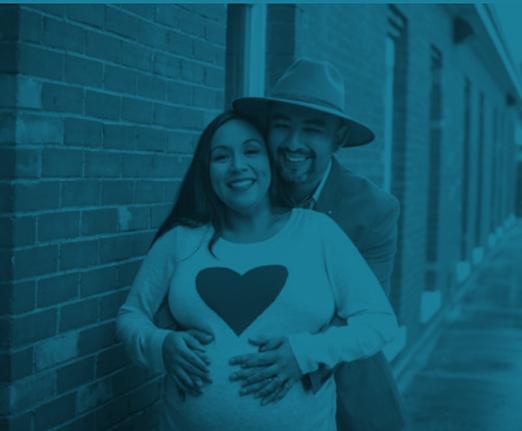




The Center for  
**FAMILY  
VOICE**



# *Amplifying Family Voice to Advance Equitable Outcomes for Young Children*

*June, 2021*

Groundwork  
**OHIO**



**This report was made possible by:**



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Groundwork Ohio.

**About Groundwork Ohio:**

*Groundwork Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization committed to championing high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five, that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families and communities.*

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# SECTION 1

# Introduction



**The Center for Family Voice, a “center for excellence” at Groundwork Ohio, is dedicated to authentically engaging Ohio parents and families in the policies and practices that impact the healthy development of their children.**

“ While there are many factors that contribute to stubborn disparities, we know families must play a more central role in our quest to eliminate inequities. ”

## A Message from our Leadership

In 2018, Groundwork Ohio released a first-of-its kind analysis, [The Ohio Early Childhood Race & Rural Equity Report](#), to more deeply understand how Ohio’s early childhood systems are addressing—or failing to address—the needs of our most at-risk children, specifically children of color and those who live in rural Appalachia. This report began with a thorough evaluation of the disaggregated data which confirmed our experience, intuition, and work in the field while providing a baseline for conversations to educate community stakeholders and policymakers about the stark disparities in child outcomes and access to the programs that seek to eliminate these disparities. We were committed to sharing our learnings with Ohioans and capturing their feedback and insights.

After sharing this data in communities, big and small, all around Ohio, we published [Drafting a New Blueprint for Success: Reflections on Ohio Early Childhood Race & Rural Equity](#), to share both the public feedback along with our new plans to advance equitable outcomes for all Ohio kids and families. One element of this plan is to more authentically engage parents and families in our policy development efforts. We heard loud and clear that they are seeking deeper relationships with, and recognition by, the systems that they rely upon—parents rightfully want their voices to be heard when it comes to the future of their children. Further, evidence instructs us that increasing family engagement in policymaking yields substantial returns for individual children, their families, and the systems that seek to serve them.

However, as policy leaders awaken to the need for and value in engaging families in policymaking, there is little infrastructure to support it. While there are many factors that contribute to stubborn disparities, we know families must play a more central role in our quest to eliminate inequities.

Fortunately, Groundwork is not alone in this recognition—countless community stakeholders have communicated the shared goal of increasing family participation in policy development. Molina Healthcare of Ohio, led by plan president Ami Cole, understands the value of family and community partnerships and recognizes that health plans, like other systems, face real challenges when trying to engage families. We are grateful for her belief in us, along with the leadership investment of the MolinaCares Accord, to build the long-term infrastructure required to authentically engage family voices in Ohio. Their confidence in our bold vision—*The Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio*—will not be misplaced.

As the first step in our plan, Groundwork is pleased to share with you this report on our findings from an extensive Ohio and national environmental scan of family engagement strategies. Amplifying Family Voice to Advance Equitable Outcomes for Young Children creates the foundation on which we will build this new Center over the coming years. As always, we invite you to join us as we seek to innovate and transform Ohio early childhood systems by ensuring that family voice is woven into the fabric of policy development and advocacy.



**Warm Personal Regards,**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shannon Jones".

**Shannon Jones**  
Groundwork Ohio  
President

## What is the Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio?

*In fulfilling Groundwork Ohio's mission, supporting its coalition-focused work and operationalizing equity in our work, it is initiating and beginning to operate the Center for Family Voice, a "center for excellence" at Groundwork dedicated to authentically engaging Ohio parents and families in the policies and practices that impact the healthy development of their children.*

Unique to Ohio, the Center will be an ongoing, multi-year committed learning process focused on eliminating disparities in systems that serve pregnant women, young children and their families. Ultimately, the Center will drive programmatic, policy, and practice changes at local, regional, and state levels by integrating the family voice into the decision-making process of Ohio's family-serving systems.

The Center for Family Voice is being developed as an innovative response to the lack of authentic family voices in the development of policy and practices that deeply

impact Ohio pregnant women, young children and their families. While there are certainly local programs and entities that may include family engagement as an aspect of service delivery or an evidence-based intervention, building infrastructure to support the centering of family voices to inform public policy is unique to Groundwork Ohio and the Center. While Groundwork's approach is certainly unique in Ohio, it also holds the opportunity of informing national work in this developing area of policy, engagement, and advocacy.

## How is Groundwork Ohio beginning this work?

*The Center has undergone an extensive environmental scan across the state of Ohio and nation to explore best practices that successfully engage families in public services delivery to inform state and local programs, practices, and policy development. This scan included over 40 local and national interviews in addition to an extensive literature review. This report is a summary of findings from this scan and review.*



The environmental scan and accompanying planning period have been generously supported by the MolinaCares Accord.



Groundwork received expert technical assistance and support from national leaders in this space, including the Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS), nationally known for its expertise in advancing innovations in health care delivery for low-income Americans. CHCS provided ongoing thought partnership during the environmental scan and planning process informing the development of the Center. They completed interviews of national organizations, contributed national case studies to the report, contributed to research materials, and provided feedback on this report.



Groundwork also received expert technical assistance from the BUILD Initiative which supports state leaders in their work to develop a comprehensive system of programs, policies and services that serve the needs of young children and their families. Specific to this body of work, BUILD was a thought partner and contributed significantly to the literature review completed during the environmental scan in addition to providing content for case studies.

## A special thanks to the early childhood stakeholders across Ohio and the nation for your time and contributions...

While Groundwork Ohio independently wrote and published this report with citations to all print sources, we acknowledge and thank you for contributing to the development of the Center for Family Voice by allowing us to listen and learn from you and your

experience whether it be through an in-depth interview, participation in a group meeting or a casual conversation or connection. All of the quotes in this report, unless otherwise cited, and most of the findings, come from these interviews.

*Among those engaged or interviewed for this report include representatives from the following organizations:*

<i>Action for Children</i>	<i>George Gund Foundation</i>	<i>Ohio Department of Job &amp; Family Services</i>
<i>Advocacy &amp; Communication Solutions</i>	<i>Hala Durrah, Patient/Family Engagement Consultant &amp; Advocate</i>	<i>Ohio Department of Medicaid</i>
<i>Alliance for Early Success</i>	<i>HAPCAP - Hocking, Athens, Perry Community Action</i>	<i>Ohio Excels</i>
<i>BUILD Initiative</i>	<i>Hopewell Health Centers</i>	<i>Ohio Fatherhood Commission</i>
<i>Center for Disability Policy</i>	<i>Invest in Children</i>	<i>Ohio Head Start Association</i>
<i>Center for Health Progress</i>	<i>Knox County Head Start</i>	<i>PFCCpartners</i>
<i>Center for the Study of Social Policy</i>	<i>Learn to Earn Dayton</i>	<i>PRE4CLE</i>
<i>Child Development Council of Franklin County</i>	<i>Learning Grove</i>	<i>Pritzker Children's Initiative</i>
<i>Children's Defense Fund-Ohio</i>	<i>Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health</i>	<i>Public Children Services Association of Ohio</i>
<i>Cincinnati Children's Hospital</i>	<i>Margaret Hulbert, Early Childhood Strategic Consultant</i>	<i>Queen's Village</i>
<i>Cleveland Foundation</i>	<i>National Black Child Development Institute-Ohio Affiliate</i>	<i>St. Fleur Consulting</i>
<i>Community Catalyst</i>	<i>National Collaborative for Infants &amp; Toddlers</i>	<i>Summit Education Initiative</i>
<i>Corporation for Appalachian Development</i>	<i>OCALI, Ohio Center for Autism &amp; Low Incidence</i>	<i>United Way of Greater Cincinnati</i>
<i>Cradle Cincinnati</i>	<i>American Academy of Pediatrics-Ohio Affiliate</i>	<i>United Way of Greater Toledo</i>
<i>Dayton Children's Hospital</i>	<i>Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children</i>	<i>Vital Village</i>
<i>Design Impact</i>	<i>Ohio Department of Education</i>	<i>W.K. Kellogg Foundation</i>
<i>Harriet Dichter, Early Childhood Strategy Consultant</i>	<i>Ohio Department of Health</i>	<i>Warren County Head Start</i>
<i>Education Trust NY</i>		<i>Juliann Woods, Communication &amp; Early Childhood Research &amp; Practice Center at Florida State University</i>
<i>Every Child Succeeds</i>		<i>ZERO TO THREE</i>
<i>Family Voices</i>		
<i>First Year Cleveland</i>		

## SECTION 2

# Making the Case for Why Family Voice Matters

“Family voice is extremely important in every child serving system.”

