

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WEBINAR SERIES

Supporting Family Leadership in State Level Policy Making

June 6, 2025



Spanish Translation

- Thank you to our fantastic Spanish interpreter!
- Please click on the interpretation icon at the bottom of your Zoom screen if you would like to listen to the meeting in Spanish.
- ¡Gracias a nuestro fantástico intérprete de español!
- Por favor hagan clic en el icono de globo en la parte inferior de su pantalla de Zoom si desean escuchar la reunión en español.



Agenda

- **Welcome**
 - Icebreaker
 - Who We Are
 - Learning Objectives
- **Background – What We’ve Learned So Far**
 - Parent Engagement and the Illinois Early Learning Council
 - The Family Advisory Committee (FAC)
 - The Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW)
- **The Future of Family Engagement – FEW Recommendations**
- **Reflections & Questions**



Icebreaker

In the chat, please share your:

- Name
- Role
- Organization
- One thing you hope to take away from today's session



Who We Are



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Children



Janet Vargas
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FAC/FEW Parent



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FEW Parent



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Learning Objectives

1. Understand the importance of parent leadership in early learning policymaking.
2. Learn about the role of parent leaders in creating and sustaining a statewide parent-led decision-making body for early childhood education and care in Illinois.
3. Learn about the role of continuous quality improvement in creating and refining parent engagement practices
4. Hear directly from parents about best practices in parent engagement that can be utilized at the programmatic, community, and/or state level.





Background: Parent Engagement and the Early Learning Council

Community Organizing and Family Issues & **POWER-PAC - IL**

About COFI

- Founded in 1995 in Chicago
- Trained over 6,000 parents
- COFI's mission is to build the power and voice of parents, primarily mothers and grandmothers from Black and Brown communities, to shape the public decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families



Early Learning Campaign



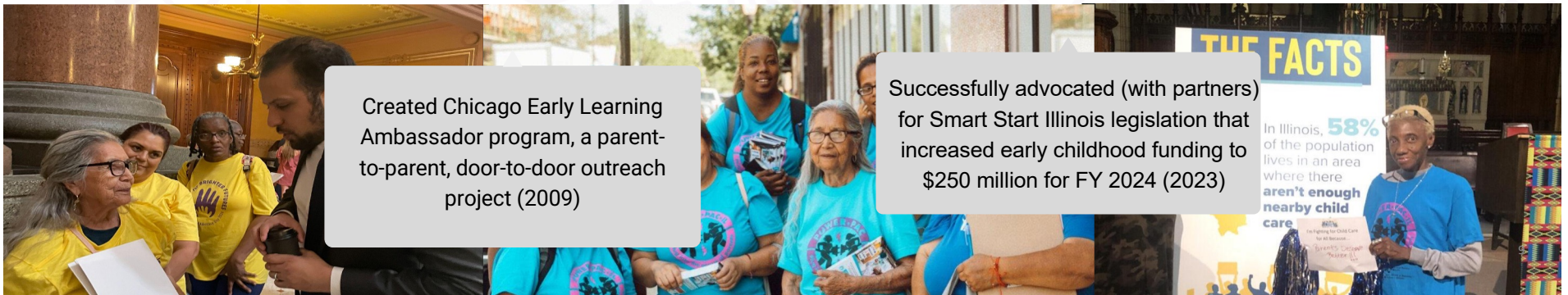
Launched the campaign in 2007

Early Intervention redlining pilot project to address & raise awareness for special education services (2017)

Illinois Governor JB Pritzker & the Illinois General Assembly created a new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (2024)

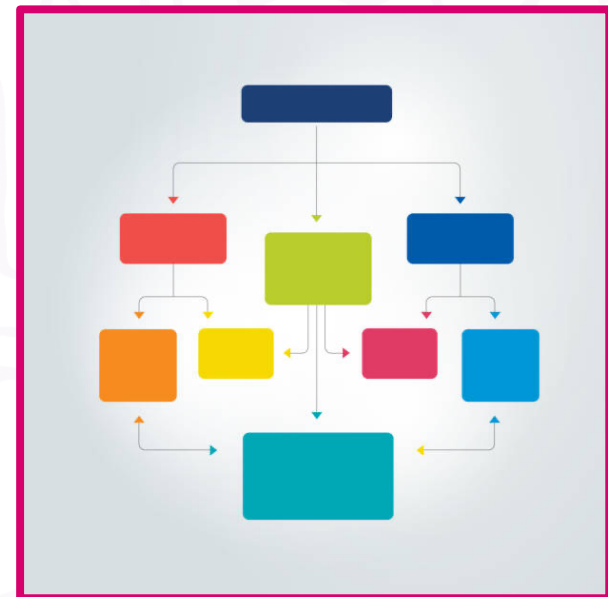
Created Chicago Early Learning Ambassador program, a parent-to-parent, door-to-door outreach project (2009)

