The Parent Leadership Indicators Framework provides a set of descriptive indicators that parent-leadership organizations can use to self-assess their practices, measure program impact, and improve communication with parents, partners, and the public.

The Parent Leadership Indicators Framework was developed by the Parent Leadership Indicators Project at the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at New York University Steinhardt. The project builds on earlier evaluation work that began at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The framework includes several components, including a research-based theory of action, a set of descriptive indicators, and an online self-assessment tool.

“When parent leaders speak out, their voices carry the authority of lived experience. They understand how gaps in social, health, and educational services limit their children’s future in critical ways. They learn to work with parents across boundaries of education, race, income, language, and culture. When elected officials and policy-makers listen to parent leaders, they become more aware of how their actions affect children and families, especially those who lack income or education, or who are marginalized by race, language, and culture. As public officials and parent leaders increasingly work together on issues and programs, collective action to improve conditions and outcomes for children gains momentum, resulting in more public forums, more public will to support education, and more formal inclusion of valued parent leaders in decision-making. Civic climate improves and the whole community benefits.”

Anne T. Henderson, Kate Gill Kressley, and Susan Frankel, Capturing the Ripple Effect: Developing a Theory of Change for Parent Leadership Initiatives

Organizations that support parent-leadership development can use the Parent Leadership Indicators Framework to self-assess their practices, measure program impact, and improve communication with parents, partners, and the public. The framework is also designed to help (1) funders identify the characteristics of high-quality parent-leadership initiatives, (2) policymakers understand the value of parent leadership on democratic systems and policies, and (3) researchers and evaluators develop more effective methods when partnering with parent-leadership initiatives.

Early work on the Parent Leadership Indicators Framework was initiated in 2014 by the Connecticut Commission on Children, the Peppercorn Foundation, and the Hagedorn Foundation. The Connecticut Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors, as it is now known, operates the Parent Leadership Training Institute in Connecticut and licenses the program to the National Parent Leadership Institute, a lead organizational partner of the Parent Leadership Indicators Project.
The objective of the Parent Leadership Indicators Project is to develop resources, evaluation tools, and support systems that will make evaluation more feasible, practical, relevant, and useful to parent-leadership groups, programs, and organizations, especially smaller community-based initiatives that may not have the resources to bring in outside expertise in evaluation. This work focuses on parent-leadership initiatives that practice deep and sustained engagement with parents over time with the goal of developing parent leadership.

To that end, the project uses the following guidelines to inform its work:

- We embrace theory-based, developmental approaches to evaluation. Developmental approaches assure that PLIs (parent-leadership initiatives) are constantly learning from evaluation and improving.
- We favor participatory approaches, while building on what’s already been done. Participatory approaches ensure that parent leaders and PLI staff, who are seldom regarded as experts despite their experience, are engaged in the evaluation process.
- We encourage qualitative, narrative data-collection methods (e.g., stories, interviews, observations), but also balance them with appropriate quantitative approaches (e.g., surveys of parent leaders and alumni).
- We help PLIs build their own evaluation capacity and make evaluation more feasible. Evaluation is expensive and time consuming. PLIs operate with limited budgets, staff members who are already stretched thin, and parent leaders who are volunteering their time. Real investment in evaluation capacity building and networks is crucial.
The Parent Leadership Indicators Project Theory of Change—called “Capturing the Ripple Effect”—describes five levels of potential impact that can be achieved by parent-leadership groups, initiatives, organizations, and training programs. Each level builds successively outward in the model, illustrating increasingly larger impacts on individuals, institutions, communities, and democratic systems. Source: Parent Leadership Indicators Project

The Parent Leadership Indicators Framework

The Parent Leadership Indicators Project Theory of Change—called “Capturing the Ripple Effect”—describes five levels of potential impact that can be achieved by parent-leadership groups, initiatives, organizations, and training programs. Each level builds successively outward in the model, illustrating increasingly larger impacts—or ripple effects—on individuals, institutions, communities, and democratic systems. The theory of change is based on first-hand research that was conducted with several effective parent-leadership programs in the United States, and the descriptive indicators emerged from a review of research and evaluation literature on parent leadership; numerous interviews and focus groups conducted with parent leaders, staff, and other community leaders; and feedback from national leaders in the field.
The Parent Leadership Indicators Framework is informed by an approach to evaluation called Culturally Responsive Participatory Evaluation (CRPE), which actively involves parent leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds in the collection and analysis of evaluation data, which includes the creation of survey instruments, interview protocols, and other research and evaluation tools. The involvement of parents in the evaluation process can help build greater understanding and excitement about the value of evaluation, and it enhances the likelihood that organizations will make changes in response to evaluation findings. Source: Parent Leadership Indicators Project

The Parent Leadership Indicators Project works in partnership with parent-leadership initiatives across the United States that are actively implementing the framework. For example, participating parent-leadership initiatives administer the Parent Leader Outcome Survey to parent leaders before and after they experience the project’s training program.