## Why does family voice matter?



“ I think the policies that are being written are for the people that do not directly have a seat at the table in the policies that are written for them—that is where the disconnect is.”



“ If you engage a parent and you listen to the parent voice, then you’ll be able to help the kids more readily.”

“ I think that when you get parents in a room—particularly because, let’s face it, when you’re a parent, you work and you parent and you don’t necessarily have as many opportunities for socialization or interacting with an adult—if you get a chance to share your story with a group of people who are saying, ‘yeah, that’s my life too,’ it feels good.”

“ [Engaging family voices] is not just important, it’s a key part of how the work can get done in an actual and meaningful way...We’re talking about how uniting the caring power of people can change lives...You can’t actually create real and substantive change unless you’re asking the community what that change looks like.”



“ Family voice is extremely important in every child serving system.”



“ Including family voice is an absolute necessity.”



photo credit: Paul Joseph Brown



# THE AMPLIFICATION EFFECT

*The activity & leadership of  
the Center for Family Voice  
will spread or amplify influence  
to achieve its objective.*

The **Amplification Effect** is a proposed **theory of change** to understand how the Center for Family Voice will advance policy transformation and improved outcomes for young children in Ohio. It is a working framework for which the Center hopes to successfully demonstrate—and it will continue to be reviewed and honed over time in partnership with families and stakeholders.

**“ I think [family engagement] is important from a programmatic standpoint and from an advocacy standpoint. But until we engage families in defining solutions, either programmatic solutions or policy solutions, you can’t engage them to advocate if it isn’t something that came from their heart and their experience.”**

*The Center for Family Voice implements core functions of the Center in alignment with its principles and values.*

- Build & Enhance Capacity** of families & local stakeholders by:
- Increasing their skills & knowledge
  - Expanding their connections
  - Building confidence & self-efficacy

- Empower Local Stakeholders** to:
- Connect family engagement to services
  - Engage families in diverse roles including as co-creators of solutions
  - Honor family contributions
  - Create inclusive cultures

- Develop Effective Partnerships** between families, local stakeholders, & Groundwork Ohio that support shared policy goals & advocacy so that policymakers see families & effective partnerships as assets.

- Advance Policy Transformation & Improve Outcomes** for young children & their families through our effective partnerships.

*Groundwork Ohio develops and supports the Center for Family Voice. It integrates the expertise and activity of the Center in all its strategies.*

**Source:** The Amplification Effect is the theory of change developed for the Center for Family Voice and is informed by the totality of Groundwork Ohio’s research and interviews with diverse stakeholders, but draws heavily on and utilizes concepts from two existing frameworks: 1.) “[The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#),” developed by Dr. Karen Mapp 2.) “[The Ripple Effect Theory of Change](#),” developed by the Parent Leadership Indicators Project.

## Why family voice matters

*“The Amplification Effect” is supported by literature that draws a connection between efforts to elevate family voice to improve child and family outcomes, and, ultimately, social change. The Center’s theory of change depicts short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes that can accrue at the individual, programmatic, and system levels.*

While it can be very difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of advocacy given so many changing variables in any political landscape,<sup>i</sup> the value of including family voices in policy change is widely recognized.

Research demonstrates that “when parents are engaged as partners and leaders in the programs, services and policies that support young children’s learning and healthy development, children thrive and systems improve.”<sup>ii</sup>

### Evolution of Parent Leadership

In September of 2020, the Michigan Home Visiting Initiative and Early Childhood Investment Corporation published a report detailing the evolution of parent leadership in Michigan.<sup>iii</sup> They have continued to develop companion materials to support the continued building of capacity of family leaders that are instructive to the Center’s work.<sup>iv</sup> Given their experience over the past three decades in engaging Michigan parents in a movement to elevate family voices and empower parents to engage in decision-making, the report details that they find “their efforts prove that when parents are supported in becoming leaders and agents of change, the benefits are clear.” They identify that families are stronger, children, families, and programs have better outcomes, and systems are more effective because parents help shape decisions that are equitable, culturally competent and customer-centric.

“Existing evidence shows that family engagement with health care professionals improves care coordination and health outcomes at the individual level—for that child, and that family.”<sup>v</sup> Similar findings exist from a synthesis of literature on family engagement and educational outcomes.<sup>vi</sup>

**“Parents from diverse backgrounds, when given direction, can become more engaged with their children. And when parents are more engaged, children tend to do better.”<sup>vii</sup>**

Further, research shows that supporting and strengthening family engagement is associated with increased protective factors for parents and children, which decreases the likelihood of experiencing trauma including child abuse and neglect, promotes family strengths and contributes to healthy child development.<sup>viii</sup>

Research has also demonstrated the impact of efforts to cultivate family leadership development. In their innovative synthesis of findings from the Parent Leadership Evaluation

## **The Center for Family Voice hopes to build upon the evidence-base for supporting parents in becoming leaders and agents of change.**

Network, Geller and colleagues (2019) identified the impact themes from participatory research from seven parent leadership initiatives.<sup>ix</sup> These themes included,

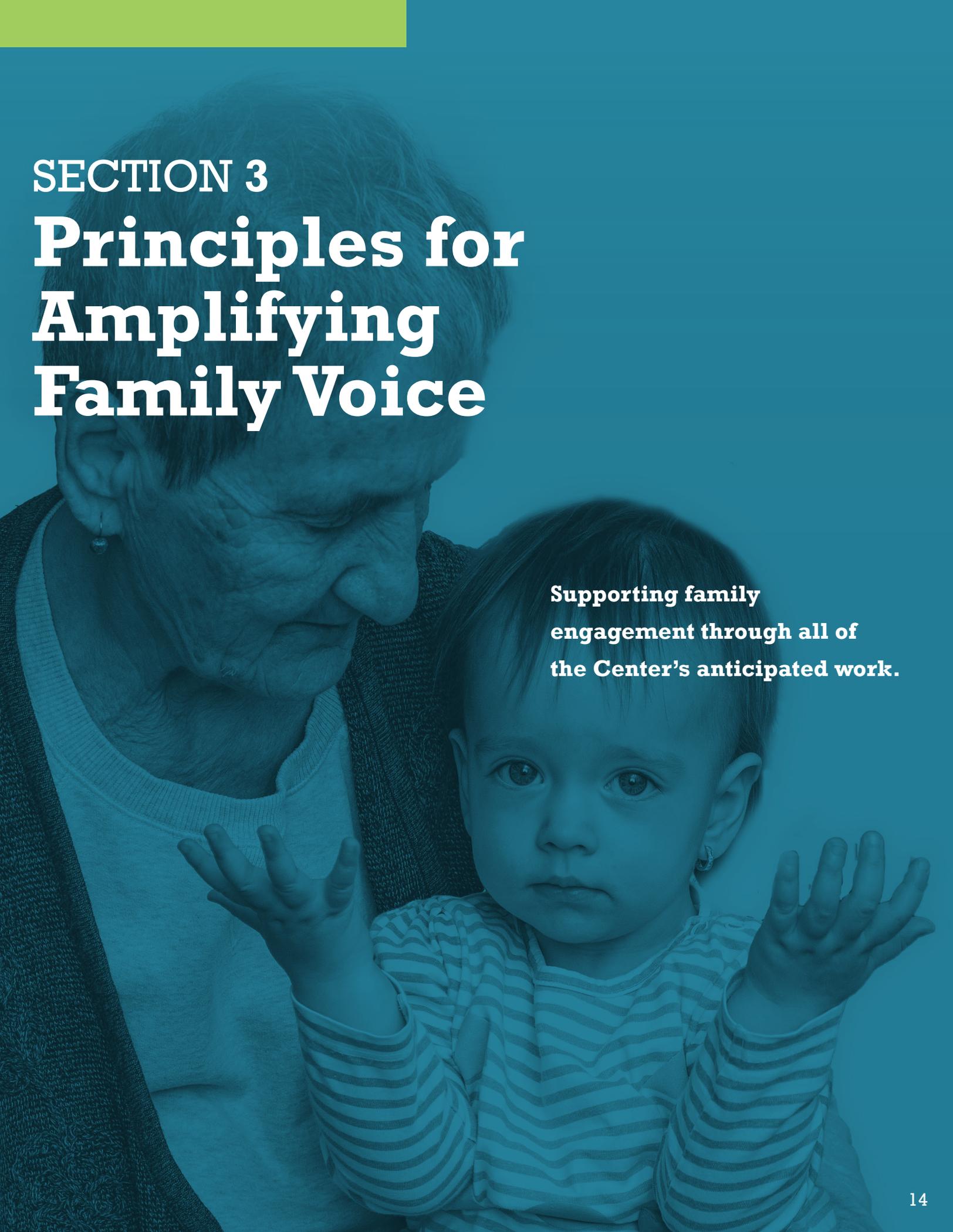
- “Development of deep and supportive social connections resembling a ‘second family’”
- Discovery of parent’s own self-worth and voice
- Shifting blame from self to systems
- Working across differences
- Community-level change
- Expanded vision of possibility for their own lives, as well as for their families, and communities—“Doing what they never thought possible”
- Multi-generational benefits <sup>x</sup>

Additional research examining efforts to strengthen parent engagement in their child’s education noted that when parents view themselves as leaders, their confidence increases as well as their capacity to be effective advocates and parents.<sup>xi</sup> This broader engagement and leadership indicates a ripple effect that emphasizes families’ strengths and action as a basis for systems-level engagement and change in early childhood systems. Family Voices also concluded that family engagement at the systems-level “has the potential to be a powerful catalyst for reducing system fragmentation, [and] removing barriers to health care.”<sup>xii</sup> The conclusion confirmed by this research base has further been

presumed and demonstrated by national early childhood education and health leaders and Ohio early childhood stakeholders.

