



# STEPPING UP AND SPEAKING OUT:

THE EVOLUTION OF PARENT LEADERSHIP IN MICHIGAN

*Deborah Roderick Stark*

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*I was working in the business world when my daughter was born with serious health challenges. I knew there was no way a business could be successful if it was treating its customers the way our family was being treated by the health system. I spoke up then and was able to raise awareness that led to changes. For example, visiting hours at the hospital were at a time that simply did not work for our family. Thirty years later, I'm still speaking out. Now I am encouraging new tables to expand their perceptions of authentic parent voice and welcome parent leaders. I also oversee the facilitation and coaching of parent leadership communities of practice that are making a difference every day at the local and state level.”*

Bryn Fortune, *Director of Family and Parent Leadership, Early Childhood Investment Corporation*



# INTRODUCTION

For more than three decades, parents in Michigan have been building a movement to lift up the voices of families and empower parents to have a seat at the tables where decisions are made.

Their efforts prove that when parents are supported in becoming leaders and agents of change, the benefits are clear:

- **Families are stronger.**
- **Children, families and programs have better outcomes.**
- **Systems are more effective because parents help shape decisions that are equitable, culturally competent and customer-centric.**

Achieving this requires a lot of hard work. It starts with a *shift in the mindset of traditional decision-makers*, it involves *changes in how agencies engage families*, and it requires *true investments in parents* so those who choose to can advance along a continuum from parent involvement and engagement to empowerment and active leadership.

This report is a tribute to the strength and determination of parents throughout Michigan who made that journey from involvement to leadership and are now using their voice and power to support others. Parents such as:

- **Colleen Klus-Salisbury**, who helped organize a tenant board to demand safe housing.
- **Anthony Queen**, who helped community and state-funded programs understand how to be more welcoming to fathers.
- **Sarah Zybert**, who helped families lobby for a bus stop in front of the children's hospital.
- **Meredith Kennedy**, who helped shape an early childhood agenda for the state.

- **Barb Schinderle**, who supports parent members of the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council.
- **Nancy Peeler**, who included funding for parents to be partners in the state's federal home visiting work.

*These parents and so many others in Michigan are stepping up and speaking out.*

Those working most 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. But the successes thus far are real. From personal growth of parents to changes at the community and state level, stories point to meaningful advances that benefit children, families and communities.



## NIVEAN FARHA

Nivean Farha understands what it's like to leave everything behind and come to a new country. Her sister-in-law did just this. With that perspective, Farha assumed leadership roles for the Head Start Policy Council, Great Start Readiness Program and attended a parent training with Community Organizing and Family Issues. She became a trusted adviser, educating mothers and connecting them to services. Farha was concerned refugee families in Michigan's Washtenaw County were not enrolling their children in school, and many were not connecting with services in the community. They were isolating themselves, not opening their doors. Hired by Success by Six, Farha began hosting parent cafes for Arabic-speaking mothers. Now she organizes three to four cafes a week, depending on the availability of resources and space. She provides snacks, drinks and sometimes lunch. Mothers come and eagerly return. They are organizing local play groups, enrolling their children in school and accessing other community services.

***'Stepping Up and Speaking Out'* is about the unspoken ingredients not already covered in the literature or taught in colleges.**

It draws on the learnings from parents, providers and administrators in Michigan. It emphasizes that equitable practice and values are central to family empowerment and leadership. Hopefully, it will offer a sense of how to move beyond the rhetoric of family engagement to action.

## 'PARENT' AND 'FAMILY': WHAT DO WE MEAN?

We refer to parents and families interchangeably throughout this guide. The use of "parent" and "family" refers to all adults who have a primary role caring for a child. This would include biological, adoptive, foster and stepparents, grandparents and other caregiving kin, and legal and informal guardians. It could also include parents who do not live with the child and are still involved in raising the child and thus have important perspectives as a parent.





## HISTORY OF PARENT LEADERSHIP IN MICHIGAN

With advocates outside of state government and a few necessary champions on the inside, there has been heightened awareness of the need to incorporate parent voice and leadership in early childhood policies and programs. This began in earnest in the late 1980s with the implementation of the Children's Special Health Care Services (Title V) and Early On, Michigan's Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

It continues today, embedded across systems at the state and local level. Parent leadership and voice have been an integral part of the state's implementation of the federal Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV). Included in the Michigan Home Visiting competitive grant was a commitment to investing in the development of parent voice as a core component of MIECHV and related systems building. That investment takes the form of support for parent leadership training, the formation of Local Leadership Groups (LLG) that connect with local Great Start Collaboratives/Parent Coalitions, a state-level Community of Practice for parent leaders participating in LLGs, and policies and procedures for full financial supports provided for parents' participation. In 2019, contracts for each MIECHV local implementing agency (LIA) specifically required parent partners in continuous quality improvement efforts.