Successfully advocated (with partners) for Smart Start Illinois legislation that increased early childhood funding to \$250 million for FY 2024 (2023)



Family Engagement and the Early Learning Council (ELC)

- Illinois created the Early Learning Council (ELC) by statute in 2003
- Members are from state government and private organizations and are appointed by the Governor
- The ELC works to coordinate across state programs to create a comprehensive statewide early learning system to improve the lives of Illinois children and families
- ELC work is done mainly through committees, subcommittees, and working groups



Challenges to Parent Participation



- Hard to follow along and intimidating – using acronyms and speaking in early learning jargon
- Far too many to attend all
- Not always covering the issues that were important to parents
- Logistical obstacles
 - No language translation
 - Needed a photo ID to enter the building
 - In Chicago and downtown



Only ONE parent was an official voting member of the Early Learning Council



What to do instead?



POWER-IL parent leaders asked the Early Learning Council to reconsider how they engaged families



The Early Learning Council was open to the idea but wanted to be thoughtful about what this different way of engaging families would be.

Family Engagement Implementation Subcommittee (FEIS)



And the Family Engagement Implementation Subcommittee (FEIS) was created, charged with creating a proposal for how the Early Learning Council could better involve families in their work



Family Engagement Implementation Subcommittee (FEIS)


*Proposal for Family Advisory Committee (FAC) – FY2019 Groundbreaking Year

The Family Advisory Committee (FAC) will serve as a systematic vehicle for the voices of families in communities and programs to be raised up to the state level. The Committee will also serve as a resource and sounding board for state agencies that are making policy and program decisions. The members of the Family Advisory Committee are expected to provide two-way feedback between the Committee and their local program or collaboration.

The Family Advisory Committee will:

- Provide family voice to guide early childhood policy development and issues
- Advise on issues that impact the early childhood system
- Promote state-level family engagement and inclusivity of parents in decision making processes
- Recruit new family leaders to engage in the Committee
- Collaborate as needed with the Access, Integration and Alignment, Quality, and Home Visiting Task Force committees on cross-committee work

* The proposal will be reviewed and revised as needed after one year

FAMILY ADVISORY COMMITTEE (FAC) GENERAL MEMBERSHIP	
Regional State Break-up: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7 regions using Illinois Department of Public Health regional map.	
Local: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 representatives per region, except the Cook Area with 4 representatives - 2 from Chicago, 2 from suburban Cook County	
Target Size: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 16 regional representatives	
MEMBER SELECTION PROCESS AND TERMS	
Expectations and qualifications for families on the Family Advisory Committee (FAC): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a child birth to 12 years or be the parental voice for a child birth to 12 years• Racially, linguistically, geographically, ethnically diverse, and low-income inclusive (consider gender and parents with children with disabilities)• Have firsthand experience with a publicly-funded early learning program• Motivated and passionate about early childhood• Agree to provide two-way feedback between the Early Learning Council (ELC) and the Family Advisory Committee• Members should be connected to their early childhood community (programs and/or collaborations) to make sure information is shared in two directions• Motivated and passionate about early childhood	

FEIS Members included:

- Parents
- Early childhood agencies
- Advocacy organizations
- Community based organizations

They researched, discussed and created the Family Advisory Committee (FAC) Proposal

The Family Advisory Committee of the ELC

“[G]roup of diverse parents from throughout the state who will add parent voice, perspective, and experience to the early childhood system and policy landscape through participation in the ELC and its committees.”

- 16 members from across the state
- Have a childbirth to 12 years or be the parental voice for a childbirth to 12 years
- Three-year terms
- Elects two co-chairs from membership
- Two seats on the ELC and its Executive Committee
- Supports and trainings for members



The Early Learning Council Approves the Family Advisory Committee (FAC)



"This is so important because it will bring the voice of parents and families to the early learning table."

Gloria Harris, POWER-PAC Early Learning Committee Co-Chair.