The Michigan report referenced on page 12 points out that there is much work to do in this space—that while their success stories are real, including personal growth of parents and changes at the community and state level, “those working closely to promote authentic parent voice and leadership in programs and policy admit they are still very much in the phases of testing, learning and growing.” The Center for Family Voice hopes to build upon the evidence-base in Ohio and across the nation for supporting parents in becoming leaders and agents of change that influence state policy as it too tests, learns and grows.

*Upon review of all the existing literature that supports the connection between family engagement and individual, programmatic and systems change, in Ohio it is uncommon for families to have more than superficial influence and power when it comes to the care of themselves and their children in state early childhood systems.* The Center will be central to the Ohio movement to strengthen children, families, program outcomes and system effectiveness and equity.



SECTION 3

# Principles for Amplifying Family Voice

**Supporting family  
engagement through all of  
the Center's anticipated work.**

As the Center for Family Voice acts on implementing “The Amplification Effect,” it does so by adopting the following definition of family voice created by Family Voices:

“**An authentic partnership between professionals and family leaders who reflect the diversity of the communities they represent, working together at the systems level to develop and implement better policies and practices.**”<sup>iii</sup>

Additionally, based upon the review of literature summarized in this report and interviews with Ohio early childhood stakeholders, the following are principles for supporting family engagement through all the Center’s anticipated work.



## Operationalize Equity

Income, race, place, and privilege play an undeniable role in any family engagement effort.

**“The toughest part of engaging families, particularly low-income, struggling families, is that most of us... Don't genuinely understand the barriers.”**

The Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio adopts the belief put forth by the Center for the Study of Social Policy's [Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#): “Families want to work with early childhood systems to improve outcomes for their kids, but face barriers. Rooted in structural racism and bias which pervade the attitudes, behaviors, policies and practices of these systems and our society as a whole, these barriers prevent many partners of color from being true partners and leaders in their child's healthy development and early learning.” Groundwork Ohio is acting on its organizational principles and ongoing commitment to advance equitable outcomes for young children and their families by putting family voice at the center of policy development so that policies respond to the unique needs of families.<sup>xiv</sup> Groundwork Ohio renews its commitment to challenging racism and structural inequities in Ohio's early childhood systems.

Individuals often act on fear by “othering” people and communities. These sentiments bleed into policy decisions. Building leadership among parents and families to center their voice in policy development will promote equity at all levels from individuals to systems because modeling respectful and responsive listening fights against this inclination. It contributes to the “knowing” versus “othering” of people and communities. Policymakers make decisions based on what they know. Creating opportunities for policymakers in early childhood systems to know families and find commonality in the dreams they have for their children and families will influence their decisions.

**“We haven't figured out how to focus on uniting principles...knowing [people], and having similar experiences with them creates an opportunity to get beyond what divides us.”**

## Build Trust

**“Trust is the currency of all of our work... If we have come to some conclusion that this is what will work and we are able to accomplish a piece of that, I think that is where that trust is built. We know the fabric of our culture. I think that just being approachable, being able to lift the voices that don't sound the same as ours, and validating that voice, is so extremely important.”**

Trust is the currency of all Groundwork Ohio's work and deeply critical to all work with families because it is the foundation of any relationship. Relationships built with families will allow the Center for Family Voice's work to be successful. Trust is more than just eliminating barriers to families participating—it begins with making them feel valued, knowing they are heard and ensuring that decisions will be influenced by their sharing or participation.

Trust requires protecting parents, acting ethically, and ensuring that sharing or elevating their story doesn't put them at any risk. There is no proxy for trust—it must be earned and requires thoughtful and consistent attention over time. This includes managing expectations and providing consistent communication with families versus investing in a relationship and then removing the support or the work from the community without notice.

**“First, we have to be genuinely committed to uniting people together. Only if people believe that will they be willing to believe that we're genuinely interested in what they want versus whatever our agenda may be.”**

**“Trust begets trust. Sometimes it begins with a simple commonality, but once you have trust with one person in a community, others will be more likely to engage with you.”**

## Honor Relationships

**“...it is the community-based organizations that connect with the people who we serve that are the most important to them... They trust their community-based organizations.”**

Groundwork Ohio, not unlike other statewide organizations, is several steps removed from direct family relationships. While the business of family engagement is agnostic to issue area or policy focus (health, education, economic stability) of an organization, it lives or dies by relationships. It is critical that Groundwork Ohio honors existing relationships in local Ohio communities where relationships with families do exist. This means partnering with and adding value to the work of community-based organizations who already have trusted relationships with families. After all, “once you’ve lost the ability to sit down, share food, [and] talk about your children’s dreams” it is far more difficult to build relationships.

Leading national organizations, including the Center for the Study of Social Policy and Family Voices, also prioritize the importance of partnership with family-led organizations as an effective way to “build the capacity of policymaking organizations, state agencies, and other systems of care to support meaningful family engagement that can ensure that policies, practices, and services are family-centered and equitable.”<sup>xv</sup>

Local organizational partners, not unlike individual family members, will have also have barriers, however, to participating or delivering fully on supporting family engagement even where they have relationships with families. The Center for Family Voice should consider how to remove those barriers as they would for families themselves by compensating them for their time, partnership, and skills. Relationships with local partners cannot just be a draw on their capacity, but rather must reflect parity and expertise. These local leaders must be part of the conversation.

This principle of partnership is shared among local and state government leaders across the nation:

**“One of the highest values that state and local leaders describe in their work is family engagement or learning from families. Building local connections is a way to hear family voices, assess and address the needs and challenges of all children in an area, and foster work between local communities and the state in order to share family feedback and help inform family-friendly policies and programs.”<sup>xvi</sup>**

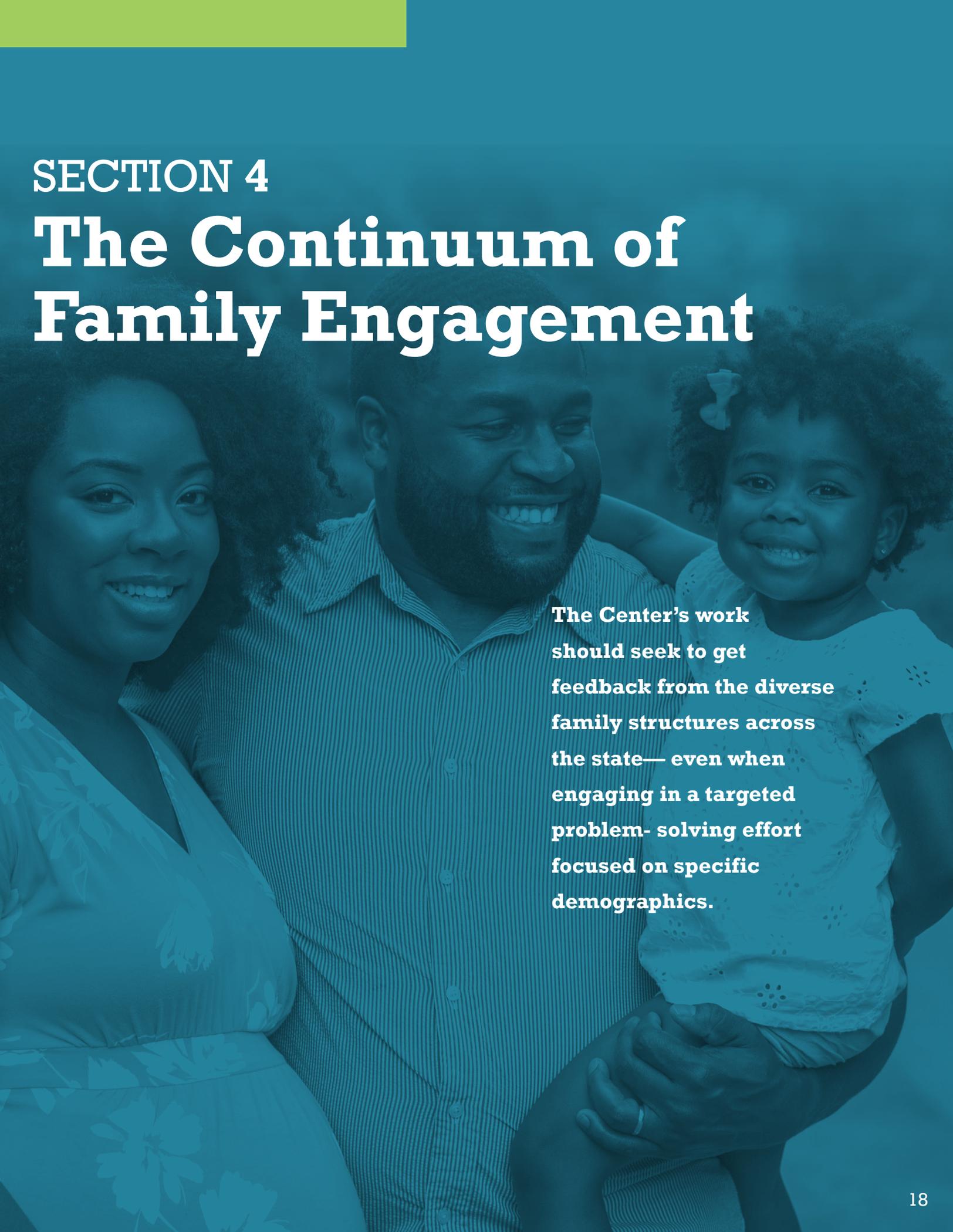
## Respect Experts

Families and parents are the experts of their own lives and the lives of their children. Making families feel valued and building trust begins with knowing they are heard, and that decisions will be influenced by their act of sharing and participating. Listening and acting on family voice requires other voices to acknowledge that, regardless of education level, experience in policy and advocacy or otherwise, parents are indeed experts. “Families lived experiences make them uniquely qualified to partner in shaping systems-level policies that can improve systems of care for all children.”<sup>xvii</sup> Their lived experience is their expertise—they need not prove anything else.