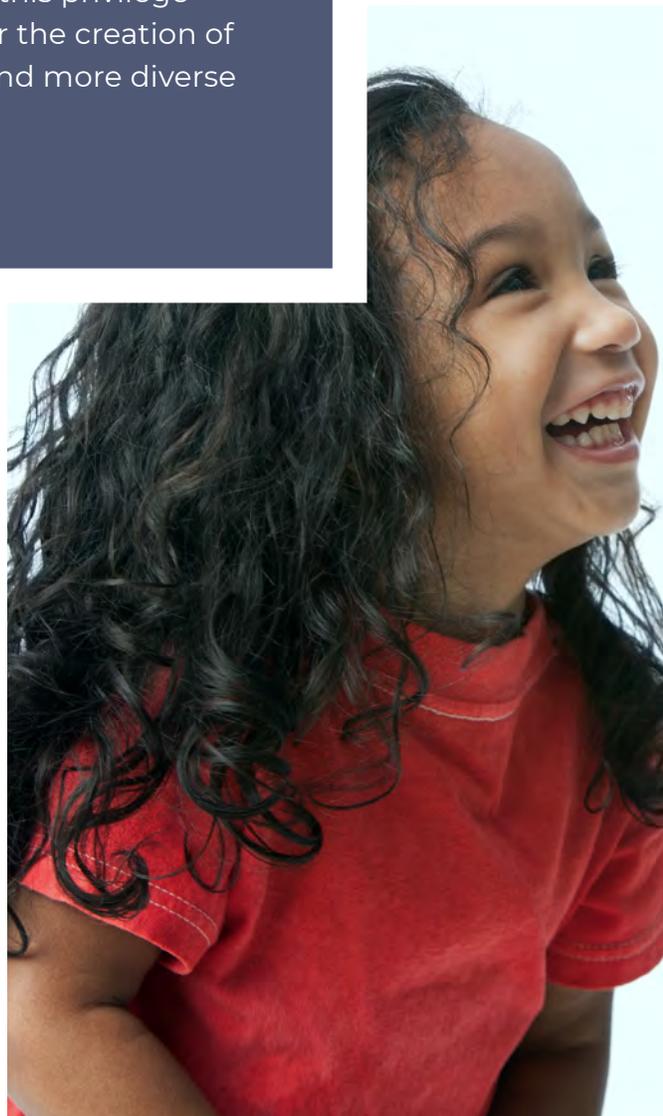
## HISTORY OF PARENT LEADERSHIP IN MICHIGAN (cont.)

This ongoing investment in parent voice and leadership development is made possible by the collaboration of Michigan's departments of Education and Health and Human Services. Together, these departments committed resources to support the Parent Leadership in State Government (PLISG) group and its Parents Partnering for Change leadership curriculum. Creating PLISG with multiple funding streams was intentional to avoid dependence on any one funding source.

The history of parent leadership in Michigan would not be complete without acknowledgment of the role that race, place and privilege played in the initial opportunities for parents to be at the table, lending their voices to inform early childhood policies and programs. Early efforts to include parents involved families who had the economic privilege to volunteer and could assume the cost of participation. However, it became clear to these parents that other families who didn't have this privilege were being excluded. This recognition was the impetus for the creation of financial support policies that ensured equitable access and more diverse parent voices at decision-making tables.

### Michigan's journey to build an infrastructure that supports parent voice and leadership was not linear.

There were starts and stops, such as the time a parent leadership training program, a precursor to PLISG, was not renewed for funding. There were challenges and successes, such as when a group of parents first presented a plenary at the statewide home visiting conference and the practice-based audience was so moved that parent workshops are now a regular part of the annual conference. Throughout, there has been an unwavering commitment of parents to not let up, to show up and to press on no matter what.





## A SHIFT IN MINDSET

**Engaging parents as equal partners in co-creation and decision-making demands a different mindset — one not taught in higher education programs for human service professionals.**

It requires us to move *from our head* — where we are focused on outcomes defined by funders and a rigid set of practices outlined in regulations or evidence-based programs — *to our heart* — where we listen to what parents say they need and want, and we engage them as equals in designing the programs and policies that are important to their families.

To shift from head to heart, we need to commit to:

- **Embodying the values of empowerment, equity, trust, vulnerability and humility.**
- **Supporting parent leadership as a step beyond involvement, engagement and empowerment so parents have the skills to become leaders and agents of change in their communities.**
- **Creating opportunities and sharing power with families, taking to heart the saying, *“Nothing about me without me.”***
- **Sustaining and expanding parent leadership throughout the system so it becomes deeply rooted in all policies and practices.**

**Empowerment:** This starts from within. As parents develop a sense of self-efficacy and recognize the power they have over their own lives, they develop an ability to influence others and channel that power into becoming agents of change within their community.