The Family Advisory Committee of the ELC

Parent leaders with COFI/POWER-PAC IL and partners ask the ELC to reconsider how they engage parents

2015

2016

The Early Learning Council (ELC) creates the Family Engagement Implementation Subcommittee (FEIS) made up of parents and partners to research and propose the best way to engage parents

The Executive Committee of the Early Learning Council accepts the FEIS proposal for the Family Engagement Committee (FAC) within the Early Learning Council

Feb. 2019

The FAC is launched, with Illinois Action for Children as the Backbone Agency

Nov. 2020

The first term of the FAC comes to end.

Dec. 2023



The Family Advisory Committee – Strengths



Strengths based on [evaluation of first two years of FAC](#) and feedback from FAC members at the end of their terms.



The Family Advisory Committee – Goals and Accomplishments

Goal 1: Due to the pandemic and staffing shortages, enrollment is down in early childhood education and care settings across the state of Illinois. This committee will seek to identify additional barriers and brainstorm solutions to increase enrollment.

- Accomplished via community outreach and engagement with decision-makers

Goal 2: Provide family voice on ELC and committee work that impacts families through engagement opportunities, and work with the ELC to embed a protocol for including family voice in the work of the ELC, including revisiting how the ELC/FAC work together.

- Accomplished via [General Recommendations for Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Systems at the State Level](#)



The Family Advisory Committee – Goals and Accomplishments

Goal 3: Review and respond to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Advancing Preschool [Inclusion in Community-Based Early Childhood Education Programs](#) report on barriers and potential recommendations for inclusion related to disabilities, racial disparities, economic disparities, and culturally responsive practices in early childhood education and care settings to identify gaps in data, themes, and patterns [and] highlight findings about FAC member’s life experiences.

- Accomplished via [response document](#)

Other Accomplishments

- Increased # of after-hours meetings to encourage family participation
- Interpretation at meetings
- Developing family leaders



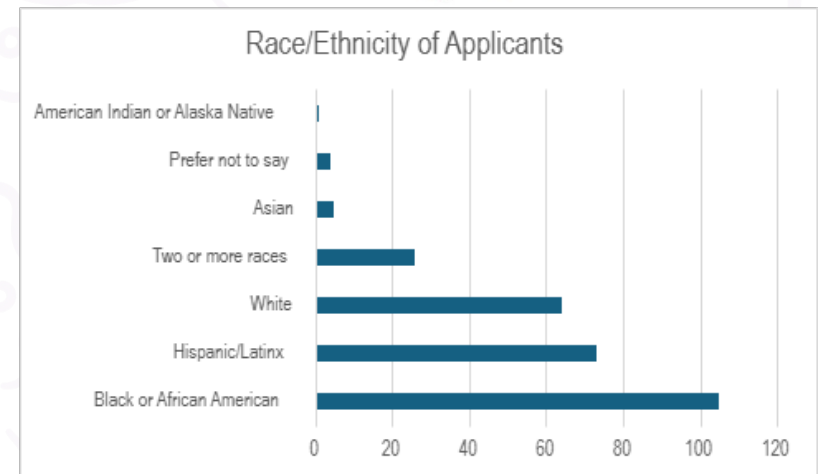
Transition to Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW)

- **October 2023:** Governor Pritzker announces plans to create unified agency for early childhood programs and services.
- **December 2023:** First cohort of FAC members' terms end.
- **Spring 2024:** State leaders suggest bringing in former FAC members and new parents to provide feedback National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago work to develop recommendations for equitable family engagement (inspired by FAC work).
- **June 2024:** Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW) has first meeting.



FEW Recruitment

- FAC members invited; six agreed
- Adapted original FAC application, adding priority points for:
 - Diversity
 - Use of services
 - Involvement in family leadership groups
 - Interest in early childhood systems
 - Points reduced slightly for working in early childhood
- Application and outreach materials written in English and Spanish
- \$250/month stipend
- 278 applicants, 240 English-speaking, 38 Spanish-speaking
 - 10 selected (8 English-speaking, 2 Spanish-speaking)