**“It’s not about teaching someone how to be a parent, it’s exposing that they do have some added value here. I have not met a parent yet who doesn’t always want better for their children. I don’t care who it is and what income level, they always want better for their children... They don’t want a handout. Allow them to think about how they can be creative to change their community.”**

## Shift Culture

When expressing the intent behind family engagement work, the mantra “nothing for us without us” is often used. To operationalize these simple yet powerful words, a culture shift and change in approach at all levels of leadership in early childhood systems is required. “It starts with a shift in the mindset of traditional decision-makers, it involves change in how agencies engage families, and it requires true investments in parents so those who choose it can advance along a continuum from parent involvement and engagement to empowerment and active leadership.”<sup>xviii</sup>



## SECTION 4

# The Continuum of Family Engagement

**The Center's work should seek to get feedback from the diverse family structures across the state— even when engaging in a targeted problem- solving effort focused on specific demographics.**

## What does family mean?

*In this report, we use “parent” and “family” interchangeably and have adopted an inclusive definition of both referring to all adults who have a primary role in caring for a young child. This includes biological, adoptive, foster and stepparents, grandparents and other extended family. It also includes legal and informal guardians.*

Further, viewing the family community wholistically is particularly important for engaging individual members of the family where, like in Ohio’s rural Appalachian region, there are families who have been in the community for generations. They trust and rely on one another and it’s important to build trust with the community while building individual relationships with family members. The Center’s work should seek to get feedback from the diverse family structures across the state—even when engaging in a targeted problem-solving effort focused on specific demographics based on income, race, gender or other social factors, seek to include diverse family voices.

### Don’t forget about dad!

The work of the [Ohio Fatherhood Commission](#) and local communities, including [Learn to Earn Dayton](#) and the [Summit Education Initiative](#), highlight the importance of including dads and other male caregivers in policy development discussions impacting young children and families even where, and because, they have historically been left out the conversation. Learn to Earn Dayton convenes Black men and fathers to inform and improve the early childhood education of Black boys in the community. Similarly, the Summit Education Initiative convened a group of local Black men including community leaders, dads, coaches, siblings, uncles and pastors to co-create solutions and strategies to engage men in supporting young children to be Kindergarten ready. Additionally, the [Ohio Department of Health](#) has included dads to inform their work to eliminate disparities in infant mortality.

## The spectrum of family voice participation

*Below is a spectrum of family voice participation where the level of participation defines the role parents and families can play. This continuum has been adapted from IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation.<sup>xix</sup> It has also been influenced by Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation.<sup>xx</sup>*

### Increasing impact on the decision...

	<i>Involve</i>	<i>Inform</i>	<i>Consult</i>	<i>Engage</i>	<i>Collaborate</i>	<i>Empower</i>
<b>Parent Participation Goal:</b>	Parents are enrolled and receive a service.	To provide parents with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain parent feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with parents throughout the process to ensure that parent concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with parents in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of parents.
<b>Promise to Parents:</b>	The system will design policies and programs for you and other parent participants.	The system will keep you informed.	The system will keep you informed, acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how parent feedback influenced the decision.	The system will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how parent input influenced the decision.	The system will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	The system will implement what you decide.

*The objective of the Center for Family Voice is to build the capacity of parents and early childhood stakeholders to work together and engage at all levels along the continuum, and also allow families to have an expanding impact on policy decisions and program development.*

This expanded impact holds the potential to transform policies that deeply impact the family's experience and improve their outcomes. For so long, much of early childhood system development operated at the lowest level of parental participation of this continuum, with parents being involved or enrolled and receiving a service but not involved in the development or refinement of the service and/or program. Not all parent participation, however, can be at the highest level on that spectrum. Parents are always critical participants, but not the only participants. As such, systems are not always able to implement what parents alone identify as priorities (i.e., families will not always be empowered as the final decision maker).

The Center's goal in Ohio is to push early childhood stakeholders to support and increase parent participation and to make a deeper commitment to parents about how impactful their participation is to decision-making. As the Center investigates potential opportunities to increase parent participation and impact, the following are the examples of activities that support each of the participation goals on the continuum.

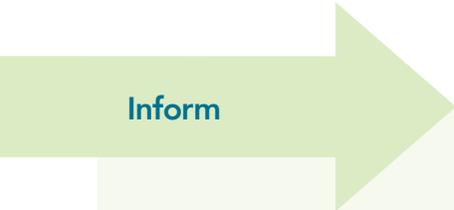
## Involve

### Where a family is "involved," they most often are receiving or are enrolled in a service.

The system has determined a family's need and sought to meet it by providing this service. Whether it's clinical care, evidence-based home visiting, group prenatal care, early intervention, child care, preschool, food, housing or transportation, the parent or child receiving services are often limited to informing their own individual care or needs. It is not typical for family voice to influence the delivery of the services or the program, and even more unlikely that their input is influencing policy. Sometimes the intervention or service itself, however, requires more than involvement. For example, in the [Ohio Start](#) program, the service itself requires team meetings and intentional opportunities for shared decision-making with families—regarding the services they receive—that creates the opportunity for families

to become equal players in their care team. This partnership role has improved outcomes for families and programmatic culture.

Where these services engage in quality improvement efforts or research and evaluation as part of an evidence-based protocol, there is a ripe opportunity to engage family voice in these processes to inform system improvement. Even in quality child care, where parent engagement is required by Ohio's five-star quality rating and improvement system, limited one-way and sometimes two-way communication (i.e. when both parties share information) check a box, but often fall short of supporting systems improvement. This foundation, however, creates an opportunity for growth and partnership with quality child care programs to build upon this requirement.



## Inform

**Providing parents with balanced and objective information to support their understanding of an issue, alternatives and solutions is an important first step to increasing participation.**

Frequently the focus of activity at this level continues to be on one-way communication with limited opportunities for feedback. This could continue to encompass the delivery of services or connecting families with services based upon their identified needs that is often done by nonprofits, local governments, and models like the Pathways Community Hub Model.<sup>xxi</sup>

Parent engagement at this level can result in improved outcomes for individual care, but often continues to lack a connection to program or policy outcomes. Utilizing data and other techniques, however, can be very instructive ways to identify and respond to family needs when families are involved and informed. For example, a call center utilized by a service or program could begin to track why families are calling and troubleshoot needed practice changes in that program. Studying family behavior can be helpful, but it fails to create an opportunity for families to cultivate their own opinions towards solving a problem they are having—it's the system that continues to determine their options even where systems are improving.

### The Pathways Model

The [Pathways](#) model utilizes a network of care coordination agencies that employ trained Community Care Coordinators (CCCs) to help at-risk patients navigate health and social services resources in local communities. CCCs identify patients who are at most risk, provide an assessment of their needs, and determine which pathways will be most suitable to them. These pathways focus on key areas of health and social services that the at-risk population may need help navigating through. The goal is to improve local health outcomes by connecting individuals with the resources they need.

Parent education is another important activity to support parents' understanding of issues, alternatives, and potential solutions even where they are being generated by the system. Parent education is often necessary so that parents can be informed and prepared to provide feedback when asked as parent participation increases across the continuum. Another important tool to support parent engagement is bringing parents together through peer-to-peer learning models. These shared learning opportunities help to create relationships and understand both the issues and potential solutions.

### Parent Cafés

One model of this activity is [Parent Cafés](#), which are physically and emotionally safe spaces where parents and caregivers talk about the challenges and victories of raising a family. Through individual deep self-reflection and peer-to-peer learning, participants explore their strengths, learn about the Protective Factors, and create strategies from their own wisdom and experiences to help strengthen their families. Cafés are structured discussions that use the principles of adult learning and family support. They are highly sustainable with training reinforcement, institutional support, and a commitment to an approach that engages and affirms parents as leaders. Participants leave Parent Cafés feeling inspired, energized, and excited to put into practice what they've learned.<sup>xxii</sup>

## Consult

**A further legitimate step along the parent participation continuum is to obtain parent feedback on analysis of the issues, alternatives, or decisions.**

The system will inform parents, listen to, and acknowledge their concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how parent feedback influenced the decision. This invitation to participate can come, for example, in the form of small- or large-scale parent surveys (i.e. community survey of families with young children, or patient satisfaction surveys unique to a particular practice). The surveys may collect simple demographic, quantitative and qualitative data or could be sophisticated instruments. Regardless, the invitation limits relationship building, and the possibility of any decision-making power being redistributed because consulting is transactional.

