

Pre-Planning for Effective Family Leadership & Engagement

Much like early childhood itself, family leadership and engagement has the best outcomes when organizations invest early and build a strong foundation. Taking time prior to the launch of your family leadership program to assess organizational readiness and develop a plan to secure needed resources will not only make your effort more successful in the short-term, but it will also help it be more sustainable for the long-term.

There are three primary areas organizations should assess as they undertake planning: organizational support and staff capacity, policies related to stipends and other supports, and additional resources.



Organizational Support and Staff Capacity

Creating Shared Commitment

The most critical step an organization can take to ensure the success of a family engagement and leadership program is to ensure from the beginning that everyone in the organization has a shared agreement of the value of involving family leaders and a clear understanding of how this involvement will impact the organization's work moving forward.

The board and staff will need time for conversation, and perhaps training and support, to reach shared understandings of why family leadership matters, what value engaging family leaders will bring to the organization's work, and how the organization will operate differently as a result.

A few questions to consider during this conversation include:

- In what ways will decision-making change?
- How will adding in time for family input change workflows?
- What new or different expectations will be required of staff?



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Too many organizations approach family engagement and leadership as something that can be accomplished simply by inviting family leaders to join a meeting or sit at a decision-making table. However, in order for family leadership to be meaningful, the organization must be open to operating differently. When an organization truly incorporates family input, the work will likely look different moving forward, and in some cases, this may require a culture shift from a more organization-centered approach to one that centers families. Organizational-wide commitment of staff and board is essential for family leadership to succeed. Developing this commitment will require time and thoughtful conversation. It is important to explicitly build this time into the planning process.



Budgeting for Staff Time

Appropriate budgeting for staff time on the front end will help ensure that family leadership efforts succeed and are sustainable. It is important to build in staff time not only for convening meetings where family leaders will be included, but also for family leader recruitment and materials development prior to the meetings and for ongoing support. Staff mentors need time to work with family leaders not just during the meeting, but also before and after. Organizations should budget staff time for check-ins with family leaders prior to each meeting to answer questions and walk through materials and after meetings to debrief, answer questions, and ensure understanding. Relationships and trust take time to develop, so it's necessary to ensure the staff mentor has the capacity and time to invest in this effort. This support time can make all the difference in a successful experience for the family leader and meaningful outcomes for the organization.

In addition to the direct staffing of the family leadership program, organizations need to consider other potential staffing needs such as administrative time for processing stipends, technology support if meetings are virtual, and other programmatic staff who will be charged with incorporating family leadership and input into the organization's programs.

Finally, organizations need to ensure that all staff who will be interacting with family leaders have an understanding and shared commitment to equity and dismantling white supremacy. It may be necessary to invest in equity training prior to undertaking this initiative in order to ensure staff are operating from a shared understanding.

Policies related to stipends and other supports

Providing economic supports is key to removing barriers to family participation. Families from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience these barriers.

Stipends are the most direct and often the most useful way to support family leader participation. Compensating leaders for their time can help remove financial barriers that might limit their ability to participate such as taking unpaid time off from work, transportation, or child care costs. It also shows the family leader that you value their contributions.

Best practice for stipends involves a direct cash payment as opposed to gift cards or gas cards because they provide families with the maximum ability to use the stipend to meet their individual needs. If using credit card based gift cards, be aware that there can be limitations as to where they are accepted. They also can expire and have unexpected fees. Family leaders should be made aware of the limitations upon receiving the credit card based gift card so they are not relying on a card for payment at a business that will not accept it.

It is important to consider whether the stipend is intended to also cover transportation and child care needs or if those costs will be covered in an alternative way. Some organizations provide mileage or funds to cover bus passes in addition to stipends. Some organizations reimburse for child care costs or meet that need by allowing children to attend meetings or provide onsite child care. Whether these costs are included should affect the level of stipend offered.

In developing an organizational stipend policy, a few things to consider include:

- The amount of stipend and whether the amount being offered is appropriate given the level of work being requested
- A timeline for distribution- will stipends be provided as a lump sum, in a series of payments (perhaps broken into funding at the beginning, middle, and end) or in increments tied to individual hours of participation



- How the stipend might interact with the benefits cliff for low-income participants-ensure that the amount provided does not inadvertently impact a families' ability to access needed benefits such as healthcare, child care subsidy, SNAP or TANF
- Ensuring the amount and procedure for distribution is in compliance with IRS guidelines and doesn't unexpectedly create tax liabilities for the family leader. It may be best to consult a lawyer in this review. This can be particularly important when working with family leaders with limited immigration status.
- The administrative procedure for receiving and processing the stipend, if it can be streamlined to be the least burdensome possible for the family leader, how it impacts the administrative staff in meeting record keeping needs, and if the process is accessible for family leaders for whom English is not their first language.

Resources

As organizations budget, it's necessary to consider what barriers might exist to successful family leader participation, brainstorm what resources might be needed to overcome them, and budget appropriately. The actual budget may need to be adjusted based on the unique needs of family leaders in your program as identified through the barrier assessment. It's also important to note that barriers may be identified during the conversations with family leaders that you didn't anticipate, so it's helpful to build in flexibility.

Some of the resources organizations should consider include:

- **Stipends.** Stipends should be provided in a meaningful amount for the level of work being requested while being aware of the potential impact on participants' benefits.
- **Transportation.** Consider how to help support transportation needs, whether through mileage, bus passes, or built into the stipend.
- **Child care.** Consider how to help support child care needs whether through child care reimbursement, providing child care, creating meetings that are child-friendly by providing activities for the child and a welcoming space, or addressing child care costs through the stipend.
- **Accessibility.** Consider asking family leaders their preference for materials. Some family leaders may prefer printed copies. Not all family leaders feel comfortable using computers and many families don't have printers. Having printed copies for family leaders to review prior to the meeting can help address these challenges.



- **Translation.** If you have family leaders for whom English is not their first language, budget to have simultaneous translation provided for all meetings and coaching sessions. All materials also need to be translated in sufficient time for the family leader to review them alongside other participants.

- **Technology.** If family leaders are expected to participate electronically, it is important to be prepared to support them. Questions to consider include:

- Are family leaders expected to have their own computer?
- Is funding included in the stipend to help towards a phone cost if they are accessing email through their phones?
- Do family leaders have access to broadband? Particularly in rural communities, internet access may be limited and hot spots may be needed.
- What is their comfort level in using technology? Families will have different levels of familiarity and ease with technology such as zoom and may require training and support. Technology needs can be assessed during family leader intake conversations, but it's important to have budgeted for them in advance.

- **Equity training.** Successful family engagement and leadership is rooted in a commitment to equity and culturally-competent engagement. Building in resources to provide equity training to all participants, including family leaders, can ensure all partners are operating from a shared understanding of and commitment to equity in the work and that participants are using a common language when talking about how to do this work.

Family leadership and engagement is central to building successful, effective early childhood systems and to helping children, families, communities, and businesses thrive. In order to do so, we must plan and budget to undertake it in ways that are meaningful, effective, and sustainable. The investment is worth it.