Strengths of the FEW

Strong, Ongoing Communication

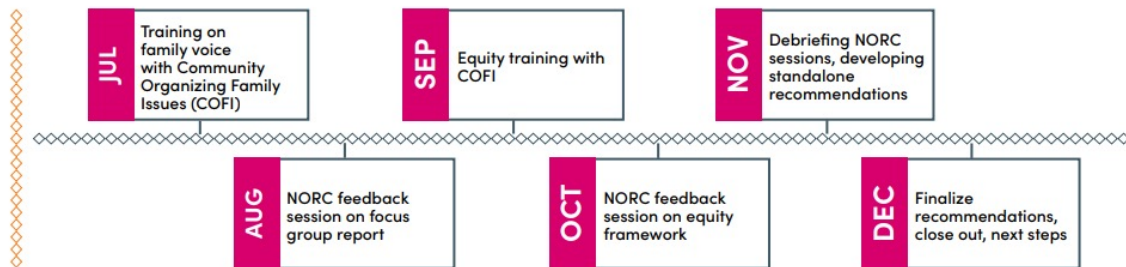
Multiple Meeting Options*

Training to Scaffold Conversations

Fully Bilingual Communications and Meetings

Family-Friendly Language

Clear Directives for Each Meeting and Continuous Feedback Loop*



Lessons from the Family Advisory Committee & Family Engagement Workgroup

Recommendations for Family Engagement in
the Illinois Department of Early Childhood



The Future of Family Engagement: FEW Recommendations

Overview of Report / How to Use Recommendations

- Created to capture continuous quality improvement of early childhood family engagement work in Illinois, with an eye toward the future state
- FEW recommendations situated in what has happened so far, context of Illinois Department of Early Childhood
- Best practices can be applied to state governance and provide guidance on improving family engagement practices in general
- [English report final](#); Spanish coming soon
- **Note:** You don't have to do this all to do family engagement well, but understanding *why* these recommendations matter will help aid in decision-making around how to better meet family needs in engagement spaces



FEW Recommendations – Early Childhood Family Engagement Structure

Tiered Engagement, Including Family-Led Tables Working Alongside Decision-Making Tables

Family Voice Embedded in Decision-Making Process from the Beginning

Pathways to Family Leadership

Decision-Making Power and Intentional Follow Up

Robust Family Engagement Staffing with Local Footprint

Commitment to Family Engagement from Agency Leadership

“[The FAC] had, you know, stakeholders come in and out, and whatnot, but there was a dedicated space for parents as a group, as like a cohort. Same thing with the Birth to Five Family Council. It really made it like a safe space for parents to be parents and like not feel the power dynamic when you’re talking about, like, parents and decision-makers. And then, when you are in those shared spaces with decision-makers and parents, like, you’re doing it as a group of parents.” –FEW Parent

FEW Recommendations – Supports for Families in Engagement Spaces

Training

Translation and
Interpretation

Opportunities for
Family Connection

Formal Recognition
of Family
Contribution

Multiple Meeting
Options

Hybrid Options

Child Care

Transportation

Food

Stipends and Non-
Monetary Resources



FEW Recommendations – Promoting Equitable Engagement

Intentional Outreach to Affinity Groups

Skilled Meeting Facilitation

Offering Different Ways to Give Feedback

Clarity in Meeting Norms

Honoring Different Cultural Norms, Standards, and Practices

“The conversations that happen in these spaces are about the most important people to us as parents. We’re talking about our kids. So I’m going to say what I think is best for my kids, and I’m going to make sure that you hear it. And right, you might not agree, or it might be something that you haven’t done yet or haven’t implemented. But we’re talking about the most important thing in my life, so that’s something to keep in mind as these conversations happen with this new agency.” –FEW Parent

FEW Recommendations – Communication

Multiple Channels for
Communication, such as:

- Social Media
- Newsletters
- Text Messages
- Direct Information from Programs
- Recorded Meetings/Webinars
- Engagement in Spaces Families are Already In
- Community Forums

Transparency

Clarity in How Feedback
Will Be Used/Clear
Benefits to Families

Feedback Loops/Ongoing
Contact

"I don't want to go anywhere [for information]. I want to make sure that whatever program I'm a part of that program is somehow notifying me or letting me know... If the agency does what I envision they could do right, which is tap into all 0 to 5 offerings that exist, period, that information should come to me as a parent from a couple of different sources. So maybe I'm getting a link in my email from [my child's] PreK, with a briefing, a video recording, or whatever. And I'm also getting some of those things, or maybe they're different, from the home daycare that my 6-month-old is in."
–FEW Parent

Conclusion / Reflections

- Illinois' early childhood family engagement work is a story of *continuous quality improvement*. We never expect this work to be perfected, but we hope to continue to learn from families and better utilize their insights to improve programs and services.
- Reflection questions:
 - How can you utilize these recommendations in your work?
 - What resources/supports do you need to implement these recommendations?

Questions?



Acknowledgements

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