### The RAPID-EC Project

The early childhood field has accelerated this form of participation among families during COVID-19 including the [RAPID-EC Project](#), led by Dr. Phil Fisher of the University of Oregon and Dr. Joan Lombardi, Chair of the project's National Advisory Group. RAPID-EC has been conducting ongoing surveys with a national representative of parents and caregivers with young children about their experience during the pandemic, first weekly, then biweekly since April of 2020. This is a substantial survey tool that has provided an ongoing series of reports and briefs based on findings that inform policy and can measure the impact of policy change ongoing. State organizations in other states across the country, like Groundwork Ohio, also utilized survey efforts during the pandemic to consult with parents.<sup>xxiii</sup> Survey data, alongside other engagement efforts can inform and strengthen these efforts.

## Engage

**Engaging families requires direct work with parents to ensure that parent concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered, and, to the extent possible, are directly reflected in the alternatives developed.**

Engaging parents could take the form of more formal and detailed research, through (i.e. beyond surveys) focus groups, family or community need assessments and community-based participatory research.<sup>xxiv</sup> For example, many early childhood state agencies in Ohio have engaged in focus groups over time to assist in problem solving on targeted issues.

One of the key ways to engage family voice is to provide thoughtful and concrete ways for families to participate in policy and advocacy so that their concerns and stories are directly heard by policymakers and in the public forum where decisions are being made.

## Engage continued

**ZERO TO THREE**

[ZERO TO THREE](#) is a national nonprofit focused on ensuring that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life. They turn the science of early development into resources, tools, policies, and messaging to inform and engage parents, early childhood professionals, and policymakers. Since parents typically have the greatest impact on their children's development, ZERO TO THREE makes it part of their mission to support and engage parents in advocacy and in the policy making process. One of the core ways they do this is through the Policy Center's *Think Babies* initiative. A few examples of *Think Babies* resources and activities include:

**Strolling Thunder Events:**

ZERO TO THREE organizes a yearly *Strolling Thunder* national event on Capitol Hill, and partners in several states hold their own *Strolling Thunder* events to connect families with state policymakers. Through these events, they convene, prepare, and empower families — strollers and babies in tow — to deliver key messages that “push babies to the top of the priority list” for elected officials. Families who meet with policymakers undergo training to learn how to effectively share their experiences and advocate for issues that are important to them. This training may include effective messaging and framing to use when sharing their stories and testifying, and even process details, such as etiquette rules when addressing policymakers and security processes families will encounter in Capitol buildings. Families are also reminded that they are the experts in the room when it comes to babies, toddlers, and the needs of families. *Strolling Thunder* event staff are there to support

the families as needed, including practicing or role playing with families ahead of events.

**Think Babies Toolkit:**

This toolkit empowers parents and caregivers to “Be a Big Voice for Little Kids™.” It includes resources to share *Think Babies* messaging); strategies to spread the word in local communities (including sample letters to editors and opinion editorials, and ways to build will among local community groups); and opportunities to [engage elected officials](#) through digital advocacy, as well as townhalls, in person meetings, and site visits. ZERO TO THREE also provides space for families to [share their personal stories](#) and advocate for policies that better help families and babies thrive.

[Read about other ways  
Think Babies partners have  
elevated family & provider voices >>](#)



photo credit: Paul Joseph Brown

Other structured models for engaging parents in policy and advocacy include parent ambassador programs, community organizing,<sup>xxv</sup> community conversations, listening sessions, town halls and roundtable events.

## Collaborate

**To collaborate is to partner with parents in each aspect of the decision-making process including the development of alternatives and the identification of a preferred solution.**

The system looks to parents for advice and innovation and incorporates this feedback into the final decisions to the maximum extent possible. Collaborating is where parent participation actually begins to redistribute decision-making power.

This may take the form of parent participation on organizational advisory boards where collaborative decisions are made. In order for the participation on a board to be collaborative, however, it cannot just include handpicked voices whose opinions aren't valued equally at the table. The family voice, if included, cannot just be placated. Power must be shared and delegated to them to make decisions. Ohio early childhood stakeholders across fields have expressed concern and cautioned that where minimal efforts have been used to fill a family seat at government, non-profit and for-profit agency boards and councils, it is often the most resourced parents or those with the loudest voice who find their way to the table as opposed to multiple voices more representative of the community's experience. While concerns of tokenism exist, health care organizations have found meaningful ways to get input from patients by convening community advisory boards. [For best practices for convening an effective community advisory board click here.](#)<sup>xxvi</sup> The nonprofit community, including private philanthropy, has also utilized a [collective impact model](#)<sup>xxvii</sup> approach for community decision-making and priority setting. The collective impact approach intentionally supports community members to work together and share information when solving a complex issue. This approach allows parents to be involved as equals and hold community and agency leadership roles.

### Human-Centered Design

Another powerful collaborative approach to family participation, human-centered design, is a problem-solving approach that "empowers an individual or team to design products, services, systems and experiences that address the core needs of those who experience a problem."<sup>xxviii</sup> In Cincinnati, Ohio, [Design Impact](#) is a nonprofit social innovation firm that uses human-centered design to address pressing community issues, equip leaders, and inspire communities. Their work has included tackling social challenges as diverse as health disparity, food access, organizational culture, and access to quality early education. The Center for Health Care Strategies has identified human-centered design as a useful tool for co-developing solutions with the community that "allows us to listen to the voices of consumers, reframe problems, and collaboratively develop solutions."<sup>xxvix</sup>

## Empower

**Empowering parents places final decision-making in the hands of parents—the system will implement what the parents decide.**

There are instances where participation on a board or council can empower families. For example, in addition to using a collaborative impact model to approach all their community work, the United Way of Greater Toledo ensures that ultimate decision-making power on grants rests with a community advisory board. This board is trained and has the ultimate authority to make these financial decisions.

**Head Start Policy Councils**

Head Start programs have long been a gold standard for family engagement and uniquely empower families. Head Start [policy and regulations](#) require programs to establish a policy council that is comprised of parents of currently enrolled children. The fact that it is required and funded to remove barriers to parent participation is particularly important to its efficacy. Parents meet regularly, typically monthly, and are provided training. Select parents from local programs also get to further build their leadership through a parent ambassador program with the Ohio Head Start Association including the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C. and meet with members of Congress.

Perhaps what is most important is that parents are delegated real decision-making authority that includes programmatic decisions, financial decisions and the hiring and firing of staff. For example, the policy council at a Head Start in Southwest Ohio identified that their children had increased behavioral issues in their full-day program. The parents perceived that where parents were gone all day it had a negative impact on their child's classroom behavior. During COVID-19, when class sizes were mandated to be lowered, parents and teachers noticed that those behavioral challenges had improved, and attributed these improvements to lower class sizes.

When the program then made application to the Head Start regional office for funding, because of this ongoing discussion with their policy counsel, the Director supported and requested financial support for smaller class sizes.

Also of note was the hiring and firing of staff being a stand-out role for parents on policy council. The administrator sends recommendations to policy council for approval. If a candidate doesn't treat policy counsel with trust and respect during the interview process, this behavior may have otherwise gone unchecked by administrators until the potential employee was hired and having direct interaction with families and students.

Policy counsel members are given leadership and other specific training so that they are prepared and have the skills to influence decision-making. This includes financial and budget training. Ohio Head Start administrators interviewed by the environmental scan all had stories of how this leadership development training and the new skills that policy counsel garners over time impacts a parent's confidence, outside employment and further community leadership and service.

**“What we do as Head Start is work with families to help them see their own power, see their own strengths.”**

**“If you can keep families engaged, you get them to understand the value of their opinions and they make choices and decisions about the program that is effective for not only their children, but all children going forward.”**

## SECTION 5



# Best Practices for Engaging Families

## Implementing the Theory of Change

*In order to successfully carry out the Center for Family Voice's theory of change and ensure that families have an increasing impact on policy decisions, the most important decisions the Center makes are not necessarily what activities it chooses to support and engage family and stakeholders—there are many activities and formats to increase participation and the impact of families on decision-making—but how it does so, guided by the principles established earlier in this report. The Center for Family Voice is committed to utilizing the following best practices gleaned from Ohio and national early childhood stakeholder experience with engaging families.*

## Our 8 Best Practices Include:

# 1

Eliminate barriers to participation for families.

**“If families hit a roadblock, they don’t have time to figure it out.”**

- ✓ **Consider a family’s basic needs** for in-person participation—provide food and consider onsite child care and transportation.