The survey helps the project understand changes in the social networks, self-confidence, communication abilities, and civic knowledge, skills, and beliefs of participants. In addition, seven of the parent-leadership initiatives involved in the project are part of the Parent Leadership Evaluation Network. These organizations have been trained in evaluation methods and have conducted in-depth interviews with parent leaders about the impact the initiatives have had on their lives. Their findings were compiled into a book—The Ripple Effect in Action: What 7 Parent Leadership Organizations Learned from Participatory Evaluation—that was co-written by organizational staff, parent leaders, and Metro Center researchers.

The five levels of the Parent Leadership Indicators Project Theory of Change:
1. **Parent Leadership Initiative Builds Capacity**

The ability of parent leaders to change systems in ways that advance equity in schools and other public institutions begins with the building of individual knowledge, skills, and confidence. “Through hands-on learning and support, parents develop knowledge and skills: for example, developing a strategic plan, giving testimony before public officials, analyzing a budget, and running a community meeting. The initiatives strengthen civic values, such as respect for others’ opinions and appreciating cultural differences, and broker connections among parents, public officials, and community leaders. Supported by this ‘second family,’ parents gain confidence as they apply their skills.”

2. **Parents Undergo Personal Transformation**

When parents build new knowledge, skills, and confidence in civic leadership, they begin “applying what they learn to solve problems, watching their inner strengths unfold, attracting recognition as a trusted information source, and building networks that bridge race, class, and culture.” This “profound personal transformation” then “attracts recognition and respect and continues to build their networks of support and political influence.”

3. **Parents Take Collective Action to Address Inequities**

As the influence of parent leaders grows in a school or community, parents begin to partner with “like-minded groups to amplify their voice while working for change at the grassroots level in their neighborhoods, cities, and states,” which then allows them to more effectively expose and address inequities in the system. “When parents see opportunity gaps, they know the consequences for their children and take action, forming networks and joining forces with other groups. Using their own stories, backed by data and told in their authentic voices, they offer ideas that lead to more equitable policies.”

4. **Parents Become Valued Advisors to Public Officials**

As parent leaders become more active in school and community affairs, school administrators, public officials, and policymakers begin to see the parents as knowledgeable allies, partners, and advocates who can help them effect positive change for children and youth. “As public officials listen to parent leaders, they gain new information, create new opportunities to learn from diverse parents about local issues, and consider parents’ ideas.”

5. **Parent Leaders Invigorate Democracy**
As informed, skilled, and mobilized parent leaders and groups become increasingly active, visible, and influential advocates in communities, their participation in school governance and other public affairs creates a “climate for civic action and promotes greater understanding of the challenges and injustices facing lower-income families.” In addition, “Community leaders open new forums for dialogue...parents step up to be decision-makers on committees, boards, and task forces,” and “some parents run for public office” while “others join the staff of public agencies to provide a family perspective.”

Five Practices that Lead to Impact

In 2019, the Parent Leadership Indicators Project released *The Ripple Effect in Action: What 7 Parent Leadership Initiatives Learned from Participatory Evaluation*, which summarizes a technical evaluation report on the national Parent Leadership Evaluation Network coordinated by the Parent Leadership Indicators Project and its partners. The summary describes five practices that participatory evaluators determined to be common elements effective parent leadership organizations and programs:
Teams of parent leaders and staff from seven parent leadership initiatives throughout the country conducted interviews with a total of 169 parent leaders, most of whom were parents of color, involved in the national Parent Leadership Evaluation Network. One primary takeaway: leadership, community organizing, and other movement-building organizations must invest in human development; otherwise, they may experience policy wins, but will not build power in a way that leads to transformational change. Source: Parent Leadership Indicators Project.

1. Humanizing: Meeting parents’ individual needs and goals

The organizations provided childcare, meeting times that accommodated school and work schedules, food, and translation and supported parents as they developed new leadership skills and as they navigated family and employment struggles.

2. Relational: Building a community that felt like a supportive family
The organizations created warm, welcoming, supportive environments that often served as a refuge from stress and trauma. They offered a sense of dignity and community and provided spaces free of judgment and stigma.

3. **Unifying: Developing solidarity across difference**

The organizations intentionally built community, encouraged parents to bring their cultures and full selves into their work, and raised consciousness about how systems disadvantage people of color.

4. **Empowering: Facilitating skill- and knowledge-building**

The organizations offered concrete skill-building, such as public speaking, storytelling, and facilitation; taught parents about public systems and policy and legislative processes; and provided parents with opportunities to interact directly with community leaders, public officials, and politicians.

5. **Responsible: Creating stable and ongoing support**

The organizations provided ongoing support, through personal struggles and civic and political setbacks and became stable anchors, where parents were always welcome back, even when they had to “check out” for a period of time.

**Seven Common Outcomes**

The multiyear evaluation also identified seven common outcomes across the parent leadership organizations and programs that were evaluated:

- **Social connections:** Parents’ networks expanded, opening the doors to new civic, personal, and professional opportunities, and giving them more people to count on.

- **Worthiness and voice:** Parents developed confidence, self-worth, self-love, resilience, social connections, support in times of need, and a vision and belief that change was possible.

