles, and (6) ensure programs are informed, created, and executed through lived experiences.

Family Leadership Models

Activate! Local: Activate! Local is a project-based leadership model created specifically for parenting adults to identify and address critical issues within the school or community environment. Working alongside schools and community stakeholders, parenting adults form a cohort that designs and executes family service learning projects that seek to solve challenges identifies within their school system or community. The model has been intentionally designed to employ inclusive practices, including language interpretation, transportation, and childcare to ensure family leaders are able to engage with the program in a meaningful way.

Reflecting on her experience with Activate! Local, parent leader Onia shared that “Activate! Local gave me strength to advocate for my child and I, in turn, became an advocate for all children.” This sort of ripple effect is the goal of the Activate! Local model: one empowered parent has the potential to drive change not just for their family unit, but also for their broader community.



(NCFL, 2023)

Activate! National: NCFL unites its family leadership programs in communities across the country to form Activate! National, a professional learning opportunity that connects locally based pairs of parenting adults and early childhood practitioners to co-design equitable practices to inform local, state, and national policies for early childhood systems. This year-long program is designed to center Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) family leadership, representation, and advocacy (Yull, Wilson, Murray & Parham, 2018). By leveling relationships between families and educators and providing room for parent leaders to contribute, Activate! National honors families' talents and lived experience and increases their sense of agency and self-efficacy. Much like the local model, Activate! National includes intentionally-designed inclusive practices to reduce barriers to entry and enable meaningful participation.

Speaking of his time as an Activate! National participant, Ernesto, an early childhood practitioner said, "I love how Activate! National allows us to collaborate and learn from families all over the nation. I have learned [that] what is effective somewhere else could be effective here. Family is FAMILY!"

Family Leadership in Practice

Activate! Local initiatives in Tarrant County and Dallas (TX), Louisville (KY), Denver (CO), and Sheridan (CO) have achieved compelling results. Tarrant County participants demonstrated great progress in their "perceptions of their skills, knowledge, and potential impact on their communities." Describing the skills and knowledge gained after the completion of the program, one parent stated, "Going through this program I have discovered my skills...The leadership program has given me the tools to prepare myself in a way that I can be of great help. I want to do my bit to see the changes that are necessary for positive change in my community."

In Dallas, participants described the Activate! Local experience as having a positive impact on their ability to intentionally engage with their children both inside and outside the home. Dallas participants also described the importance of the

social networking and relationship building that the program facilitated between parents.

In Arizona, parenting adults engaged in Statewide Family Engagement Center programming communicated a desire to learn more about advocating for their children and building their leadership skills. As a result, families came together to learn from one another and build a strong network across the state with support from NCFL coaches, school-based staff, and partners. Their efforts resulted in elevating awareness of and leading action toward issues meaningful to them including digital equity, exceptional children, and healthcare.

The Activate! National implementation also achieved success. An Activate! National parent reported: "I'm learning that I can do more in the community and that my voice actually matters and people actually want to hear what I'm going through because other people are going through the same things. I'm learning there are a lot of resources in the community that I wasn't aware of or even taking advantage of." Activate! National practitioner participants were similarly impacted, reporting: "I'm a better facilitator now. I make sure that everyone in the room is seen and heard. This program is making me a better leader."

The Work Ahead

NCFL has an ambitious vision for the next decade that builds upon the organization's legacy work and charts a new course. NCFL's 60x30 Vision aims to establish coordinated and aligned Family Learning Systems in 60 communities by 2030 that will include family literacy, family engagement, and family leadership as key elements.

We invite you to keep abreast of our ongoing family leadership efforts across the country and to follow along as we carry out our 60x30 Vision. Updates are available on the [NCFL blog](#) and through the Family Learning Insider [newsletter](#). Partners, organizations, or educators interested in learning more about NCFL's available family leadership resources can contact info@familieslearning.org for further assistance.

References

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