**“When you’re reaching out to people, if they’re hungry, they can’t hear you. So feed them first and then their ears will open.”**

- ✓ **Utilize technology to overcome participation barriers** including transportation, geography and weather, but do so where technology can be supported and where families have access to free Wifi. (ex. In Ohio’s rural Appalachian Region families often use Facebook messenger to communicate and utilize free public Wifi libraries where they do not have broadband access). Provide technology devices, data and phone minutes to support virtual participation.
- ✓ **Choose thoughtful and convenient locations** for families to participate. Where do families already have to go (ex. child care, church, food pantry)? Ohio stakeholders identified a well-known community gathering place for Hispanic families in Cleveland and an Ikea cafeteria in Cincinnati where Indian families met regularly from the nearby elementary school as examples of places that must be identified.

**“It’s about the relationships, but it’s also knowing where they gather.”**

- ✓ **Choose a thoughtful time** for participation that allows access to the target population of families.
- ✓ **Print resources in multiple languages** and consider interpretation services both in-person and virtually that accommodate the needs of parents. Don’t assume literacy.
- ✓ **Identify local community members who can help** facilitate participation among the target population and inform what barriers exist.
- ✓ **Consider culture, food and faith.** Build participation opportunities and agendas around the culture of your target audience. For example, in the Appalachian region there is a long history of storytelling, so consider throwing out the formal agenda for open-ended discussion. Be sensitive to diet restrictions or preference and religious observances of racial and ethnic communities.
- ✓ **Consider the unique circumstances of parents and families with young children.** The very reasons that families are such critical informants of systems change, may be the most significant barrier. In seeking to elevate the work of families, specifically with young children, it’s important to consider that regardless of income or other social and environmental factors, there are a number of reasons that engaging parents of young children is difficult compared to parents of older children and other family communities.
- ✓ **Be flexible.** Planning for and eliminating barriers is important, but it’s not always transactional.
- ✓ **Keep it positive and build confidence** among family participants. Make families feel valued as contributors and decisionmakers by building upon their strengths.

## 2 Compensate parents for their time and expertise.

- ✓ **Provide stipends** or other forms of compensation such as gift and grocery cards to families to recognize their time, energy and ideas contributed.
- ✓ **Be conscious of the financial impact** on public benefits and tax reporting requirements when structuring stipends.
- ✓ **Reimburse families for actual costs accrued** to participate including transportation, meals and child care.
- ✓ **Consider access or exposure to an experience** they otherwise wouldn't have to compensate or incentivize family participation. (e.g. trip to the zoo or museum with their children, or access to professional development like empowerment workshops.)

## 3 Communicate intentionally with families.

- ✓ **Explore and utilize all formats** of digital and print communication with families including social media.
- ✓ **Communicate often**, especially with thoughtful reminders where families have committed to participate in activities.
- ✓ **Engage in message testing**, even for one-way communication, with Ohio families including unique target audiences among families based on race, age, geography and other social factors. [See Frameworks Institute resources](#) on how to talk about family engagement.
- ✓ **Don't use jargon** and use language that removes any perceived anxiety or barrier to participation.
- ✓ **Utilize electronic and virtual communication** to support participation. Electronic communication can be highly effective.<sup>xxx</sup>
- ✓ **Always follow-up before and after.** When supporting family participation, this communicates clear expectations, processes and protocols for participation activity.
- ✓ **Always report back to family participants** the impact of their participation—what was learned and how it will be used.
- ✓ **Express gratitude constantly** for what families give when they can.

**“It's not just about incentives like food or a gift card, but the pride they have for the time they spend with their child or contributing to these things, is also of value to families.”**

## 4

Ensure there are established connections and robust support for family participation activities.

- ✓ **Work with community partners** who have trusted relationships where possible.
- ✓ **Use data (including disaggregated data by race and ethnicity) to inform your work**, especially when you are targeting a unique population.
- ✓ **Seek to create a more equal power differential** in decision-making process to support the co-creation of solutions by bringing together families and community and systems leaders.

**“It’s not that an agency head or others don’t have perspective—they have perspective and power, what needs to be added is those who have perspective and no power at the table.”**

### Building Relationships

[The Center for Health Progress \(CHP\)](#), a non-profit advocacy organization based in Colorado, focuses on driving policy change, building community partnerships and community organizing to improve access to quality health care, and effect lasting change in the health serving systems for Coloradans. CHP works with a broad range of stakeholders, including policy makers, health systems, providers, community-based organizations, and consumers, to advocate for innovations and programs that improve health and advance equity. Policy priorities include: improving access to health insurance and affordability; improving immigrant rights and health; and addressing health-related social needs, such as housing, non-emergency medical transportation, and food insecurity. Community partnership efforts seek to build capacity to drive community-led initiatives to improve health and well-being. CHP provides technical assistance in coalition building, facilitation, and community change. In partnership with communities, CHP centers on increasing collaboration and shared learning between and across communities; increasing the visibility of local

health care work across the state; and elevating the collective voice of those with lived experience to improve the health of Coloradans. Community organizing initiatives bring community members together to advance a health justice agenda.

Imbued throughout their efforts is the recognition that transformational work requires long-term relationship building. Through all CHP’s programs, staff are committed to building trust with community members through a collective action approach to policy agenda setting and mobilizing efforts, and maintaining transparency around objectives, outcomes, and next steps. While consumers are often “voices at the table” in many advocacy and mobilizing campaigns, without the investment in relationship-building with community leaders and members these efforts are often transactional. Recognizing this, CHP, works to build relationships with a base of core community leaders, who in turn build relationships with community members. In addition, CHP invests in developing core leaders’ capacity and organizing skills to build an infrastructure that pushes for change at the local and state levels.

4. *continued***Using Collective Ingenuity to Ensure a Successful Start**

[Vital Village](#) Networks, based at Boston Medical Center, is focused on building community capacity to ensure health, well-being, and educational equity for children through collaboration, research, data-sharing, leadership development, and advocacy. Since 2010, Vital Village has fostered partnerships between residents and organizations to improve the capacity of neighborhoods to promote child well-being and prevent early life adversities. These “hubs of innovation,” or community networks, support partnerships between service providers across sectors and community residents that align and enhance their child-focused work. Vital Village promotes community-driven strategies that build on existing efforts and community-based resources, and encourages collaboration among educators, clinicians, social service providers, legal advocates, and residents to strengthen prenatal, early childhood education, and economic security of families and communities. With the understanding that authentic partnership with families is critical to the success of any initiative, Vital Village works to build stronger connections between community residents and agencies to co-design and improve community systems.

Vital Village uses a distributed leadership model, which is a collaborative approach to exploration, priority setting, shared governance, and decision making. Recognizing that “everyone at the table

has wisdom but is also a learner,” Vital Village works to facilitate a process that acknowledges this dual role of participants. While there might be profound differences in worldview and approaches, this doesn’t preclude community networks coming together to learn from one another and work together. The network uses a peer-to-peer advocacy and service-learning and leadership model both within and across each neighborhood hub and facilitates opportunities for community residents to cultivate their leadership skills. Trainings offered by Vital Village include the [Social Justice Mediation Program](#), and the [Certificate in Community Advocacy and Leadership](#) from Urban College in Boston to help community members develop leadership and advocacy skills so that they can organize, mobilize, and advocate for families and children.

With an eye towards advancing equity, Vital Village also supports the [Networks of Opportunity for Child Wellbeing \(NOW\)](#), a national initiative to improve the capacity of local communities and coalitions to advance equity using a trauma-informed lens. The NOW Innovation Forum curates resources, stories, discussions, and other interactive tools in a central hub to promote shared learning and networking among communities across the country that are working to ensure that all children and their families achieve optimal health and well-being.

## 5

**Invest in people first.**

- ✓ **Ensure a representation of the diversity in the community** when engaging families.
- ✓ **Expand families' connections and make them feel supported**, in order for them to have the capacity to engage.

**A Supportive Community**

[Queens Village](#) is a supportive community of powerful Black women who come together to relax, repower and take care of themselves and each other. It is an initiative of Cradle Cincinnati, a collective impact organization that fights high rates of infant mortality that disproportionately affect Black women in Cincinnati and beyond. The initiative centers Black women’s voices on changing not just racial disparities

in birth outcomes but also the conditions that drive inequity in maternal and infant health. They provide a safe space for Black mothers to support and be supported by their peers, to connect, to relieve stress, to process trauma and to build a better world together for themselves and their children. Because of their success in Ohio, they will be expanding to additional communities across the state and three additional cities across the nation.

5. *continued*

- ✓ **Don't underestimate the power of social interaction** and relationships between family participants as an outcome of engagement activity—even where you can't solve every social problem.
- ✓ **Provide parents with targeted learning opportunities** and leadership training so they have the tools and information they need to make contributions. [See the \*New York Parent Equity Fellowship\* >>](#).