- **Shifting the blame:** Parents understood how their own experiences were related to larger policies and reframed stories of pain as stories of strength and resilience. This process cultivated empathy and relationships across racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and language difference.
- **Working across difference**: Parents leaders described their parent leadership initiative as a community in which they were comfortable sharing their opinion and disagreeing, and where they were able to work together towards a shared goal.

- **Community-level change**: Parents felt a duty to achieve their civic potential rather than wait for others to make change happen. Identification with their parent leadership family helped parents translate their love for their own children into civic action on behalf of all children.

- **Expanded vision of what’s possible**: Parents dreamt about—and did—what they never thought possible. They designed projects and led campaigns, told their stories in front of hundreds of people, met with elected officials, joined task forces and councils, and ran for offices and school board seats. Their self-confidence spilled into other parts of their lives.

- **Multigenerational benefits**: Parents’ confidence and cultural pride radiated onto their children, children looked up to their parents and also became part of a connected, civically engaged community.

**Parent Leadership Evaluation Tools**

The Parent Leadership Indicators Framework also includes an [extensive inventory of research-based measurement indicators](#) that describe some of the most common features—or “universal attributes”—of high-impact parent leadership groups, initiatives, and organizations. The inventory includes five measurement categories aligned to the project’s theory of change: (1) initiative indicators, (2) personal-transformation indicators, (3) collective-action indicators, (4) public-official and community-leader indicators, and (5) civic-climate indicators. Each of the five categories features a corresponding set of descriptive indicators that provide more detailed explanations of what a particular attribute looks like in practice.
The Parent Leadership Indicators Framework advocates for participatory approaches to the evaluation of parent-leadership initiatives. This useful table illustrates some of the advantages and disadvantages of internal, external, and participatory forms of evaluation. Source: *Evaluation for Equity: Measuring What Matters in Parent Leadership Initiatives* by Sara McAlister and Joanna Geller

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>DISADVANTAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTERNAL EVALUATION</strong></td>
<td>Can be less costly than an external evaluator</td>
<td>Often have less access to specialized knowledge about evaluation methods and techniques than professional evaluators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative staff act as evaluators as either a portion or the entirety of their job.</td>
<td>Usually have a rich understanding of the initiative’s context, practices, and potential key evaluation questions; easy access to data</td>
<td>Sometimes seen by funders and other stakeholders as less credible than external evaluations due to having a stake in a positive view and possible greater reluctance of participants to share criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXTERNAL EVALUATION</strong></td>
<td>Traditionally viewed as impartial and better positioned to report objectively on program strengths and weaknesses and to what extent goals are achieved</td>
<td>Do not always have a nuanced understanding of the cultural, social, and political context that would lead to more-relevant evaluation questions and increase the chances of findings being useful to the program and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducted by professional evaluators, usually hired by programs/initiatives or by funders</td>
<td>Can employ sophisticated data collection and analysis methods that fall outside the capacity of most program stakeholders</td>
<td>Power differentials, especially with participants from marginalized communities, can impede open and honest dialogue, leading to misleading or incomplete data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation is often situated within the larger base of relevant research</td>
<td>Can compare program outcomes and impacts to other programs or models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can address larger questions of interest to the field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES</strong></td>
<td>Can strengthen evaluation design and increase impact by requiring deliberate collaboration with other stakeholders</td>
<td>Requires major investment of time and attention by program staff, participants, and other stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff and leaders play central roles in designing and carrying out evaluation, with or without the help of a professional evaluator</td>
<td>• Capitalizes on participants’ nuanced understanding of cultural, social, and political context, often inaccessible to external evaluators</td>
<td>• Can be a burden for organizations with small staff and limited budgets, and for participants with many other obligations and pressures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evaluation questions more likely to address most urgent and relevant issues</td>
<td>• Findings more likely to be used to refine program practices and strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can produce better and more thorough data</td>
<td>Requires strong trust, collaborative norms, and careful attention to assembling an evaluation team that represents multiple groups of stakeholders and attends to power dynamics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Capitalizes on bonds of trust, especially when collecting personal and sensitive data</td>
<td>Requires strong trust, collaborative norms, and careful attention to assembling an evaluation team that represents multiple groups of stakeholders and attends to power dynamics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Helps minimize potential reluctance, due to power differentials between evaluators and people providing the data, to engage in honest and open dialogue, especially in historically marginalized communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds programs’ capacity to use data and embed evaluation in ongoing program practice</td>
<td>Funders who are accustomed to more conventional approaches may be skeptical about objectivity and rigor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the Parent Leadership Indicators Project explains, however, “These lists do not include everything parent leadership initiatives do, nor is everything on them expected from every parent leadership initiative. They simply serve as examples that we frequently have seen in studying initiatives that develop parent leadership.”

The full set of indicators can be found on the Parent Leadership Indicators Project website, along with a
publicly accessible self-assessment tool that will help parent-leadership initiatives identify strengths and weaknesses in their programs and strategies. The website also includes an overview of evaluation methods that can be used to measure progress on the five levels described in the Parent Leadership Indicators Framework's theory of change.

Acknowledgments

Organizing Engagement thanks Joanna Geller for her contributions to developing and improving this resource, and the Parent Leadership Indicators Project at the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools for permission to republish images from their website and publications.

References