**Equity:** Each family and child has a different set of circumstances that impact their experiences, needs and wants. With equity, we commit to meeting each family where they are, giving everyone what they need so they can reach their fullest potential. Their diversity becomes an asset, and all families have a fair opportunity to succeed.

**Trust:** For people to be vulnerable and engage in authentic relationships, there must be trust. That trust needs to go both ways.

**Vulnerability:** Being vulnerable requires courage to show your true colors, speak your truth, ask for help and trust those around you.

**Humility.** Humility calls for a balanced and deliberate give and take where all are teachers and all are learners. We need to understand how the system can best support each family so they feel empowered and have the information, knowledge and skills to thrive.



# ESSENTIAL STEPS TO INVEST IN PARENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP



Through trial, error and a whole lot of persistence, leaders in Michigan found ways to support authentic parent voice and leadership in service of a more equitable system that ensures children and families reach their full potential. In time, they realized that the work aligned with the implementation science framework. That framework is regularly used to support growth and uncovered several steps that are essential for parent leadership to flourish. These steps are Michigan's secret sauce: (1) support parents so they can fully participate as leaders and agents of change; (2) find and support champions who can build the foundation for parent leadership through policies, contracts and grants; and (3) help tables understand how they can engage families in leadership roles.

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*We grew up in a culture where we didn't advocate — it's a big shift for these mothers to realize that they will not get in trouble and not penalize their child if they tell a teacher, 'I don't like how you are working with my child.' They have more courage to talk about issues and advocate for their children and family.”*

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Nivean Farha, Parent Leader,  
Washtenaw County

## 1. Support parents so they can fully participate as leaders and agents of change.

For many, the concepts of parent involvement, engagement, empowerment and leadership are muddled. What are the nuances, and what needs to happen to support parents in moving along a continuum from involvement and engagement to empowerment and leadership?

# PARENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP CONTINUUM

Building strong family leadership is an intentional parallel process of capacity building and application. Leadership — exercised both at the individual and systems level — grows in complexity and impact as you move across the continuum.

## 1. Involvement

Involvement is a process that recruits parent participation in activities and groups. The contributions by families are often directed and defined. Parents are associated with but not invested in the goals, purpose or growth of the group or organization. They are developing capacity by building relationships, creating connections and gaining awareness.

## 2. Engagement

Engagement is a process focused on using parent voice and experience to inform decisions about services and systems. Parents are invested in the goals, purpose or growth of the group or organization and use the capacity developed during involvement to actively engage.

## 3. Empowerment

Empowerment is an active and ongoing process focused on self-acceptance and trust in one’s ability and capacity for growth and impact. Capacity is further developed through coaching, mentoring, peer-to-peer networks, and skill development based on the individual’s goals.

## 4. Leadership

Leadership is when parent voice and representation are expected and integral components with reciprocal response between families and services or systems that result in collective impact. Parents use their experience, skills and strengths to effect change and use the capacity developed during empowerment to actively lead.

### MICHIGAN’S PARENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP CONTINUUM

*How Parent Leaders Become Change Agents to Impact Decisions*

INVOLVEMENT	ENGAGEMENT	EMPOWERMENT	LEADERSHIP
Parents are enrolled and participate	Parent voice informs	Parent partners collaborate in planning and implementation	Parent leaders are integral decision-makers
The system designs all policies, programs and evaluation tools for parent participants	The system learns from parent voice through surveys, focus groups and interviews	The system changes approach with parent partners	The system designs policies, programs and evaluation tools with parent leaders



One nuance is the need to not only invite parents to the table, but also provide opportunities to build skills and capacity that support their participation. Without this, it's like trying to bake cookies without the sugar — capacity building and supports are needed to make parent engagement meaningful.

This is where Michigan has unique experience. Parents and agency leaders have been working for nearly three decades to understand this very aspect of parent participation. That experience has uncovered six things that need to occur:

- **Establish policies and practices to pay parents for their time and expertise.**
- **Offer parent leadership training programs to large numbers of parents.**
- **Provide coaching for parents so they have support as they develop and exercise their leadership.**
- **Provide opportunities for parents to practice their leadership skills.**
- **Facilitate peer-to-peer networks to offer ongoing learning and skill-building opportunities using an empowerment process.**
- **Hire parents in key roles where their lived experience can inform decisions and support the development of other parent leaders.**

These components support an ongoing focus on equity. They acknowledge parent experience and expertise deserves the same investment the system provides to professionals. Parents often say the opportunities for learning, skill development and practice are critical for helping their family move from surviving to thriving.