### Providing Family Assistance & Training Programs

[Family Voices](#) is a national family-led organization of parents and caretakers of children and youth with special health care needs (CYSHCN). Family Voices fosters partnerships between families and health care stakeholders by helping families become equal partners in all decision-making related to their child's care. Many families in the network have first-hand experience with complex systems of care, including issues like care fragmentation, and are deeply aware of systems-level issues. Families can engage at the individual or family leader level. For those that want to be more deeply engaged as family leaders, Family Voices trains, connects, and informs them to become self-advocates and agents of change as they push for improved health care services and policies. Across states, Family Voices supports a national network of family information centers and a wide variety of leadership programs and trainings, including the following:

**Family assistance and training programs:** Family Voices oversees [Leadership in Family and Professional Partnerships \(LFPP\)](#), a national resource to support and engage families of CYSHCN at all levels of health care, from direct patient care to advocacy. LFPP provides training and technical assistance for [Family to Family \(F2F\) information centers](#), which are in every state. These centers are staffed by family members with lived experience that allows them to support other families in similar situations, including

struggling to navigate complex health care systems. LFPP also provides [technical assistance and trainings](#) through annual conferences for stakeholders, family engagement webinars for state agency leaders, and train-the-trainer workshops for developing family leadership skills. Parents engaged in Family Voices advocacy and training activities can advance along the leadership continuum to get involved in policy systems design, receiving mentorship from family peers along the way. Family Voices also supports [Collaborative Action Teams](#), which bring together diverse state-level stakeholders, including from public school and public health systems, to rally around systems change for CYSHCN.

**[Family engagement assessment in systems change:](#)** Family Voices provides trainings on validated assessment tools to measure authentic family engagement. They use four domains to promote meaningful and sustainable family engagement at the systems level: 1) Representation that reflects the diversity of the community, and partnerships with family-led and community-based organizations; 2) Transparency that provides information needed to fully participate all parts of the process; 3) Impact that measures what has changed at the organizational and systems levels due to the involvement of families; and 4) Commitment that focuses on family engagement as a core value and promotes engagement at all levels and in all systems of care.

- ✓ **Ensure adequate professional development** for staff and leaders working to engage with families including implicit bias training and trauma-informed training.
- ✓ **Educate policymakers and system leaders** about the value of family engagement so that they seek family voice in their decision-making processes.

**“It's partly a matter of gaining trust in the relationship. We work a lot with our staff on doing motivational interviewing and how to establish trust with families—because obviously, they're not going to share what's going on in their home unless they trust you.”**

## 6

## Exercise humility.

- ✓ **Don't make any assumptions.**
- ✓ **Don't underestimate families** who are able to own the solutions that are proposed.

**Attendance Example**

There was a housing community in Southwest Ohio across the street from an elementary school. *80 students living in this community were absent, tardy or truant from the school located directly across the street!*

School leaders engaged families in the community. The families identified that they wanted their kids to be at school, and felt badly that they were not.

Together, they came up with a plan—which was to create a simple phone chain. A parent in the furthest part of the community initiated the phone chain and a walking carpool.

*The school went from 80 kids not going to school to 76 kids being ON TIME every day.*

- ✓ **Commit to decision-making looking different** and let go of presupposed outcomes.
- ✓ **Support professionals to be receptive** to family input even if it goes against what they are accustomed to hearing or understanding.
- ✓ **Demonstrate the effect of family participation** to all stakeholders including how it has informed or changed decisions.
- ✓ **Don't twist the truth** or exploit family stories to meet the needs of your agenda. Ensure that families have the final say in whether their personal stories get disseminated.

## 7

## Sustain the rigor of effective family engagement.

- ✓ **No “one and done.”** There must be an infrastructure built to have ongoing relationships with families.
- ✓ **Advocate for resources to properly fund these activities.** Family engagement activities must be well-resourced through public and private investment. This includes making sure that it is in someone’s job description to connect with, and engage, families, for example.
- ✓ **Work to embed family engagement** into practices that people and programs already have.
- ✓ **Work to require family engagement for programs** through evidence-based models or protocols, or better yet, hold programs accountable to it through statutory or administrative law. For example, there is a rich history in the disability community of family engagement in policy development. This is because it is required by and embedded in federal and state policy.
- ✓ **Hold state government accountable** to policy changes informed by families by supporting state sponsored engagement models and leadership opportunities.

### Illinois Example

Illinois recently established a Family Advisory committee (FAC) as part of their Early Learning Council (ELC) to systemically incorporate parent voice into the state early childhood systems. The state plans to provide ongoing professional development to all FAC members that includes an overview of Illinois’ early childhood systems and trainings on leadership, advocacy, and meeting facilitation. In addition to preparing the FAC parent leaders to work within the ELC, the ELC committee co-chairs are actively working toward making adjustments that encourage intentional sustained parent engagement within the various committees of the Council.<sup>xxxii</sup>

### Michigan Example

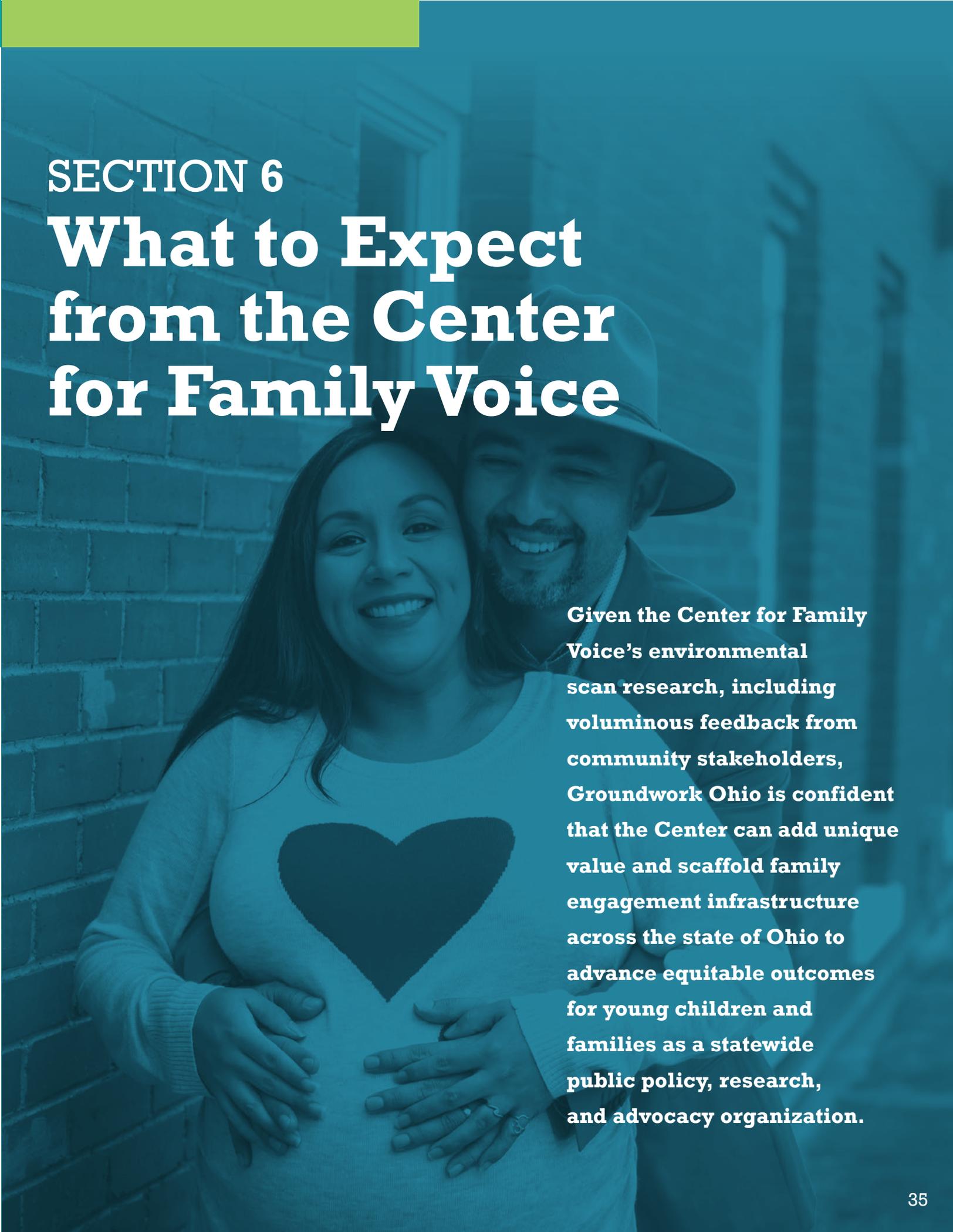
Through Michigan’s state office of Great Start, Michigan’s 54 Great Start Collaboratives have built a unique approach to hearing family voices through Michigan’s 40 Great Start Parent Coalitions. These state-supported coalitions are a formal mechanism for getting a customer perspective that can lead to better outcomes for children. Parent Coalition members also gain knowledge that helps them educate their communities about the importance of early childhood and provide information, education, and resources to other parents raising young children.<sup>xxxii</sup>

**“ Ask the question of state leaders, ‘what are you doing with regard to family involvement’...encourage everybody in state government to be paying attention to it.”**

## 8

**Measure what matters and demonstrate impact.**

- ✓ **Use family engagement assessment tools** to determine if efforts are effective up against goals for family engagement. Utilize the [Family Engagement in Systems Tool \(FESAT\)](#) developed by Family Voices as a starting point.
- ✓ **Develop and collect quantitative and qualitative process and outcome metrics** to measure effectiveness for each aspect of family participation using a variety of tools before, during and after participation activity.
- ✓ **Develop community analytics** for family engagement projects to measure impact.
- ✓ **Track changes to policy.**
- ✓ **Benchmark success** up against public health and education outcomes measures for young children and families.
- ✓ **Circle back and provide families information or results** on any data collected for which they were a part.