***More on each of these follows.***

### **Establish policies and practices to pay parents for their time and expertise.**

Professionals sitting at the table are paid for their time, and it's only right to pay parents for their time and expertise too. After all, parents often must take unpaid time away from their jobs to attend meetings or engage in committee work.

## HOW TO PAY PARENTS FOR THEIR TIME

### Codify pay practices in policy

Informed by the policies and practices of the original Parent Leadership Program, the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council (MICC) developed a set of procedures and guidelines for supporting parent participation including paying for time and reimbursing for mileage and child care. These procedures and guidelines have been adopted by other partners in the early childhood system at the state and local levels.

### The guidelines:

- **Set a rate for honorarium.** For example, the 2019 guidelines established an honorarium reimbursement for governor-appointed parent representatives and their parent alternate for attending MICC meetings, MICC subcommittee meetings and, with prior approval by Michigan Department of Education (MDE), other MICC-related business or activities. The rate is \$18 per hour, with total time calculated based upon time spent preparing, attending and traveling to and from the meeting. Parents need to be aware that the honorarium represents earned income, and it will need to be reported.
- **Set a rate for travel/travel-related expenses.** For example, expenses will be reimbursed at approved state rates (mileage, hotel, meals) or for actual costs (tolls, parking, other transportation, registration for special meetings/events).
- **Provide travel advances if needed:** Parents participating in out-of-town activities may request from MDE an advance not to exceed \$200. After the event, parents must complete a Request for Parent Support Funds form to document the actual expenses and attach all receipts.
- **Set a rate for child care reimbursement:** Actual expenses up to a maximum of \$60 per day will be reimbursed by MDE. If expenses will exceed \$60 per day, parents are to request prior approval. Parents must provide the child care provider's social security number, address and signature.

## HOW TO PAY PARENTS FOR THEIR TIME (cont.)

### Build in flexibility

While it is important to have a policy on the rate that will be paid, there also needs to be flexibility. The MICC financial support procedures and guidelines speaks to this in terms of respecting family diversity. The document states, *“When compensating or reimbursing parents for their participation, diversity in needs should be recognized and responded to in an individualized and creative manner.”*

### Be transparent with families

It is important to recognize that not everybody has the privilege of financial stability. Let families know how long it will take to process their reimbursement. Be sure to communicate any anticipated delay.

### Just say no to gift cards

While gift cards are a solution that is easier for the system, there are several issues that make them the wrong option, both for families and for program accountability.

- **Respect:** Parents bring their expertise to the table and do the same work as the rest of the group. A gift card for parents may suggest that their contributions are valued differently than the “professionals” at the same table.
- **Inequity:** Paying parents with gift cards limits where and how they can use the funds earned. This again highlights inequity between parents and other participants.
- **Taxable income vs. reimbursement:** As with the honorarium for their time, a gift card is considered “earned income” and must be reported. If the whole amount is on a gift card (e.g., time, transportation, child care), the total amount may be viewed as taxable. Programs need to be careful to avoid doing anything that will negatively impact parents’ ability to continue to access public assistance.
- **Accountability:** Some funders prohibit the use of gift cards.

## Offer parent leadership training programs to large numbers of parents.

Parent leadership training helps to build the muscle parents need to be a leader and agent of change. Six state agencies in Michigan joined forces to fund Parent Leadership in State Government (PLISG), which includes the Parents Partnering for Change leadership curriculum. Each year since 2006, approximately 100 families participate in this two-day training. Together, parents learn how to get involved in advisory boards or on committees and how to be effective.

Training topics include:

- **Telling your family's story as a way to uncover natural leadership traits.**
- **Understanding your WHY, or your motivation, for participating.**
- **What it means to be a parent leader.**
- **Improving communication skills.**
- **How boards work.**
- **Effective meetings.**
- **Handling conflict.**

## Provide coaching for parents so they have support as they develop capacity and exercise their leadership.

Michigan invests in coaching and mentorship programs that have seasoned parent leaders working with others who might be at the start of their parent leadership journey. Regular coaching is necessary for parent leaders to stay connected to their why, to celebrate steps forward, and to have encouragement in times of challenge. Investing in coaching also helps to continuously build and sustain a pipeline of parent leaders.



*The Parents Partnering for Change leadership program helped me to better understand how to communicate with others, how to hold effective meetings and how to handle conflict. I feel like I can now assume leadership roles and be an effective leader in my community. And I made friends with a new group of parents too — we are friends now on Facebook and are able to support and encourage one another.”*

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Lydia Willis, Family & Parent Leadership Coordinator, ECIC





## Provide opportunities for parents to practice their leadership skills.

It is important to give parents a chance to practice being change agents. They need the opportunity to “try it on.” The more they are in places where they see others acting as change agents — speaking up, having their points acknowledged — the safer they will feel stepping up and speaking out. Then they can go back to their peer network for a safe space to reflect, process and strategize.