## SECTION 6

# What to Expect from the Center for Family Voice

**Given the Center for Family Voice's environmental scan research, including voluminous feedback from community stakeholders, Groundwork Ohio is confident that the Center can add unique value and scaffold family engagement infrastructure across the state of Ohio to advance equitable outcomes for young children and families as a statewide public policy, research, and advocacy organization.**

## Equitable Outcomes

The Center will be thoughtful not to duplicate work that may already be occurring in Ohio at the local and state levels when identifying opportunities to provide this unique capacity and to translate and elevate family voice for the purpose of influencing statewide policy and advocacy—the Center will transmit family voice, not just create more noise. It will do so through the implementation of core capacities and commitments utilizing best practices shared in this report.

### Core Capacities of the Center’s Input:



**Advocate for recognition, resources & accountability measures that embed & support family engagement infrastructure in state policy.**

1

Family voice and engagement must be embedded into state public policy and public and private investments to ensure that family voice is included at all tables where decisions are being made about their lives and the lives of their children. The Center will bring systems-level expertise and advocacy when evaluating how existing and new policy and investment can include and support family voices in policy development by generating opportunities and contributing to the shifting of culture of state policymaking.

**Invest in strategic projects that strengthen local partnerships between stakeholders and families.**

2

The Center will bring resources and expertise to select public and private partners to evaluate and center family voice with the objective of improving policies and programs. These projects will foster collaborative problem solving that are accountable to improved outcomes for young children and families. These projects will contemplate direct or real-time impact to families and support legacy assets that cultivate long-term partnerships between families, local partners and Groundwork Ohio beyond the scope of any one project. The Center will focus on those projects that seek to improve outcomes and eliminate disparities by centering family voice and engaging multidisciplinary teams committed to sharing learnings that can inform state policy.

**Groundwork Ohio has already begun to demonstrate and act upon strategic projects to inform the Center’s ongoing work and opportunities. For example:**

1. Groundwork Ohio is supporting the Eliminating Racial Disparities in Infant Mortality Task Force plan to engage in a focused, multidisciplinary, collaborative approach to health improvement. Groundwork Ohio supported the coordination of internal and external stakeholders that serve families disproportionately affected by poor birth outcomes. Through local host organizations, Groundwork Ohio supported the Ohio Department of Health in identifying Black families to share experiences and contribute to the design of the Eliminating Disparities in Infant Mortality Task Force recommendations. Thirty local listening sessions were recently conducted in alignment with equitable best practices of family engagement that honored their time and contributions.
2. Groundwork Ohio recently provided a grant to Learn to Earn Dayton, a nonprofit that works closely with

non-profit providers, educational institutions and business and community organizations to support Montgomery County young people in their educational journey from birth to college and career. Learn to Earn has a special interest in supporting families with children from 0-3 years old—the period when children’s brains are developing most rapidly. They are committed to engaging parent voice and connecting this critical local work to statewide policy and advocacy. Groundwork is supporting three components of their Parent Voices Work Plan including:

- *Establishing a strong and vibrant Parent & Family Voices Committee*
- *Publishing a parent and families recommendations report and videos*
- *Hosting a Parent and Families Voices Summit*

**Develop and support a statewide family action network.**

3

Work with local partners to create and disseminate information and materials, utilizing effective messaging for families, that provide accessible opportunities for them to inform policy development and engage in advocacy opportunities. The Center will translate Groundwork’s strong communication leadership in state policy and advocacy to families directly and through local partners and messengers so that family voice is regularly connected to policymakers and influencers.

Build and sustain a Family Leadership Fellowship.

4

Build upon local leadership capacity and create a pipeline of representative families to engage more deeply in state policy development and advocacy. Groundwork Ohio will bring its experience in leading two cohorts of early childhood professionals through its Early Childhood Leadership Fellowship to develop and administer specialized curriculum to a new cohort of family members seeking to build leadership and advocacy skills each year. The Center will draw upon existing local family leadership efforts and relationships with early childhood professionals to recruit family participants and seek to remove barriers to their participation. This new Fellowship contemplates engagement of alumni networks of family participants as yearly cohorts complete the program that create a leadership pipeline for state agencies and advisory groups and become integrated more deeply in the Center’s and Groundwork’s ongoing work.

Foster the use of best practices, identify ongoing learning opportunities and provide a constant feedback loop for Center partners.

5

The Center will be a resource to and support the professional development of local and state partners who want to engage more deeply with families. The environmental scan revealed that so many partners are trying to do so with limited capacity and knowledge. The Center will identify short and long-term tactics to support this learning including peer learning communities and other collaborative communication efforts.

“ **Where is the standard and how can I start? It will be nice for us to have standards that’s not a one size fits all...but something other programs can take and say, ‘this is where we can start.’”**

Develop meaningful process and outcome metrics to measure impact and benchmark success for Center activities.

6

Process evaluation of activity and initiatives of the Center will inform strategies and expectations for its work in consideration of its theory of change. The Center will seek to measure short-, mid- and long-term outcomes among all its activity using quantitative and qualitative methods. The Center will commit to using and informing a Groundwork Ohio early childhood data dashboard that monitors key health and education access and outcome metrics for young children and families to identify opportunities and gaps.

Employ leadership and staff at Groundwork Ohio that reflect a diverse set of skills and experiences to successfully implement the Center for Family Voice and deploy equitable principles.

7

The internal governance of the Center must align with external visions for the Center’s work. Groundwork Ohio will further strive to embed equitable principles, the Center’s work and learnings and unique family relationships across the Groundwork enterprise including staff, leadership and advisory structures.

“ **We all bring different representation, but you have to be mindful about diversity in leadership”**

Secure sustainable funding that provides consistency and flexibility.

8

The Center and Groundwork Ohio must constantly seek sustained and diverse funding to implement all the Center’s work long-term, which requires dedicated financial resources.

## SECTION 7

# Plugging In



**We have heard you loud and clear—there is a need for the Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio. We look forward to implementing the critical work of the Center and learning over the coming months and years alongside you.**

“ If we can listen and genuinely engage, there’s an army out there to be motivated. ”

“ [Groundwork’s development of the Center for Family Voice] has always needed to be done but no one’s ever done it...we’ve needed something like this for a long time but it’s just, actually having someone working on it and not trying to piece it together...but actually give it the time and dedication it needs to make something happen for the people here...I’m all for it.”

“ We want to integrate community voice into all of our work in a very consistent way. I think it’s been haphazard. But especially as we do more and more work in the community, we need better ways and better strategies and consistent ways to engage with family voice in a meaningful way. That can impact how we better engage in the community-on-community health issues.”

“ I’d like to see [parent engagement] at the policy level and then it will trickle down as opposed as opposed to trying to trickle up and bottle-necking [before it reaches the policy level].”

“ Since advocacy isn’t the only thing that we do, [family engagement in policy and advocacy] hasn’t been an area where we could really delve in and devote that much time to.”

“ Overall, I don’t think our systems necessarily know how to engage families with their voice very well, and so it doesn’t happen as often as it needs.”

“ [At the state level] there has not been anybody who have been successful in elevating the family voice when it comes to [infant and maternal health].”

“ We are making efforts to engage in partnership, but we have a long way to go. It’s not easy to find systemic ways to make it sustainable, systemic, and deep. That’s the challenge.”

“ Centering family voices is absolutely necessary [but] we don’t have access to parents the way somebody that’s working directly with families does. I think policymakers care a lot about that.”

“ The next step is ‘how do you connect [local parent lead work] to the policymakers, researchers and clinicians so that we all learn from each other... I think there are a lot of opportunities and legislators would benefit from hearing directly from the families.’”

“ We agree that centering family voices is important, but I would also say that we’ve not prioritized it, nor do we have formal investments to elevate family voices. I would say it’s something we need to work on and we’d be excited about engaging.”

## In Conclusion:

*Groundwork Ohio is hopeful that in reviewing this report, you see yourself, your work and your organization’s mission echoed in the values, the objectives and the activities of the Center. Please know if you do, that you have a seat at our table as a partner in the work of the Center for Family Voice. The work will only be as strong and connected as the diverse network of relationships it supports across the state. Accordingly, please accept this report as an open invitation to “plug in.” We invite your feedback on this report and expect that you will keep us accountable to our commitments as we turn up the volume on family voice. Please contact the Groundwork Ohio team with questions, comments, and feedback. We want to get to know you and your story.*

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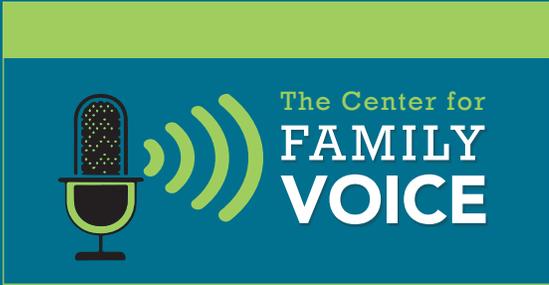


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*Amplifying Family Voice to  
Advance Equitable Outcomes  
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