Parents in Michigan have many places they can practice. For example, at the local level, there are Home Visiting Local Leadership Groups, Great Start Collaboratives, Community Mental Health boards and Head Start policy councils. At the state level, there are the MICC and the Home Visiting Advisory group, to name a few.

## HOW THE MICHIGAN INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COMMITTEE SUPPORTS PARENT LEADERSHIP

The MICC has a parent involvement committee that comes together before each MICC meeting to give parents an opportunity to review the agenda, talk about the points they want to make, discuss what motions should be offered and who will make them. Sometimes they even give out assignments for reaching out in advance of the meeting to other MICC members to rally support. These parents know they are representing more than 20,000 families who have a child enrolled in Early On, and they take their jobs as parent representatives on the MICC seriously. In fact, a few years back, a representative from the governor’s office attended an MICC meeting and was so taken by the involvement of a parent that when it came time to appoint a new chair of the MICC, the parent was named to fill that role.



## Facilitate peer-to-peer networks to offer ongoing learning and skill-building opportunities using an empowerment process.

Michigan invests in networks for parent leaders to come together, share their experiences and strengthen their leadership skills. The Parent Involvement Committee of MICC and the state-level LLG Parent Leader Community of Practice are two examples of places parents can safely voice their concerns, and discuss, learn and strategize with one another to find solutions. It is a space for them to further develop skills and confidence. In this way, peer-to-peer support becomes instrumental in keeping parents engaged, and it creates opportunities for their own learning and development.



The value of the peer network multiplies when parents intentionally create opportunities to ripple into the broader community. Each person in the peer network has connections to other parents outside the network through their faith community, their child care, their school, their volunteer service and their workplace. Those in the peer network can pass information back and forth, sharing ideas and resources from the network with other parents in their community, and bringing ideas, feedback and questions from the community back to the network.



*Parents serving on the Ingham LLG decided that they wanted more from their experience. So, they asked for time following each meeting that could be used for trainings and other activities that would help them develop their personal and professional skills. The parents made a list of topics to discuss — medical advocacy, nurturing parenting, resources in the community, parent leadership.”*

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Effie Alofoje-Carr, Coordinator,  
Ingham County Home Visiting Local  
Leadership Group

## Hire parents in key roles where their lived experience can inform decisions and support the development of other parent leaders.

It matters who parents see when they walk in the door of an agency or program. Managers focused on hiring should consider there are some roles where life experience can trump professional degrees. Michigan did this with the implementation of the MIECHV program and staffing for the home visiting LLGs. Additionally, the state developed a Medicaid-funded position for parents within the behavioral health system.

According to Jane Shank, executive director of the Association for Children's Mental Health (ACMH), *"From peers, parents can hear 'I've been there. I understand. I am here to give you hope. I can help you build your voice and confidence in advocating for decisions related to your child's treatment and services. I can help connect you with providers and resources that can be helpful. And I can do this because I recognize your feelings, I can validate them and I will move forward with you side by side."*

## 2. Find and support champions who can build the foundation for parent leadership through policies, contracts and grants.

Michigan has been fortunate to have many champions who believe deeply in the value of parent voice and make it their cause. Some have had personal experiences that spark their commitment. Others may have an extra dose of compassion and humility and believe supporting parent voice is simply the right thing to do. Still others may be motivated by research on the correlation between family engagement and children's outcomes.



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*"What makes them champions is that they have had some heart experience that led them to believe this is important."*

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Nancy Peeler, Manager of the Early Childhood Health Section,  
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS)

Champions have different roles. Some sit within leadership and mid-level manager positions in government. In particular, the mid-level managers often know best how to look for opportunities to support family leadership. Others work outside the government as program directors and community leaders. In reality, anyone who has the vision and passion for parent leadership and who has the ability to change practices, programs and policy can be a champion. And it is often best to have multiple champions coming from different corners so there is consistent awareness and pressure to lift up parent voice and leadership.

## BARB SCHINDERLE

Barb Schinderle is liaison to the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council (MICC) for Early On in the Office of Great Start. Schinderle first came to this work as a parent. Her middle child was born with special needs, and when her daughter was almost 3, she was invited into a program for parents of children with disabilities. Joining the Parent Leadership Program (PLP) was a turning point for Schinderle as a mom, a future parent leader and a champion for parent voice and leadership. She was supported in learning her rights and advocating for the least-restrictive educational setting for her daughter. Her involvement changed the trajectory of her daughter's outcomes, putting her on a road to success.

When a position opened at the PLP as a state trainer, she applied. Helping other parents feel empowered and develop their leadership skills became a passion for Schinderle. From there, she went to work with The Arc Michigan and hosted gatherings for families throughout the state who had children in the Early On program. When funding for that role ended, she was tapped by the Part C coordinator at the Michigan Department of Education to be a liaison to the MICC, focused on supporting parent members. Schinderle has been in this role since 2001, and she relishes the opportunity to help other parents learn, grow and have their voices influence change for children at a personal and systems level.



## NANCY PEELER

Nancy Peeler is Manager of the Early Childhood Health Section of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). When Peeler's daughter was young, she found herself needing to fight with the health care system to get a particular assessment. She persevered and got the assessment scheduled, inviting her daughter's early intervention provider to join them for the assessment. Peeler thought it was important for the provider to experience this too. She didn't realize what an impact this would have — not just for her family but many others. The early intervention program set up a sensory room, provided professional development for use of the room to staff, and integrated this into the delivery of services for families. This showed Peeler that parents are important change agents and listening to parents and following their instincts

can bring about important changes that will benefit children and their families. When the early intervention program acknowledged Peeler had something to contribute, she felt validated, which helped Peeler believe in herself too. Peeler carries this experience with her as she makes decisions each day in her role within the MDHHS. Whether she is developing a program budget for a federal grant to support parent participation and leadership development, or she's outlining the scope and methodology for an evaluation to ensure the lived experiences of families are accurately captured and used to inform future policies and programs, every action Peeler takes is driven by her belief that equity is achievable when authentic parent voice and leadership define the North Star.



## MEREDITH KENNEDY

Meredith Kennedy is a mother of six children and a citizen of Waganakising, Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians. Kennedy uses her voice to support her family, help other mothers in her community and shape the future direction of early childhood services in Michigan. She is one of five women from across the state who produce a video blog on breastfeeding. And she is one of two parents on the six-member executive committee for the Michigan Pritzker Children's Initiative. Kennedy knows speaking up and championing the needs of Indigenous families is essential. *"This is about advocacy for our children and families — not the bossy auntie,"* Kennedy said.

Champions find ways to embed requirements for parent leadership in policy, contracts and grants. They create policies that reserve seats at the table for parents receiving services, and they pay them for their lived experience and expertise. This helps create a system that reflects the authentic demands of its customers, and addresses inequities and power imbalance. For example:

- Michigan's Managed Mental Health Supports and Services Contract for FY 2020 states: *"It is the policy of MDHHS that all publicly supported mental health agencies and their contract agencies shall engage in family driven and youth-guided approaches to services with children and families and will engage family members and youth at the governance, evaluation and service delivery levels as key stakeholders."*
- Section 32p of the Michigan State School Aid Act, Public Act 265 of 2018 outlines the purpose, criteria and funding for the Great Start Collaboratives (GSCs) and the Great Start Parent Coalitions (GSPCs). *"Each intermediate school district (ISD) or consortium of ISDs*

*that receives funding must: convene a local GSC and a Parent Coalition to ensure the coordination and expansion of local early childhood infrastructure and programs that allow every child in the community to achieve the Office of Great Start outcomes."*

- When Michigan wrote the original competitive grant for MIECHV funding, the state responded to the federal requirement for stakeholder engagement by proposing the creation of LLGs on which parents serve, a state-level parent community of practice, plus a coaching system to support parent leaders. They also spelled out how the state would pay parents for their time.
- For more than 20 years, the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start and Family Education has had funding built into the budget to support parents who serve on the MICC. The financial support guidelines outline the principles and process for supporting family members to participate alongside state agency personnel and service providers.

### 3. Help tables understand how they can engage families in leadership roles.

Inviting parents into meetings and sharing decision-making power with them is not how programs and agencies are accustomed to working. Typically, the extent of engagement may be a customer satisfaction survey or a one-time focus group. But those strategies alone are not enough to share power with the families who use the system. For example, parents can help analyze whether the decisions being discussed create, worsen or ignore existing disparities. After all, they know best what will help their family and others with similar experiences.

**Bryn Fortune and her colleagues at ECIC, who provide various parent leadership capacity building strategies and consult with agency leaders and programs in Michigan and nationally, note that readying tables so they can equitably engage families in leadership roles is a developmental process that, while always individualized, looks something like this:**

**Show up and speak out about the need for parent voice to shape decisions that can address root causes.**

**Create opportunities for tables to meet parents and hear their stories.**

**Facilitate tables so they are challenged to move beyond interest in hearing a parent story to engaging parent leaders as decision-makers.**

**Create accountability for parent leadership to be long-lasting so systems change can occur.**

**Step aside and let go so parents can co-lead.**

Fortune describes this as “cracking new territory” or “awakening awareness.” For example, before Michigan fully committed to including parents on the statewide home visiting advisory group, Fortune would attend the meetings. Her first goal was to build relationships and trust. In time, she would ask the questions that would cause the group to pause and wonder about parent perspectives. The group would come to recognize that the expertise parents bring is unique and cannot be brought forward by anyone else currently at the table. She gradually helped them realize if they listened to parent voices, they could more clearly see how to implement programs that would address root causes and help families thrive.



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Once folks at the table were open to and interested in hearing from parents directly, Fortune would bring a few parents with her to the meetings. Time and attention was given to supporting the parents to make sure they were comfortable and ready for each meeting (e.g., reviewing the agenda, talking about who would be in the room and how the meeting would be structured, providing information on the context and breaking down jargon, engaging in role play) and that the parents had time to process afterwards. It's about learning how to decode and read the room. This is especially important because parents are not privy to the water cooler conversations that typically take place outside meetings with those who are at the table. Again, this is a gradual process of building relationships, trust and mutual respect to get to a point where parents feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences and where genuine listening and learning can occur among all participants around the table.





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Excellent facilitation is needed to help tables coalesce around a commitment to parent voice and leadership and follow through on it. A skilled facilitator will take care to design the agenda so it supports the relationship building, listening and learning needed for both agency and parent representatives. *“It’s not about just checking a box and expecting a parent to know how to navigate, nor is it that having a parent at the table will mean that they are heard. There will — and should be — hard conversations that need skilled facilitation. When conflict arises, we know good things are happening,”* said Holly Wingard, Director of Training and Technical Assistance at ECIC. The facilitator will help the group develop and own a shared understanding of roles, goals and outcomes that will harden into a genuine resolve for parent leadership.

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Step aside and let go so parents can co-lead.



It is important to create mechanisms for accountability so inclusion of parent voice and leadership is not a short-lived trend. In some cases, an expectation for parent representation on planning and decision-making bodies is baked into the bylaws or is a requirement of the funding source. For example, Head Start federal regulations require at least half of the members of each Head Start Policy Council are parents. In Michigan, the LLGs and the home visiting quality improvement teams are all required to have parent representation. Little “a” accountability is important too. That’s when people around the table have built relationships with the parent participants and follow through on their promise to listen, learn and design (or redesign) programs to reflect the parents’ lived experiences.



Show up and speak out about the need for parent voice to shape decisions that can address root causes.

Create opportunities for tables to meet parents and hear their stories.

Facilitate tables so they are challenged to move beyond interest in hearing a parent story to engaging parent leaders as decision-makers.

Create accountability for parent leadership to be long-lasting so systems change can occur.

**Step aside and let go so parents can co-lead.**



*“I know that authentic parent voice and leadership is ‘in the bones’ when I can step aside, parent leaders stay at the table, and systems changes start to emerge,”* Fortune said. Another sign is when the other organizational leaders at the table begin to ask for help to include parent leaders in their work. *“At that point, you’ve hit community spread and sustainability,”* she said.



“

*A month after moving eight hours away from my family, I found out I was pregnant. I never planned to be a parent and didn't know what to do. A flyer on the bulletin board at the health department offered help. I called, learned about the Nurse Family Partnership home visiting program and eventually agreed to enroll. I quickly learned that the home visitor was there for me. She answered all of my questions about the pregnancy and preparing to be a mother, and when I started getting shut-off notices, the program helped me connect to resources. During one visit, the home visitor invited me to attend the state's home visiting conference. From this, I became involved with the Home Visiting Initiative Local Leadership Group (LLG). While sitting around that table with professionals and sharing my experiences, I realized doors were opening and I was beginning to find my voice. I went from having \$2 in the bank and no plan, to a job I love with benefits. If you met me seven years ago, you would not recognize me today. Sure, I'm still shy and reserved. But back then I never spoke up, never wanted to stir the pot, and just flew under the radar. In having my son, Finn, and being involved with parent groups and the LLG, I found my voice, became a more confident parent, and I've had an opportunity to make systems work better for families.”*

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Sarah Zyburt, *Director of Advocacy and Advancement,*  
*Voices for Children*

## MICHIGAN HIRES PARENT SUPPORT PARTNERS TO WORK IN THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEM

The Michigan Association for Children's Mental Health (ACMH) entered into conversations with the Department of Health and Human Services in 2008 to formalize the concept of parent peer support as a Medicaid benefit for families whose children were in the public mental health system. This aligned with growing national recognition of the importance of family-driven, youth-guided approaches. The guiding belief was parents with lived experience raising a child with serious emotional disturbances could best offer support to their peers so they could find comfort and confidence in driving decisions for their children's care.

The next year, the Parent Support Partners (PSP) was included in the Medicaid provider manual as Family Support in Training, code S5111. ACMH created a training curriculum and certification program for PSP. The first cohort of PSP was enrolled in 2010 for training, coaching and ongoing professional development.

In 2019, Michigan had 100 PSPs, 80 fully certified and 20 working their way through the certification process. PSPs are valued as active members of treatment teams.





# WE KNOW INVESTMENTS IN PARENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP WORK WHEN ...

Parents see themselves as leaders and true agents of change:



*I am 'in' and ready to advocate for things beyond my family. I have the capacity, skills and resources to take care of the inside stuff, and now I can move the mountain with other people for things not directly about me."*

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Holly Wingard

**Programs and organizations make parent leader representation an expected and integral part of decision-making bodies, and they support this with a parent professional development system:**



*I know that this has worked when I can step away as a coach and the work continues and spreads."*

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Bryn Fortune

Parents take responsibility for mentoring and supporting parents who are coming behind them. This helps grow additional cohorts of parent leaders:



*Peer networks give you a chance to meet with other parents who may be ahead of you, and they can let you know what to expect, how to get the most out of the program for you and your child. After you meet for a while, the guards come down and you talk about how you can make the program work better for those who are underrepresented in the community. There is safety — and power — in numbers."*

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Anthony Queen, Parent Leader, Kent County MI

**Programmatic and policy changes are made that reflect parent input and result in policies and services that bring better results for families based on what families identify as important. This means families identify what is important to them and the system listens.**

Nothing sums this up better than the following story, straight from the heads and hearts of Michigan's parents and agency leaders.



## **PARENTS STAND OUT FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP AND WASHINGTON, D.C. RESPONDS WITH A GRANT TO SUPPORT MORE LEADERSHIP TRAININGS**

The Genesee County Health Department received a \$5 million grant from the federal government to support families in connecting with services following the Flint water crisis.

County officials knew they needed to include parents in the conversation from the start so they could have a say in decision-making for how funds were spent. They subcontracted with Voices for Children to support the parent advocacy piece, identifying parents, offering training and providing supports including honorariums and reimbursement for travel and child care.

The Healthy Start Lead Expansion Access Program parent advisory committee was launched. The committee meets monthly to act as a quality control mechanism, watchdog and guide for service delivery. The group is engaged in leadership and empowerment of each other as well.

In March of 2019, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services heard about the success of the parent advisory committee and requested a reverse site visit. Five parent leaders traveled to Washington, D.C. to advocate and share their personal experiences.

What was scheduled as a single, 2.5-hour meeting turned into more than twice that over two days. HRSA invited the parents to submit an additional proposal for funding to support more parent-led leadership trainings.

Approximately \$70,000 a year is being invested by the federal government to support this work.

## STEPPING UP AND SPEAKING OUT

The intent of *Stepping Up and Speaking Out* is to inspire readers and, through example, offer suggestions for how to transform structures — the mindsets, policies and practices — that fully support parents so they can emerge as leaders and agents of change in their communities.

*“We have a long way to go ourselves,” Peeler said. “We have learned a lot and have had some successes, and we have still not figured it all out. We offer what we’ve learned and hope that will be helpful to others.”*



“

*A commitment to parent voice and leadership is woven into the fabric of early childhood policy and practice in Michigan. We know that you can’t be successful unless you have authentic parent voice.”*

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*Jeremy Reuter, Director of Statewide Advocacy, Michigan State University*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This body of work is a result of the collective effort of many parent leaders over many years, including our friend Teresa Marvin, who passed away before this was written. We dedicate this publication to the parents across Michigan who have stepped up and spoken out, each making their own contribution to parent involvement, engagement, empowerment and leadership.

## SPECIAL THANKS

We want to say a special thank you to our writer who put into words the continuing journey of parent leadership in Michigan. We would also like to thank the parents and professional partners whose stories, insight and feedback were integral to this body of work. Thank you to all the staff who reviewed multiple drafts and facilitated the process. And finally, a special thank you to the National Home Visiting Network for encouraging the development of this report.

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Suggested citation: Stark, D. R. (2020). Stepping Up and Speaking Out: The Evolution of Parent Leadership in Michigan. Lansing, MI: Early Childhood Investment Corporation & Michigan Home Visiting Initiative.



# STEPPING UP AND SPEAKING OUT:

THE EVOLUTION OF PARENT LEADERSHIP IN MICHIGAN

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